

STATEMENT OF
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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Gallego, Ranking Member Kelly, and distinguished members of this subcommittee, thank you for providing this opportunity to discuss the posture of the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). I am proud to testify alongside the Honorable Christopher Maier, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD(SO/LIC)).

ASD(SO/LIC)'s oversight, policy guidance, and advocacy within the Department of Defense (DoD) are essential for the modernization, readiness, and wellbeing of special operations forces (SOF) and their families. We have continued to deepen our longstanding partnership through our co-authored SOF Vision and Strategy documents which provide an enduring foundation to guide future SOF activities and investments. This collaboration continues as we refine our Future Operating Concept and assess force design considerations over the coming months.

The steadfast support of Congress ensures our nation's SOF are the world's most capable and credible. Your support underpins our efforts to bolster deterrence, ensure our enduring advantage through innovation and modernization, and strengthen our force and their families. Your SOF remain vigilant, ready to respond in crisis, and committed to defending the nation against all threats from state and non-state adversaries.

Today, I am honored to present an account of USSOCOM's priorities, activities, and investments to ensure our SOF remain unmatched and prepared for the challenges of tomorrow.

The strategic environment of 2022 is dynamic, but its complexities are not new. Nation-states and non-state actors, including violent extremist organizations, compete for influence and advantage, acting both across domains and transregionally.

In Ukraine, Russia's unprovoked, unjustified, and premeditated invasion reminds us of continued challenges to the rules-based international order. Since 2014, following Russia's previous aggression in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, SOF supported multinational training efforts with Ukrainian SOF forces and provided Military Information Support Operations (MISO) assistance to illuminate and counter Russian disinformation. Russia's destabilizing activities reinforce the importance of USSOCOM's decades-long commitment to enhancing interoperability with Allied SOF throughout Europe – a critical asset in providing options for the United States and our Allies.

To preserve and advance our vital interests and those of our Allies and partners, the United States must maintain its overmatch in strategic deterrence, conventional military force, and space and cyberspace capabilities – complemented by credible irregular warfare capabilities. Given this overmatch, competitors will prefer asymmetric means to attack, erode, or undermine our nation's advantages and interests – particularly our network of Alliances and partnerships. Strategic rivals continue to seek advantage through activities in the “gray zone” below the threshold of a credible military response. Disinformation continues to be employed at unimaginable speed and scale without regard for geopolitical boundaries. The destabilizing impacts of climate change, diminished influence of international institutions, and political turmoil aggravated by the global pandemic have provided opportunities for non-state actors and nation-state competitors alike.

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SOF create strategic, asymmetric advantages for the nation across the spectrum of conflict. Our formations provide options to the Joint Force to deter, deescalate, or decisively prevail if war is unavoidable. SOF are problem-solvers. Their enduring value resides in their ability to adapt and to combat asymmetric threats, including in the “gray zone”; employ precision and surprise to achieve strategic effects in conflict or crisis; build access, placement, and influence through sustained partnership with foreign forces; and support Allies’ and partners’ resilience and resistance efforts – all providing discrete options when conventional action is impractical or not desired.

To address current and future strategic challenges, SOF are aligned with the DoD’s strategic priorities. USSOCOM’s institutional and operational efforts span three broad areas: bolstering deterrence through campaigning, innovating for advantage, and strengthening our force and family.

BOLSTERING DETERRENCE

After two decades of combat, our SOF today are more integrated, credible, and capable than at any point in our nation’s history. USSOCOM’s dedicated men and women have degraded violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and disrupted innumerable plots to attack Americans and our interests since 9/11 – while remaining vigilant and ready today. Their courage and commitment are and have been remarkable. Notably, twelve SOF servicemembers have been awarded the Medal of Honor for actions since 9/11, and three of those recipients are still serving on active duty within our SOF formations today.

SOF are bolstering deterrence globally as part of the DoD’s integrated deterrence approach. Operations over the past twenty years have necessitated operating transregionally alongside capable Allies and partners, leveraging the unique capabilities of our interagency community, and integrating with the Joint Force across domains – the foundation for effective integrated deterrence.

We have rebalanced our activities to prioritize campaigning for strategic advantage – comprising nearly one third of our deployed forces in fiscal year 2022 (FY22) – while maintaining sustainable counter-VEO (C-VEO) operations. Our command is committed to defending the nation and our interests globally, advancing our partnerships, and actively campaigning to strengthen deterrence, including in the “gray zone.”

Defending the Nation

USSOCOM has honed our capabilities to defend Americans, our homeland, and our valued Allies and partners through our operations since 2001. We currently have over five thousand SOF deployed to over 80 countries. Our National Guard SOF supported wide-ranging operations globally in over 30 countries while also deploying stateside to 18 states last year, providing essential Defense Support of Civil Authorities, COVID-19 response, inauguration security support, and natural disaster relief.

SOF represent a critical strategic hedge for the nation to respond in crisis. Exquisite, tailored capabilities enable SOF to execute no-fail hostage rescue missions and to counter an adversary’s efforts to produce or deploy weapons of mass destruction. Repeatedly during 2021, SOF provided crucial forces and command and control for crises requiring rapid deployment,

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complex problem-solving, and synchronized effects – whether responding to manmade and natural disasters or safeguarding Americans globally.

Alongside the ever-increasing capabilities of near-peer rivals, the threats posed by select non-state actors will endure. Violent extremists will continue to use terrorism as a tactic to achieve their objectives. Drivers of extremist violence exist in deep, multigenerational ideological divisions that cannot be overcome quickly or with military force. Violent extremism and terrorism will persist in the decades to come, representing an enduring threat to the United States, our Allies, and our partners.

USSOCOM continues to pursue a sustainable approach to our C-VEO operations by prioritizing threats, working closely with international and interagency partners, and leveraging expanded options to degrade VEO capabilities. During operations to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) over the past decade, SOF have played a critical role in mobilizing international partners, disrupting illicit financing, interdicting foreign fighters, illuminating propaganda, and defeating large-scale territorial expansion, when necessary.

USSOCOM continues to prioritize our role as the DoD's Coordinating Authority for C-VEO through our Department-wide campaign planning, assessments, and recommendations. Our semi-annual VEO threat assessment highlights our transregional approach involving multiple Geographic Combatant Commands.

After sustained global pressure since 2001, the threat to the U.S. homeland posed by VEOs based in the Middle East and Africa has diminished. Nevertheless, the threat to U.S. interests overseas remains. The continued availability of safe havens coupled with local security shortfalls perpetuates the risks of VEOs' external attacks. In East Africa, al-Shabaab continues to focus its operations within Somalia and presents an ongoing risk to U.S. interests in the region. In Afghanistan, ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) has prioritized local and regional operations but presents an enduring external threat to the U.S. homeland and interests abroad. Senior al-Qaeda leaders also remain committed to attacking the U.S. homeland and continue to encourage attacks by their affiliates. In Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula presents a continued threat of conducting or directing attacks externally. In Iraq and Syria, ISIS senior leaders demonstrate the intent and capability to target American interests despite the losses of key operatives and personnel since 2019.

Violent extremists continue to incorporate new technologies and adapt their tactics, posing an ongoing risk to counterterrorism (CT) efforts globally. Adversary unmanned aerial systems (UAS) pose a pressing challenge, exhibiting a rapid evolution in employment and lethality exceeding improvised explosive devices over the past two decades. While the evolving UAS threat from VEOs is troubling, capable state adversaries and their aligned paramilitary forces have also successfully employed UAS to target American and Allied forces – recently in Iraq in early 2022.

SOF Campaigning

SOF's full range of core activities, tailored capabilities, and enduring partnerships provide critical options for campaigning to bolster deterrence. Our combat-credible forces can undermine adversary confidence that aggression will succeed, shaping a rival's decision calculus. The access, placement, and influence generated by SOF's long-term commitments to building partner capacity and improving Ally interoperability provide expanded, low-cost options to gain awareness, shape the operating environment, or present an adversary with multiple dilemmas, if necessary. Additionally, SOF remain ideally suited to identify an adversary's challenges in the "gray zone" and counter those malign activities with firmness while managing escalation.

USSOCOM continues to prioritize its operations, activities, and investments in the Indo-Pacific and Europe while maintaining a sustainable posture to counter threats from the Middle East, Africa, and other regions. Over the past three years, our campaigning activities to counter and deter near-peer rivals have more than doubled – comprising over 30% of our deployed forces in FY22 and continuing to grow to nearly 50% in FY23. Our command also provides specialized expertise from our stateside forces to support Combatant Command priorities globally through Continental U.S.-Based Operational Support (CBOS) – a disciplined approach to provide tailored, low-density capabilities to support specific operational needs. We continue to optimize our global posture to counter violent extremists and other non-state actors while sustaining the ability to respond to crises worldwide.

Focused, deliberate campaigning in Eastern Europe over several years has supported whole-of-nation resilience efforts among critical Allies and enhanced their resistance capabilities if threatened with territorial aggression. Our continued focus on honing the core maritime capabilities of our Naval Special Warfare and Marine Raider formations complemented by exploring creative options to extend SOF's operational reach has also improved our ability to act credibly throughout the Indo-Pacific.

USSOCOM has invested heavily to expose and counter adversary propaganda and disinformation to better compete in the cognitive domain. Competitors, like China and Russia, continue to act assertively in the information "gray zone" to manipulate populations worldwide. As DoD's Joint Proponent for Military Information Support Operations (MISO) and the Coordinating Authority for Internet-based MISO, our command is adapting our psychological operations forces for the evolving information landscape. As part of our ongoing rebalancing efforts, our MISO activities to counter strategic competitors have also more than doubled over the past three years – comprising over 40% of our MISO activities worldwide in FY21. The Joint MISO WebOps Center (JMWC) continues to coordinate our MISO conducted via the internet and actively engage foreign audiences to illuminate and counter hostile propaganda and disinformation online. Since 2021, we have incorporated our first foreign partners and interagency liaisons within the JMWC.

Lastly, the critical authorities granted by Congress continue to allow SOF to campaign effectively against state and non-state actors alike, achieving an outsized impact across multiple mission sets. Operations supported by FY18 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) § 1202 (Irregular Warfare) have proven essential for applying SOF capabilities to expose and impose cost on malign actors, and the recent extension of this authority in the FY22 NDAA will continue enabling these critical SOF activities. Operations supported by 10 USC § 127e (CT)

provide flexible options to apply CT pressure in otherwise inaccessible or contested areas – increasingly important as we optimize our C-VEO capabilities. Recent authorities under 10 USC § 127f (Clandestine Operational Preparation of the Environment) and FY20 NDAA § 1057 (Intelligence / Counterintelligence) also support SOF activities with greater clarity and transparency.

Advancing Partnerships

USSOCOM benefits from unparalleled integration with our Allies and international partners, the interagency community, and the Joint Force strengthened over the past two decades of operations. While shared interests in countering violent extremism and terrorism prompted unprecedented levels of integration since 2001, these mutually beneficial relationships have extended to the full range of SOF operations globally.

Our network of valued Allies and international partners is our nation's greatest strategic advantage. We cannot surge trust in crisis. USSOCOM maintains a global network of liaison officers and exchange officers with Allied and international SOF. At our headquarters alone, we host exchange officers and foreign liaison officers from 28 Allied and partnered nations, offering an unrivaled ability to provide options to understand and act worldwide. Through persistent engagement over decades, our SOF have fostered extensive interoperability with Allied and partner SOF, often intensified by operating shoulder-to-shoulder during combat operations for over two decades. Authorities under 10 USC § 333 (Building Partner Capacity) and 10 USC § 322 (SOF Training) – the latter of which enables the Joint Combined Exchange Training program – are essential to further enhancing collaboration and promoting interoperability.

SOF's integration with the U.S. interagency community is equally important to leverage the nation's full capabilities to enhance awareness and provide expanded options to act. Our extensive interagency liaison network facilitates information sharing, speeds decision-making, and enhances synchronization for effective whole-of-government responses. Routine collaboration with interagency partners, such as the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) and Department of State's Global Engagement Center (GEC), has enhanced USSOCOM's response to a range of threats over the past year, including violent extremism, adversary misinformation, and near-peer malign activities.

The ongoing success of Operation Gallant Phoenix (OGP) – a multinational C-VEO initiative launched by USSOCOM in 2014 – has enabled international and interagency partners to share information and prosecute violent extremists. While focused upon degrading VEO networks, the lessons learned are applicable to future efforts to counter adversary actions in the “gray zone” and deter aggression. Coupled with USSOCOM's Counter Threat Finance authorities and expertise, information-sharing operations, like OGP, provide expanded options to disrupt illicit financing or deter malign activities.

Additionally, USSOCOM maintains collaborative, mutually supporting relationships across the Joint Force to ensure the most effective application of military power. Close coordination with Geographic Combatant Commands enables SOF to operate transregionally – particularly important as strategic rivals, like China and Russia, pursue advantage worldwide. Operating transregionally has proven critical for C-VEO efforts and is necessary to counter adversary “gray zone” activities. Equally strong collaboration with Functional Combatant Commands ensures synchronization across critical warfighting domains. Our recent efforts to enhance SOF-Cyber-Space capabilities leveraged trilateral coordination among USSOCOM,

USCYBERCOM, and USSPACECOM in addition to other interagency partners. Lastly, our ongoing efforts to promote opportunities for experimentation between our components and their respective Services have deepened ties, resulted in operational breakthroughs, and improved warfighting effectiveness.

Our role as DoD's Coordinating Authority for Counter-Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD) draws upon USSOCOM's full suite of international, interagency, and joint relationships to counter WMD proliferation and deter aggressive actions by state and non-state actors. Our recent design and execution of a transregional chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) senior leader forum advanced comprehensive partner understanding of the threat and informed the development of integrated actions to deter, defend against, and respond to WMD use.

INNOVATING FOR ADVANTAGE

USSOCOM is innovating and modernizing our approaches, tactics, and technologies to build enduring advantage. We continue to invest in promising data-driven technologies while also developing a workforce well-prepared for our data-driven age. Our command is also accelerating our wide-ranging modernization efforts and fully leveraging our important acquisition authorities that enable us to capitalize on our nation's innovation advantage – with an emphasis on four key acquisition programs: modernized maritime platforms, counter-UAS, Next-Generation ISR, and Armed Overwatch. Focused modernization also requires a complementary emphasis on divesting dated or obsolete platforms that are no longer operationally relevant or effective in the current and future environments.

Investing in a Data-Driven Future

USSOCOM continues to serve as pathfinder within DoD for integrating data-driven technologies, leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) powered by machine learning, deep learning, neural networks, and similar cutting-edge technologies. Our early work with DoD's Project Maven expanded our understanding of data collection and algorithm development, leading to successive Service-led initiatives. We are modernizing into a data-enabled command employing cloud, data, and AI technologies throughout our operations from the tactical edge to strategic decision-making.

Over the past year, we have maximized DoD-wide initiatives, led by the DoD Chief Data Officer and the Joint AI Center, to further identify opportunities to implement data-driven technologies. Our command was one of the first to welcome teams as part of the Deputy Secretary of Defense's Accelerating Data and AI Initiative in early FY22. We look forward to continuing these important efforts overseen by the DoD Chief Digital and AI Officer. We are closely aligned with DoD-wide initiatives to promote responsible and explainable AI to mitigate algorithmic risks, ensure traceability, and guard against unethical, illegal, or immoral outcomes.

Valuable partnerships with academia, national laboratories, and industry are central to this effort. In late 2021, we launched an initiative with Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Lincoln Labs to enable SOF information dominance. We continue to invest in promising AI and data fusion capabilities to streamline ISR processing, exploitation, and dissemination (PED); identify online disinformation; enhance mission command; improve predictive maintenance; and leverage robotic process automation to enhance a variety of resource-intensive, often error-prone

processes. Additionally, our network of liaison officers in key innovation hubs across the country – including Silicon Valley, Boston, Austin, and Washington, DC – enhances our partnerships with academia and industry and supports our command-wide modernization efforts.

Harnessing the full capacity of AI requires sustained investments in our talented workforce. Our AI-Ready Workforce initiatives have made steady progress since their inception in FY20, and we are codifying lessons learned in our new SOF AI Education Strategy. Partnering with leading universities – such as Carnegie Mellon University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology – to educate hundreds of senior and midgrade SOF leaders on AI principles and ethics has accelerated USSOCOM’s progress in implementing AI across a spectrum of operational problems.

Several enterprise-wide initiatives further support USSOCOM’s data transformation, especially with respect to mission command, intelligence fusion, and business activities. Equipping our workforce with a modern cloud-computing environment is equally critical to developing and deploying AI enterprise-wide. Additionally, our recent Data Strategy Implementation Plan outlines the ways and means for SOF to harness the power of data across our activities globally. Our enterprise-wide data steward pilot enables our SOF formations to execute their tailored data missions while preserving flexibility. Finally, USSOCOM’s efforts to accelerate the adoption of Advancing Analytics (known as Advana) enable real-time, data-driven decision-making throughout our command – including supporting efforts to integrate a variety of personnel and readiness systems as well as our financial systems.

Accelerating Modernization

USSOCOM is rapidly modernizing its materiel and systems and incorporating emerging technologies to build enduring advantage. Our command leverages its unique acquisition authority to modernize special operations capabilities in five focus areas: Next-Generation ISR, Next-Generation Mobility, Data and Networks, Precision Effects, and Hyper-Enabling the Operator/Biotechnologies.

We have coordinated closely with the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering (USD(R&E)) as well as the Services to collaborate on and experiment in each of these focus areas. USSOCOM’s unique attributes of being inherently globally deployed, partnered, and joint while also possessing acquisition authorities positions us to contribute to the overall modernization of the Joint Force. Specifically, we are well-positioned to be the partner of choice supporting three of USD(R&E)’s technology priorities: within cyber, focusing on MISO capabilities; within directed energy, focusing on electronic warfare/electronic attack at the tactical edge; and biotechnologies.

Next-Generation ISR enables finding and fixing a target in a contested environment and consists of three components: cyber-based ISR, space-based ISR payloads, and small tactical unmanned systems. In the cyber domain, we will continue supporting DoD’s Project Maven to automate the PED process while also collaborating with USCYBERCOM on the ability to find and fix adversaries in cyberspace at the tactical edge. Our efforts in the cyber domain also include capabilities to better leverage the full range of open-source data. To better harness advances in space, we have established a collaborative arrangement with the Space Force and the Space Development Agency to experiment with payloads that will provide our forces with space-based capabilities at the tactical edge. Finally, we are aggressively pursuing collaborative

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autonomy through our AI for small unit maneuver efforts across our portfolio of ground, air and maritime unmanned and unattended sensors.

As part of our Next-Generation Mobility efforts, we continue to modernize our platforms to prevail in contested environments while working closely with the Services. We are equipping our existing aviation platforms with advanced infiltration and penetration capabilities – such as our Silent Knight terrain-following/terrain-avoidance radar for our rotary- and fixed-wing fleets and radio-frequency countermeasures for our MC-130s and AC-130s. For the MC-130s, we are also exploring an amphibious take-off and landing capability to provide expanded options in maritime-focused environments, like the Indo-Pacific. We have partnered with both the Air Force for development of high-speed, vertical take-off and landing platforms and the Army for their Future Vertical Lift program. Finally, we are investing in modernized surface and undersea maritime platforms in partnership with the Navy. Our efforts in developing, testing, and fielding a range of maritime capabilities will strengthen deterrence in the Indo-Pacific and across the globe.

The Armed Overwatch program remains central to our Precision Effects modernization efforts – as we advance to a production award later this fiscal year. Armed Overwatch will provide responsive and available situational awareness, protection, and fires to our ground forces executing C-VEO missions in permissive environments.

Precision Effects are not limited to kinetic fires as we modernize our electronic warfare/electronic attack capabilities – best exemplified by our counter-UAS (C-UAS) efforts. While our command hones capabilities to defeat UAS prior to launch, we are also closely teamed with the Army's Joint Counter-UAS Office to detect and defeat UAS that pose a threat to deployed SOF and our partners. Through our System Integration Partner contract, we have taken an innovative approach to C-UAS which will enable us to effectively counter the evolving threat. We are pursuing a system-of-systems, open architecture approach to C-UAS that will allow for the rapid integration of both emerging and proven technologies.

Within the Data and Networks modernization area, we are advancing technologies across three broad capabilities: operations and intelligence fusion for our tactical commanders, protection of our operators from ubiquitous technical surveillance, and influence operations in the cyber domain. Our Mission Command System/Common Operating Picture deployed after only one year of development by embracing agile software development techniques and is USSOCOM's gateway to DoD's Joint All-Domain Command and Control. As our forces operate in increasingly contested environments alongside partners, we must provide identity management capabilities to protect them, their partners, and their families. Finally, we will continue to modernize our JMWC and other MISO efforts with automation and AI-enabled capabilities to operate more effectively in the cognitive domain.

Our final modernization focus area – Hyper-Enabling the Operator/Biotechnologies – focuses largely on developing emerging technologies, enabling us to rapidly deploy promising capabilities. Hyper-Enabling the Operator pursues technologies to provide decision advantages by optimizing information for individuals and teams conducting partnered operations – with the goal of enhancing effectiveness. Our biotechnology efforts are closely aligned with our Preservation of the Force and Family program to address the physical and cognitive wellbeing of our SOF. Our ongoing brain health efforts remain a critical component of this effort –

combining best-in-market, leading-edge data and AI industry partners with nutrition and health partnerships while leveraging state-of-science commercial and academic labs.

STRENGTHENING OUR FORCE AND FAMILIES

Our people are the underlying source of strength within our SOF formations. The creativity and commitment of these men and women is crucial to adapting our tactics and technologies for tomorrow's challenges. We believe unreservedly that our first SOF Truth endures: "Humans are more important than hardware." USSOCOM continues to focus on sustaining trust by implementing our Comprehensive Review findings, enhancing the readiness and resilience of our teammates and their families, and unlocking the potential of our nation's deep and diverse pools of talent.

Sustaining Trust

Our commitment to high ethical standards, engaged leadership, and maintaining accountability within SOF is critical to sustaining the trust earned over decades. USSOCOM continues to make sustained progress in implementing the recommendations from the 2019 Comprehensive Review, as detailed in the forthcoming biannual report to Congress from our command and ASD(SO/LIC). Our Comprehensive Review Implementation Team has diligently overseen the continued efforts to codify institutional adjustments. Our components have taken active roles in refining their processes to select key leaders, enhancing ethical training throughout the force, and ensuring accountability for lapses that erode trust.

Over the past two years, USSOCOM has made marked improvements in achieving sustainable force employment – one of several underlying concerns identified in the Comprehensive Review. Through a rigorous review of requirements, we have ensured key tactical leaders are best postured to provide present and engaged leadership while minimizing risk to our missions overseas. Our formations have attained DoD's directed 1:2 deployment-to-dwell ratio for nearly all SOF – while steadily approaching the 1:3 deployment-to-dwell goal – by exercising strategic discipline through our force employment processes.

We are unequivocal that sexual assault and extremism have no place in our formations. We will continue aggressively investigating allegations of misconduct and holding personnel accountable, as appropriate. USSOCOM actively supports DoD and Service policies, including ongoing implementation of the Independent Review Commission recommendations, regarding sexual assault and harassment that have improved reporting processes, victim advocacy, and prevention. Our command also remains fully engaged in DoD's efforts to remove behaviors that promote discrimination, hate, or harassment and that are inconsistent with our oaths to defend the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic.

Enhancing Readiness and Resilience

The Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF) and the Warrior Care Programs (WCP) remain central to enhancing readiness and resilience for SOF and their families. The POTFF program has evolved to foster a holistic, multifaceted approach to human performance, resilience, and rehabilitation. Over 60% of POTFF manpower now supports the psychological and cognitive aspects of performance. The increased focus on brain health and cognitive performance – including funding authorized for related research in the FY22 NDAA – is

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necessary to prepare SOF to operate in an increasingly complex, information-rich battlespace. SOF commanders overwhelmingly recognize the POTFF program as promoting career longevity, improving retention, and enhancing quality of life within our formations.

Caring for our wounded, injured, and ill teammates is a sacred duty, especially after two decades of sustained combat. Our WCP, commonly referred to as the Care Coalition, has led this critical effort since 2005. Thanks to the WCP's tireless efforts, we have retained over 70% of wounded SOF in military service – with nearly 60% of these highly trained, skilled, and experienced warriors returning to duty within their original occupational specialty. Congress' continued support for these programs has enabled these remarkable results.

Our formations also maintain a persistent focus on suicide among SOF. Leaders are increasingly attentive to underlying risk factors through enhanced training and education. Through persistent efforts to destigmatize seeking care, the number of servicemembers seeking mental health resources through POTFF has increased. While we witnessed a modest reduction in suicides in 2021 when compared with the previous two years, any loss of life through suicide is tragic and unacceptable. We continue to fully support all efforts in this critical arena.

Lastly, as the COVID-19 pandemic enters its third year, its impact on SOF readiness has been moderate, resulting from cancelled or postponed events and decreased interaction with Allies and partners. USSOCOM's uniformed, civilian, and contractor populations have been largely protected through compliance with DoD-wide and installation-specific risk mitigation measures, including vaccination requirements.

Unlocking the Potential of our Nation's Talent

The strength of our nation lies in its boundless and diverse reservoirs of talented individuals. Maintaining the world's finest SOF in the decades to come requires accessing the nation's deep and diverse pools of talent. Building a diverse force is therefore both an operational imperative and a strategic necessity.

Our Diversity and Inclusion Strategy and accompanying Implementation Action Plan continue to guide our efforts with our initial report to Congress forthcoming. Our SOF Executive Committee on Diversity and Inclusion – chaired by ASD(SO/LIC) and USSOCOM – provides senior leader oversight and fosters accountability for sustained progress in implementation. USSOCOM is committed to welcoming all men and women capable of meeting the high standards required of SOF professionals, ensuring these servicemembers are part of inclusive teams, and overseeing their equitable careerlong advancement.

We continue to make incremental, but critical, progress in removing barriers to women's and minority participation and advancement within SOF. Women and minority servicemembers now serve in key leadership roles throughout all four SOF components and within our headquarters – in several cases for the first time in USSOCOM's history. Women have also continued to successfully enter SOF-specific career fields that had previously been closed. While these milestones are important and notable, they are not sufficient. Sustained focus in fostering diverse and inclusive organizations is still required.

CONCLUSION

USSOCOM is committed to creating strategic, asymmetric advantage for the nation. SOF are bolstering deterrence by campaigning in line with the DoD's strategic priorities while providing critical options in the "gray zone." Our force stands ready to respond in crisis and defend the nation from state and non-state threats. Further, our wide-ranging modernization initiatives build enduring advantage and prepare our force to prevail in the future. Doing so necessitates our continued prioritization of our people – our most cherished resource. Our efforts sustain hard-earned trust, build resilience within our force, maintain quality of life for families, and ensure inclusive and diverse teams to succeed on tomorrow's battlefield.

We will meet the challenges of tomorrow with clear thinking and resolve. Our nation demands it. SOF have proven their innovative spirit and determination on countless battlefields over many decades. With the continued support of Congress, USSOCOM will demonstrate the strategic advantage of maintaining the most credible and capable SOF in the world.