

Statement for the Record



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Chairman Gallego, Ranking Member Kelly, and distinguished members of this committee, thank you for providing this opportunity to testify on the global posture of our nation's Special Operations Forces (SOF) enterprise. I welcome the opportunity to testify with General Richard Clarke, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), one of our nation's most dedicated military professionals and outstanding leaders.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of Congress for the SOF enterprise. Your support and commitment to civilian oversight, both within the Department of Defense (DoD) and here in Congress, ensure we have the world's most capable SOF. Your support enables the men and women of the SOF enterprise to tackle some of the Nation's most challenging problems in austere, chaotic, and dangerous environments.

Today's strategic environment is complex and diverse, with threats across the spectrum of competition, crisis, and conflict compounded by instability resulting from transboundary challenges like pandemics, climate change, and economic stressors. All require SOF, and the entire U.S. national security establishment, to be more adaptive, innovative, and agile than ever before. We are at an inflection point where the SOF enterprise will be called upon to contribute more to counter the challenges of China and Russia, while maintaining enduring capabilities to counter violent extremist organizations (C-VEO) and conduct crisis response to protect Americans and America's interests.

In alignment with the National Defense Strategy and Secretary Austin's priorities, SOF will build enduring advantages, lead and support integrated deterrence operations, and actively campaign with partners. We will do so by continuing to focus on our people, by providing tailored and unique capabilities, and deepening our relationships with Allies and partners. As this and prior Congresses have made clear, our best chance of success lies in a mature civilian-military partnership that is led effectively to be far greater than the sum of its parts.

Civilian Oversight as Key to an Optimized SOF Enterprise

During his confirmation hearing last year, Secretary Austin testified that "the safety and security of our democracy demands competent civilian control of our armed forces" and pledged to empower his civilian staff accordingly. The Secretary actively supports institutionalizing the role of ASD (SO/LIC) in the administrative chain-of-command for USSOCOM as Congress directed. Last May, the Department revised the DoD Directive that explains and validates the ASD (SO/LIC) responsibilities and roles, further strengthening my office's ability to provide civilian leadership, management, and oversight of the organization, training, and equipping of SOF.

Secretary Austin also reaffirmed that the ASD (SO/LIC) will continue to report directly to him as the Secretary of Defense in exercising authority, direction, and control of special operations-peculiar administrative matters, and reiterated his commitment to ensuring that the ASD (SO/LIC) has a seat at the table alongside the Secretaries of the Military Departments in key decision forums, such as his regular Service Secretary meetings, the Deputy's Management

Action Group, and the Joint Requirements Oversight Council. In doing so, SO/LIC is positioned to provide effective and enduring civilian representation of SOF equities and competencies to Department and national leadership.

As you have seen in our monthly Section 926 updates, our Secretariat for Special Operations has made progress building the manpower and expertise necessary to conduct meaningful oversight and provide civilian leadership to the SOF enterprise. Though we have made headway, our development remains a work in progress. The Secretariat has increased its expertise and integration with the Department's processes across all of the special operations-peculiar administrative matters. We will reach full potential when we have adequate amount of staff, leadership, and expertise in place to embed in all relevant processes at the required levels of seniority, and adequate facilities and communications to execute our mission. I appreciate your continued support as we institutionalize these reforms.

Additionally, General Clarke and I have worked together to achieve a new level of transparency and collaboration between our organizations. On at least a weekly basis, we review key issues of importance to the SOF enterprise. Further, the SO/LIC leadership team collaborates closely with senior executives and general and flag officers on the USSOCOM staff. This partnership allows SO/LIC to more effectively understand and represent unique SOF requirements, challenges, and capabilities. Perhaps as importantly, it enables us to innovate on the best ways to employ and structure SOF today and for the future.

Our collaboration extends to jointly creating a new SOF Vision and Strategy earlier this year that represents a shared leadership outlook for the SOF enterprise. We are also working on a longer-term vision as we closely collaborate to execute a *SOF Force Design 2040*. In December of 2021, SO/LIC and USSOCOM initiated the *SOF Force Design 2040* to ensure SOF's future force is constructed to address the future threat environment. Through this effort, we will also publish a *SOF Operating Concept 2040*, conduct a capability gap assessment, and develop a SOF future force structure to implement the operating concept.

Looking toward an optimized force for the challenges of 2040 forces us to think beyond the pressures of immediate operations and also consider what developments might not yet be captured in current strategies. It focuses our exercise and experimentation work so that we continue to innovate where it is beneficial, while sustaining capabilities of enduring value. With this new strategic tool, we will be better positioned to analyze the SOF enterprise, continue to refine the operational vision for future joint SOF, and articulate SOF's ability to deliver global, scalable, and tailorable strategic options that enable U.S. national leaders to manage risk over the near, medium, and long-term. We expect this force design effort to lay the foundation for the long-term direction of SOF, and become the basis for a repeatable and sustainable cycle of reviewing, testing, and experimenting SOF concepts, force structure, and modernization efforts.

SO/LIC's dual role in shaping the Department's policy, in combination with our administrative oversight and leadership and management responsibilities reinforce SOF's role in and contributions to the Department's strategic priorities. With our unique twin roles, we are positioned to ensure key SOF-led capabilities are integrated into strategic concepts, and

simultaneously ensure appropriate investments—in areas such as irregular warfare, information operations, and undersea capabilities. SO/LIC will ensure SOF concepts and capabilities inform and supports the Department’s regional and functional goals. We will also continue to develop the Special Operations Policy Oversight Council to ensure that SOF is able to meet the Joint Force’s requirements and clearly identifies the support it needs from the Services.

Building Enduring Advantages by Focusing on Our People

SO/LIC is also partnering closely with USSOCOM to protect and preserve our greatest asset – our people. SOF has always recognized that the foundation of its success lies in its people and the Secretary of Defense established taking care of people as one of his top three priorities. We believe at our core that our single most important enduring advantage against potential adversaries is personnel who are highly trained and motivated to excel in combat arms and in problem solving with partners. Continuing to recruit and retain the most diverse and talented Americans for SOF is essential. Over the last decades we have asked much of these warriors and their families. We are motivated by our enduring commitment to the well-being of SOF personnel and families who have repeatedly faced the strains of combat and repeated deployments while facing some of the Nation’s most challenging operational problems. We also recognize that the future operational and strategic environment will not be the same as the past and we must prepare the force for those challenges.

Together with senior leadership from USSOCOM, I regularly review the health and readiness of our special operations workforce. With Office of the Secretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness, we ensure SOF are integrated into efforts to better quantitatively model the impacts of force management decisions on readiness and consider their cross-cutting strategic impacts.

We continue to invest in the resiliency of SOF by taking a holistic, whole-person approach to the well-being of personnel and their families. With the strong support of Congress, SOCOM is strengthening the Preservation of the Force and Families (POTFF) program to address SOF-unique challenges and to optimize physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and spiritual performance. POTFF, through a combination of USSOCOM, Service, and Department resources, ensures we are able to meet the unique needs in individual SOF components and units. The POTFF’s embedded service providers have broken the stigmas historically associated with those seeking psychological health support and have provided preventative care to avert potential suicides during the COVID-19 pandemic. We appreciate Congress’ support through Section 561 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2022 to enable the SOF enterprise to extend the POTFF family support program to our Gold Star families and embrace surviving families as important members of the SOF community.

USSOCOM’s Warrior Care program also continues to provide members who have sustained physical or psychological trauma and their families with much needed support throughout the process of recovery, rehabilitation, reintegration, and transition. We have no greater responsibility than to care for our personnel who sacrificed their mental and physical well-being to defend the Nation and to provide them with a path to return to service and/or to transition to civilian careers following their years of service.

It has been two years since the release of the Comprehensive Review, an internal review directed by Commander, USSOCOM and ASD (SO/LIC) to address concerns about force employment, leadership, and accountability across SOF formations. The implementation of the recommended actions from the Review is beginning to have a measurable and positive impact on SOF culture and ethics. USSOCOM is working to refine data collection so that progress, trends, and risks can be identified and so that mitigations can be evaluated for their effectiveness. Across the SOF enterprise, there has been commitment to ensuring present and engaged leaders at all levels to ensure alignment with SOF values. Our work will not stop here; SO/LIC and USSOCOM are committed to going beyond the Review to create institutional mechanisms that will continue to promote cultural changes that benefit the force and its mission execution.

We remain committed to taking further steps to combat sexual assault and extremism activities within our community and support such efforts across the Department. USSOCOM created the Health of SOF Cell to orchestrate efforts in organizational culture and climate, diversity and inclusion, and countering extremism within the SOF enterprise. We fully support this comprehensive approach and work closely with the Cell to promote the healthy organizational climate and culture of SOF. Over the next year, we will improve our data tracking and metrics to identify areas requiring additional attention, to examine the efficacy of our efforts, and to steer our strategy and resources to where they are needed and most effective. As we consider the future operating environment, we recognize that SOF is not fully taking advantage of the nation's talent pool. SOF's unique capabilities to communicate, coordinate and collaborate with Allies, partners, and other foreign groups with different backgrounds and perspectives are a critical requirement for the future operational success. I endorse General Clarke's view that, "building a diverse force is therefore both an operational imperative and a strategic necessity."

The SOF Executive Council for Diversity and Inclusion was created two years ago in response to our requirement to take advantage of the nation's talent to more effectively operate in a diverse global environment. This forum provides executive level attention to advancing diversity and inclusion in the SOF enterprise. SOF Service components are increasing their outreach to groups that previously may not have considered a career in SOF and working with their parent Services to develop more targeted and effective recruiting initiatives. We do not need to change our core standards, but we do need to carefully examine how we bring in personnel and the process and sequencing of how we test the ability to meet the standards.

Providing Targeted and Unique Capabilities for Integrated Deterrence

To meet the challenges of integrated deterrence, we must equip SOF with innovative, modern, and reliable capabilities that can out-perform our competitors in all areas. We continue to invest in technologies and capabilities to empower our personnel to operate in denied areas and to conduct high-risk air, land, and sea operations in remote and austere environments, with a focus on the near-peer threat environment.

SO/LIC-USSOCOM collaboration on strategy is mirrored in resourcing. General Clarke and I now co-sign the yearly Capabilities and Programming Guidance used to develop

USSOCOM's 5-year Program Objective Memorandum (POM) and the President's Budget request. This past year was the first in which SO/LIC was able to formally exercise oversight responsibility and submit the USSOCOM POM for the Secretary's ultimate review and approval. In addition, this is the first year in which we also formally designated Armed Overwatch and Undersea Programs as "special interest" acquisition programs ensuring more comprehensive oversight so that any problems or issues may be identified early and rapidly remedied.

As the Department's advanced strike and surveillance aircraft focus on nation-state threats, SOF deployed to remote locations continue to require close air support, precision strike capability, and airborne intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities to safely execute missions in support of integrated deterrence and building enduring advantages. The investment into the Armed Overwatch program will ensure that this dedicated capability exists, allowing high-end fighter aircraft to orient towards other critical needs. The Armed Overwatch platform will deliver a capability that ensures our SOF can continue to operate wherever we need them, whenever they are needed.

In our SOF Undersea Programs, we are investing in advancing USSOCOM's manned and unmanned undersea systems capability with a focus on enhancing joint force lethality. We are working with the Department of the Navy to ensure the integration of modernized SOF operational concepts and investments intended to facilitate access in denied areas and greater range for longer periods of time with less risk to the operator.

Campaigning and Maximizing our Work with Allies and Partners

In today's security environment, China is our pacing challenge, Russia is an immediate threat to our Allies and partners, Iran's and Iranian-supported destabilizing behavior continues in the Middle East, North Korea maintains a threatening posture on the peninsula, and multiple violent extremist organizations continue to pose a threat to the U.S. and our Allies and partners. We also see adversaries operating in the "gray zone," or level below armed conflict, where they hope to avoid provoking a conventional military response from the United States. We see adversaries expanding their capabilities in multiple domains (e.g., space, cyber, information) and with unique or modified tactics and weapons such as small unmanned aerial systems. Our adversaries are also leveraging criminal organizations, fragile nations, and poor governance to influence global politics, destabilize our Allies and partners, seize natural resources, and fund other malign activities. Within the SOF enterprise, there are actions, activities, and investments to assist the Joint Force and the Nation to address all of these challenges.

SOF's unique training authorities such as the Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) program maintains our readiness in diverse global environments. These small-unit engagements prepare our teams to conduct persistent small-footprint irregular warfare and expand and strengthen our purpose-built network of Allies and partners. As COVID-19 restrictions continue to be lifted, we are on pace to almost double the number of these training deployments conducted this year compared to 2021. These persistent and habitual partnership exercises enable critical region access, geographic and cultural familiarity, and operational interoperability in support of combatant commander requirements for high-priority Allies and partners.

Based on training, capabilities, and mission sets, SOF are ideally positioned to support the interagency, Allies, and partners as they develop a wide range of low-visibility options for the purposes of strategic competition and campaigning in the gray zone. Drawing on decades of counterterrorism experience, SOF has the “muscle memory” to integrate activities against a number of diverse state-based threats, especially in pre-conflict environments.

Unique authorities provided by Congress, such as that provided under Section 1202 of the NDAA for FY 2018, enable SOF to assure our Allies and partners of U.S. support during competition, crisis, and conflict; and provides key access and placement. Section 1202 is an example of an authority which enables SOF’s transition to increased focus on campaigning to gain advantages against competitors’ coercive actions.

We continue to execute a sustainable approach to combatting terrorism that carefully balances risk and resources. SOF will continue to prioritize the Defeat-ISIS campaign and to disrupt and degrade other violent extremist organization’s threats to our U.S. national security interests. SOF will also continue to build the capacity of partner forces to address and monitor these threats.

The SOF enterprise now is at a pivot point where we must build enduring advantages, lead and support integrated deterrence operations, and actively campaign with partners in to provide to our national leaders unique and vital capabilities and options in a more complex security environment. For the past 20 years, SOF capabilities and force structure were optimized for C-VEO operations. SOF is now adapting its concepts, force structure, and capabilities to gain an advantage during strategic competition, to help drive integrated deterrence, and to support the joint force in conflict should deterrence fail.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, I would like to conclude by thanking the Committee again for its strong support for our special operations personnel, who work diligently every day to safeguard our national security. Our partnership with Congress is vital to our ability to successfully fulfill our mission, and your support of the men and women of the SOF enterprise is appreciated.

I thank the Committee again for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.