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Before the

Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities

COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY ON UNITED STATES SPECIAL
OPERATIONS COMMAND IN REVIEW OF THE DEFENSE
AUTHORIZATION REQUEST FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026 AND THE
FUTURE YEARS DEFENSE PROGRAM

Tuesday, April 8, 2025

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ALDERSON COURT REPORTING
1029 VERMONT AVE, NW
10TH FLOOR
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7 U.S. Senate
8 Subcommittee on Emerging
9 Threats and Capabilities
10 Committee on Armed Services
11 Washington, D.C.
12

13 The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:36 p.m. in
14 Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Joni
15 Ernst, chairman of the committee, presiding.

16 Committee Members Present: Senators Ernst [presiding],
17 Wicker, Budd, Sheehy, Reed, Slotkin, Shaheen, Rosen, and
18 Kelly.
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1 OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JONI K. ERNST, U.S. SENATOR
2 FROM IOWA

3 Senator Ernst: The Emerging Threats and Capabilities
4 Subcommittee meets today to review the posture of our
5 special operations enterprise. Thank you to our witnesses
6 for appearing before the subcommittee today. I want to take
7 a moment to welcome Senator Slotkin as the subcommittee's
8 new ranking member. I look forward to working closely
9 together.

10 For the members' information, today's hearing will
11 begin in open session, and then transition to a closed
12 session in SVC-217 in the Office of Senate Security, no
13 later than 3:45 p.m. For years, I have worked closely with
14 our special operations forces community to ensure they have
15 the resources to counter evolving threats. SOF is more than
16 a counter-terrorism force. They are indispensable in
17 countering the malign activities of the Chinese Communist
18 Party, Russia, and their authoritarian allies.

19 SOCOM is operated under stagnant budgets. The
20 limitation of SOF and strength was a very shortsighted
21 decision at a time when SOF capabilities are needed, more
22 than ever. We must change course now. That is why I intend
23 to work with the DOD to rebuild SOCOMs budget. Given SOF's
24 critical role in national security, this is a wise and cost-
25 effective investment.

1 Additionally, we must update DOD policies and
2 authorities to leverage SOF capabilities fully. Irregular
3 warfare has been a core SOF mission since World War II, yet
4 unnecessary restrictions have hampered their flexibility.
5 We need to empower our combatant commanders to unleash SOF's
6 full potential. President Trump, Secretary Hegseth, and our
7 witnesses today recognize the urgency of these threats and
8 the vital role SOF plays.

9 As chair of this subcommittee, I will prioritize these
10 key forces, which are essential for this era of great power
11 competition and for ensuring the security of the American
12 people. This is not just about defense and deterrence.
13 It's about ensuring the U.S. remains the preeminent global
14 force. We have no time to waste.

15 Now, I would like to recognize Senator Slotkin for her
16 opening comments.

1 STATEMENT OF HON. ELISSA SLOTKIN, U.S. SENATOR FROM
2 MICHIGAN

3 Senator Slotkin: Thank you, Chairwoman Ernst.
4 Important hearing on readiness, but importantly, happy to be
5 here with you in our first official hearing on Emerging
6 Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee of the 119th, my first
7 time ranking member in the Senate. So, I'm happy to be here
8 and I look forward to maintaining a really strong, robust
9 bipartisan approach.

10 I think we want the same things, which is to make sure
11 that our special operations forces have the resources, the
12 potential, the acquisition, everything you need to deal with
13 a world of really changing fast changing threats and
14 challenges. Welcome to our guests. We're happy to have you
15 here. And I think we want to express our appreciation for
16 everything you do every day particularly in guiding the
17 special operations forces, given that, as you were
18 describing to us earlier, the precipitous increase in the
19 missions you are being asked to do. I think that we are
20 keenly aware of that.

21 Obviously, the gray zone challenges in places like
22 China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and enabling the joint
23 force. But I think in particular, I think it's hard to have
24 this conversation without thinking about Taiwan and sort of
25 the scenarios we have going forward with Taiwan and the

1 important role you all will play. Space, cyber, information
2 operations, you all are at the forefront of a very changing
3 world on conflict. Conflict is just going to look different
4 and continue to look different than it was when many of us
5 were starting out.

6 We want you to have those resources and therefore I
7 will just flag, I'm very interested in what's going on right
8 now and the cuts that are potentially on the table at the
9 Defense Department. We've heard rumors of 80,000, 90,000
10 forces, for instance, from the Army being cut. I don't
11 think anyone is against cutting actual fat on the bone, but
12 being surgical and smart about it and not cutting the very
13 operators that we need to perform this ever-expanding group
14 of missions, you're being asked to do.

15 So, with that Madam Chairman, I yield back.

16 Senator Ernst: Thank you. And I'd like to thank SASC
17 Ranking Member, Senator Reed for being here today. And
18 Senator Reed, do you have any opening comments or thoughts?

19 Senator Reed: I just want to commend you Madam
20 Chairman and the Ranking Member. I have great confidence.

21 Senator Ernst: Okay. Thank you. We will go ahead and
22 proceed to your opening statements, and Mr. Jenkins, we will
23 start with you and then we will proceed to General Fenton.
24 So, gentlemen, you each have five minutes for your opening
25 statements.

1 STATEMENT OF COLBY C. JENKINS, DEPUTY ASSISTANT
2 SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, PERFORMING THE DUTIES OF THE ASSISTANT
3 SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND LOW-
4 INTENSITY CONFLICT

5 Mr. Jenkins: Thank you. Madam Chair Ernst, Ranking
6 Member Slotkin, Chairman Wicker when he comes, Ranking
7 Member Reed, and other distinguished members of the
8 subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on
9 the global posture of our nation's Special Operations
10 Forces, or SOF. I'm honored to testify alongside General
11 Fenton. We are joined here today by two extraordinary
12 Americans, who I would like to take a moment to recognize.

13 Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense and
14 Director of the Special Operations Secretariat, Dr. Sandra
15 Hobson, seated behind me, as well as SO/LIC Senior Enlisted
16 Advisor, Command Master Chief Brad Rhineland, also seated
17 behind me. These dedicated servant leaders bring expertise
18 and insights that have been invaluable as we advocate within
19 the Department of Defense, on behalf of our SOF service
20 members and their families. As a combat veteran Green Beret
21 myself, the opportunity to work with these incredible
22 teammates and represent our SOF enterprise is profoundly
23 humbling and special.

24 Today's global security environment has become
25 increasingly complex, as AI and other technological

1 advancements rapidly transform the character of warfare,
2 threats from state and non-state actors continue to
3 converge. Our global competitors actively seek to undermine
4 the United States and our allies. Terrorists and
5 transnational criminal networks continue to pose a serious
6 threat to the homeland.

7 In these turbulent times, my office, the Office of
8 Special Operations, Low Intensity Conflict or SO/LIC, and
9 the U.S. Special Operations Command remain at the forefront
10 of our nation's strategic priorities, representing less than
11 2 percent of the defense budget. Our special operations
12 forces provide unique and outsized effects, adding
13 exceptional value to the nation. Tasked with the most
14 challenging and dangerous missions, SOF remain the world's
15 most lethal, adaptable, and capable force.

16 Our priorities for the SOF enterprise are squarely
17 nested within Secretary Hegseth's priorities for the joint
18 force, defend the homeland, strengthen deterrence, and
19 increase burden sharing with U.S. allies and partners. Our
20 elite warriors deter our adversaries by creating strategic
21 asymmetric advantages and maintaining irregular warfare
22 superiority.

23 Leveraging our close relationships with our foreign
24 partners in critical regions, SOF are uniquely positioned to
25 identify and counter our adversary's malign and coercive

1 activities. Whether in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, the Middle
2 East, Africa, Western Hemisphere, or near our own southern
3 border, these low-cost, small-footprint efforts promote
4 stability, empower partners and allies, and lead efforts
5 against China, terrorists, drug traffickers, and other
6 threats.

7 Even with the global increase in demand, our special
8 operations forces face personnel cuts and resource
9 constraints. In fact, armed conflict and regional
10 instability have driven a 200 percent increase in our crisis
11 response mission over the past three years. While at the
12 same time, operational and logistics costs for crisis
13 response have increased 260 percent.

14 We must ensure SOFs readiness while balancing
15 operational demands and optimizing available resources. We
16 must also promote accountability through rigorous analytics
17 and data-driven decision making. Congress wisely
18 established civilian oversight of special operations to
19 ensure that SOF remains strategically aligned, ethically
20 grounded, and accountable. My office provides policy
21 direction, resource advocacy, and oversight needed to ensure
22 that SOFs initiatives and efforts stay focused on war
23 fighter needs and national objectives, without mission creep
24 or undue strain on the force.

25 This oversight is not bureaucratic. In fact, it is

1 essential to effective war fighting. Our nation's security
2 depends on a strong, agile, modernized, and accountable SOF
3 enterprise. With your support, we will continue ensuring
4 that SOF is ready to detour, fight, and win anytime,
5 anywhere. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.
6 I invite you to visit our SOF community around the globe, to
7 meet our service members and their families, and to see
8 firsthand the capabilities that we bring in defense of the
9 nation. Your continued support is critical. I look forward
10 to answering your questions.

11 [The prepared statement of Mr. Jenkins follows:]

12 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

1 Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Jenkins. And General
2 Fenton, you are now recognized for five minutes.

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1 STATEMENT OF GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON, USA COMMANDER,
2 UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

3 General Fenton: Madam Chair Ernst, Ranking Member
4 Slotkin, distinguished members of this subcommittee,
5 Chairman Wicker when he comes, Ranking Member Reed, thank
6 you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

7 This month marks 38 years since the creation of Special
8 Operations Command. We are thankful for Congress's
9 incredible foresight in creating us and steadfast support
10 ever since. I'm joined today by Command Sergeant Major
11 Shane Shorter. Shane exemplifies the unmatched caliber of
12 our non-commissioned officer corps. If you look at the
13 hardest problems facing our nation in the darkest corners of
14 this earth, you will find our special operations non-
15 commissioned officers solving them.

16 Our NCOs exemplify the precision, lethality of your
17 special operations teams and demonstrate our competitive and
18 comparative advantage. They are the reason we are envied by
19 militaries around the globe. It's the honor of a lifetime
20 for Shane and me to represent the uniform and civilian
21 members of your special operations command, as well as our
22 U.S. Interagency Partners and the Global SOF Warriors from
23 28 nations who are stationed at our SOCOM headquarters in
24 Tampa.

25 I'm also honored today to testify alongside Secretary

1 Jenkins from ASD SO/LIC. We rely on SO/LIC 's partnership,
2 support, and advocacy to ensure your special operations
3 warriors and their families who serve alongside them
4 continue to thrive and win. We are in an era of serious
5 national security challenges. The border, communist China,
6 Russia, Iran, North Korea, and terrorist organizations all
7 pose significant threats in isolation.

8 However, we're increasingly seeing these threats
9 converge across the globe. Meanwhile, the changing
10 character of war is changing at a rate faster than we've
11 ever seen. The innovation cycle now turns in days and
12 weeks, not months and years. Our adversaries use \$10,000
13 one-way drones that we shoot down with \$2 million missiles.
14 That cost benefit curve is upside down.

15 To summarize, this is the most complex, asymmetric, and
16 hybrid threat security environment I've seen in 38 years of
17 service. Contending with these challenges demands more from
18 your special operations forces that requires tough choices,
19 forcing trade-offs as we strike to balance an increase in
20 operations readiness and the need for modernization.

21 Your elite SOCOM team provides an outsized return on
22 any investment. However, with only 3 percent of DODs forces
23 and less than 2 percent of DODs budget, we are now playing a
24 zero-sum game. Yet I'd submit your special operations
25 forces were tailor made for this era, rapidly responding to

1 crisis, disrupting terrorist organizations, and
2 asymmetrically deterring our adversaries.

3 Employed expressly at the direction of the President
4 and Secretary of Defense, SOCOM's Crisis Response Mission is
5 the nation's most lethal and surgical tool to eliminate
6 threats to the homeland, rescue American citizens, protect
7 our diplomats, all at a moment's notice. In the past three
8 and a half years, the frequency of these Presidentially
9 directed missions significantly increased by 200 percent.
10 Yet for this sacred obligation, we'll accept no risk in
11 today's crisis response mission.

12 Some may think we're done fighting terror. I'd submit
13 terror is not done with us. SOCOM's mission to degrade
14 terrorist groups starts at our border, spans the globe. In
15 recent months, your special operations team eliminated over
16 500 terrorists who had the intent and capability to strike
17 the homeland. Alongside our global special operations
18 partners, we've captured over 600. Aligned with the
19 department's priorities, deterrence has long been a part of
20 SOCOM's DNA.

21 We are America's irregular warfare experts. We deter
22 war by altering our adversaries' decision below the
23 threshold of conflict in the gray zone. We stand ready to
24 prevail if deterrence fails, as combatant commands seek to
25 strengthen, deterrence requests for SOCOM capabilities have

1 increased by more than 35 percent in the last two years
2 alone. Against that backdrop, we continue to grapple with
3 years of flat budgets, a 14 percent decrease in buying
4 power, significant personnel reductions, and the requirement
5 to evolve our technology and authorities.

6 All this forces trade-offs, tough choices that
7 challenge current missions and puts modernization at risk.
8 Yet SOCOM remains the world's premier special operations
9 force. I pledge to always provide the nation with the best
10 special operations capability for the fiscal and personnel
11 resources we receive. We will never compromise on standards
12 and lethality. We are grateful for this subcommittee's work
13 on novel approaches to SOF funding and authorities.

14 I look forward to taking your questions. Thank you.

15 [The prepared statement of General Fenton follows:]

16 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

1 Senator Ernst: Thank you, General Fenton. And we will
2 start now with the senators' questions. I'll start with
3 five minutes of questions and go on to the Ranking Member.
4 If we have other members join, we will have them ask
5 questions as well. If we don't have other members join, we
6 will recess briefly and move to the closed hearing. So,
7 this may be a very speedy round but I will go ahead and
8 start.

9 And General Fenton, so you mentioned the personnel
10 reductions in force. And since the announcement of SOF
11 personnel cuts under the previous administration, I have
12 been very firmly and vocally opposed to that. The return on
13 investment our nation gets from our special operations
14 forces is not only measurable, it is absolutely unmatched.
15 Despite those reductions, SOF continues to do what it does
16 best, it's adapting, innovating, and overcoming.

17 So, General Fenton, can you speak to how SOF is
18 adapting its training pipelines to enable future operators
19 to integrate high tech capabilities like AI, cyber, and
20 electronic warfare more effectively?

21 General Fenton: Senator, I can. I would start by
22 saying I think you know you're your SOF very well, in terms
23 of that we innovate and I like to think we innovate for
24 today and we modernize for tomorrow. And as we think about
25 tomorrow, that's certainly through the lens of the lessons

1 learned that we're watching vis-a-vis the events in Ukraine.
2 And I think it's more important to not just observe those
3 lessons, but as you laid out, institutionalize them.

4 I think in the instance of institutionalization of
5 those lessons I would offer U.S. Army Special Operations,
6 USSOF, has undergone two, what I think are pretty
7 significant efforts against this change of character of war.
8 First, is they've created a brand-new course, the remote
9 Uncrewed Systems Integration Course down at Fort Bragg, a
10 course that is about a six-week program of instruction,
11 bringing together everything from learning how to build the
12 drone, fly drones, and then certainly adapt them as we have
13 seen on the battlefield.

14 The second thing they've done, I would characterize in
15 terms of institutionalizing, is they've created a brand-new
16 Military Occupational Specialty or MOS or job title. And
17 that job title is remote systems integrator. And they've
18 created that around the backdrop of a special force forces
19 warrant officer, a Green Beret warrant officer, and after
20 their training is complete a multi-month program of
21 instruction, they'll go back to the special forces groups
22 and start to really take that as a master trainer and weave
23 it into all group training.

24 You would see that across many of our components. But
25 I think, Senator, those are a couple of examples I'd want to

1 give you.

2 Senator Ernst: No, that's great. And I think many of
3 us recognize there's nothing more dangerous than a warranted
4 officer. So, appreciate that new MOS. So, let's talk a
5 little bit more about those cuts. A critical strength of
6 SOF is their ability to lead on emerging technologies and
7 developing those capabilities that kind of ripple across the
8 broader force. And it speaks directly to the indispensable
9 role that they play in today's complex threat environment.

10 So, any additional reductions that we might see in SOF
11 wouldn't just impact our SOF, they would degrade our ability
12 to project power around the globe. So, General Fenton, from
13 an operational perspective, how would further force
14 reductions impact SOF's ability to respond to emerging
15 threats in regions like INDOPACOM, Europe, and of course the
16 Middle East?

17 General Fenton: Well, Senator, I would offer right out
18 the gate that that would absolutely hurt. It would hurt
19 fairly significantly, especially against the backdrop of, I
20 think over the last three, three and a half years, we've
21 seen a 5,000-person teammate reduction inside of SOCOM
22 already. And that's against the backdrop of communications,
23 logistics, intelligence, civil affairs, and sci-ops, and of
24 course operators. I think all those are the type of
25 capabilities that you see combatant commanders, as I

1 mentioned in my opening statement, asking for more and more
2 to the tune of about 35 percent. And I think that would
3 absolutely impact that. We're already forced to make tough
4 choices. Those would and trade-offs, those would certainly
5 make those would amplify those tough choices and trade-offs
6 and really put us in a place where I've mentioned earlier in
7 the statement, we're already at a zero-sum game.

8 Senator Ernst: Thank you. And just in the time that I
9 have remaining, can you please characterize the situation
10 that unfolds when we have SOF teams that are out on the
11 ground as force multipliers? And one example that I'm
12 thinking about this is many years ago in Africa when we had
13 ODAs there, we were able to bring together many different
14 nations. Those nations had teams on the ground as well, but
15 they could not get along with the populations that exist in
16 some of those regions.

17 It took Americans and the leadership that these teams
18 brought into Africa to bring all of these nationalities
19 together into a collaborative force. Can you speak to how
20 SOF really can provide that leadership in small teams, small
21 numbers without a huge footprint and be able to bring
22 different nations together?

23 General Fenton: I can, Senator. Small teams, small
24 footprints, big impact, is the way I like to think about it.
25 And I think that starts with the fact that in our DNA is

1 partnering, and SOF is known as a premier partner force.
2 That's what we do across the globe and maybe even today to
3 the tune of about 7,000 folks in about 80 different
4 countries. It's all about beginning partnerships. And
5 those partnerships then evolve into trust.

6 And once you get trust, then we're able to do
7 everything, build partner capacity, develop some level of
8 competency and capability. And I think it just goes on from
9 there. And even do exactly as you just described, bring
10 folks together who otherwise may not be together. And I
11 think at the end of the day, amplify capability and capacity
12 for any combatant commander or for the Secretary of Defense.

13 Senator Ernst: Thank you, General Fenton. Ranking
14 Member Slotkin.

15 Senator Slotkin: Thank you. The senator had very
16 similar questions to the ones I had about what are the
17 trade-offs of these cuts, right? And for me, it's hard to
18 miss that Space Force got excluded from having to take cuts.
19 And I'm happy for them, that's a mission that's extremely
20 important, but just would hope that if there's someone who's
21 picking and choosing missions that are going to be cut
22 versus protected, that I know you're advocating, but that
23 sort of, we realize that the units that are in highest
24 demand should not be taking the same haircut as everybody
25 else across the force. So, hope that that's happening. And

1 thank you for illustrating some of those trade-offs that you
2 would have.

3 I do want to, you know, understand what missions you
4 have been tasked to do in recent months. I am, as someone
5 who was a CIA officer and a Middle East specialist and did
6 three tours in Iraq, I am 100 percent with you that just
7 because you don't hear about threats in the news every day
8 doesn't mean they're still -- doesn't mean they're not still
9 out there plotting to kill Americans, attack the homeland
10 and do really devastating things. And we of course have
11 nation states that are causing all kinds of problems.

12 But I did see that the President designated Mexican
13 cartels, a number of named cartels, as foreign terrorist
14 organizations restricting in a positive way American
15 citizens from providing support, materiel, leadership in any
16 way to those organizations. Can you describe what, if any,
17 guidance you've been getting and giving on lethal force
18 against cartels on the southern border, given the buildup of
19 about 10,000 U.S. forces down there?

20 General Fenton: Thank you. I can begin with that and
21 then we can talk the details. The designation of foreign
22 terrorist organization does not grant us any new authorities
23 as a DOD entity is. What it really does is it helps us
24 unlock the doors to whole of government approach. Our
25 threat finance analysts can now better provide their target

1 packets to our counterparts in the whole of government
2 approach. But what but what we are doing now is making sure
3 that we provide options that we can be ready, lethal, and
4 prepared should the President need us to continue to seal
5 and protect the border.

6 But to answer your question directly, it does not grant
7 us any new authorities to take direct action or so forth.

8 Senator Slotkin: So, you would need commander-in-chief
9 authority to go, for instance, and pursue drone attacks
10 inside Mexico against cartels? I'm just asking, Mr. Musk
11 said publicly that that foreign terrorist designation
12 authorizes drone strikes against Mexican cartels inside
13 Mexico. I'm just trying to understand fact from fiction
14 here.

15 Do you believe you have that authority today?
16 Understanding the designation alone may not give it to you.
17 Do you believe you have the authority today to cross over
18 the Mexican border and use drone strikes to go after
19 cartels?

20 General Fenton: No, ma'am. The designation of FTO
21 does not grant us any new authorities.

22 Senator Slotkin: But separate from the FTO
23 designation, do you, as the service secretary believe you
24 have that? I'm just trying to understand. I'm not --

25 General Fenton: Yes, ma'am.

1 Senator Slotkin: I have no problem with them being
2 designated. I have no problem going against them and their
3 financing, right, their materiel. But I think certainly as
4 part of this committee, we want to understand use of lethal
5 force in a neighboring state.

6 So, is there in any way separate from FTO designation,
7 do you currently have the authority to shoot down, shoot at
8 Mexican cartels over the border right now?

9 General Fenton: No, ma'am. I do not.

10 Senator Slotkin: Okay. Thank you for clarifying. And
11 then you know, I think a lot of us on the committee are very
12 worried about Taiwan and a potential problem with China over
13 the next few years. I'm the co-chair of the Taiwan caucus,
14 so we think about this a lot.

15 Can you give me your best assessment of, you know, what
16 our security assistance activities there, our training,
17 maybe we have to go into classified session, but would
18 appreciate you know, your role and deterrence understanding
19 the role you're playing in that issue.

20 General Fenton: Senator, we'll absolutely have to go
21 into a closed session to provide details. What I would
22 offer is that, in support of INDOPACOM, you would see your
23 special operations forces doing many of the missions you
24 described earlier. Certainly, always being prepared for
25 crisis response inside that AOR through our theater, Special

1 Operations Command, Special Ops Command Pacific, that is a
2 sacred obligation.

3 I think you would also see us in a counter-terrorism
4 way making sure that any CT threats, in this case, ISIS East
5 Asia, we're doing in a partnered way with teammates in that
6 region. And then I think you would see us certainly in
7 deterrence. And the way we present ourselves is placement
8 and access. It builds relationships and partnerships and
9 capability and all that I think is very valuable to Sam
10 Paparo, and any COCOM commander because it provides options
11 and opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have, and dilemmas
12 and challenges to the adversary.

13 Senator Slotkin: Thank you. And I yield back.

14 Senator Ernst: Thank you. And next we will go to
15 Senator Budd. Thank you.

16 Senator Budd: Thank you, Chairman. Again, thank you
17 all for being here. General Fenton and Mr. Jenkins, thank
18 you both for testifying before the committee on SOF. So, I
19 was grateful for the opportunity to travel with Chairman
20 Wicker last year to JSOC at Fort Bragg and to talk about the
21 important work that SOF is doing not only in North Carolina,
22 but around the world.

23 General Fenton, how would you characterize the demand
24 and requirements for special operations forces particularly
25 in crisis response, General Fenton?

1 General Fenton: Senator first, thanks for visiting our
2 forces and thanks for allowing us to be in the great state
3 of North Carolina.

4 Senator Budd: Our honor.

5 General Fenton: Appreciate all the hospitality there.
6 I know all our forces do. I would offer in my opening
7 statement; I laid out a couple.

8 I think in terms of crisis response, we have seen a
9 pace and a scale and duration that I frankly have not seen
10 in my 20 to 30 years in the special operations community.
11 It is called on more. So, there's a requirement that's gone
12 up by 200 percent in the last three and a half years.
13 That's on or about 15 missions where we've been asked to get
14 out very quickly and do the type of missions that I
15 mentioned, either recover diplomats, protect an embassy at
16 some point, maybe even recover a U.S. citizen. I think I
17 don't anticipate the world to get any less volatile, and
18 that looks like a pattern to me. And so, I think that
19 demand has certainly gone up.

20 In deterrence, the combatant commanders have asked for
21 special operations in the last two years at an increase of
22 about 35 percent to do the type of missions that they're
23 looking for us to do. That could involve anything from
24 partner-based training to unilateral operations that would
25 give them additional opportunities and advantages, maybe an

1 unfair outsize advantage and give the adversaries a bunch of
2 dilemmas and challenges. So, I think I anticipate that
3 going up.

4 And then I just mentioned earlier, terrorism is not
5 done with us, and I think we absolutely have to stay focused
6 on the threat that ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Al-Shabaab pose and
7 all three of those missions are absolutely in SOF
8 wheelhouse.

9 Senator Budd: General, talk a little bit about, you
10 gave some numbers, 35 percent increase in area, 200 percent
11 in another area. When you're called upon, how often do you
12 have to say no because of that increased demand and perhaps
13 the lack of readiness or rest or requirements that are
14 needed?

15 General Fenton: Senator, I think that that question is
16 at the heart of something the Command Sergeant Major and I
17 think about every day, that's risk. And I think in this
18 case that risk is a combination of operational risk: do we
19 have the capability and the capacity? And then for the
20 first time, certainly in my memory, fiscal constraint risk:
21 can we actually do it?

22 I think that drives to the heart of I've had to say no
23 in some instances in deterrence, where I feel like I am
24 taking risk almost 41 times in the last year, to combatant
25 commanders that would want special forces operational

1 detachments, so 12 Green Berets, folks who may want command
2 and control nodes. And I could go on and on.

3 I can give you additional examples in closed session,
4 but I think it's certainly way too often. And my sense is
5 that, first, that is risk. We're not meeting the combatant
6 command, DURs demands in a special ops peculiar way. I'm
7 also taking risk in modernization. And in a sense, I feel
8 like I'm saying no to the SOCOM enterprise when we don't
9 have the top line increase and the budget needed to
10 modernize not only technology, but certainly our humans.

11 So, we think about education for an uncertain world,
12 that's modernization, and on top of that, certainly even our
13 authorities. So, I think I say no way too much. And then
14 those two categories to combatant commanders in deterrence,
15 and frankly, to where we need to be as a SOCOM enterprise to
16 win tomorrow, just like we've been winning today and in the
17 past years.

18 Senator Budd: Thank you for that. And lots of other
19 questions, either for the record or the closed session.

20 [The information referred to follows:]

21 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

22

23

24

25

1 Senator Budd: Mr. Jenkins, again, thank you for being
2 here. See if you're tracking this provision in the Senate
3 Fiscal Year 2026 NDAA includes a provision requiring the
4 Assistant Secretary of Defense for SO/LIC and the Commander
5 of Special Operations to ensure the annual defense planning
6 guidance includes specific guidance for requirements and
7 employments special operation forces across the spectrum of
8 conflict. Are you tracking that, sir? And care to
9 elaborate?

10 Mr. Jenkins: Yes, sir. Yes, and thank you for that
11 very much. So, with our Interim National Defense Strategic
12 Guidance, we have three lines of effort, defend the
13 homeland, deter China, and increased burden sharing. And
14 the only force that can fill in or blend across all three
15 lines of effort there is the Special Operations Force.

16 And in my service like capacity, I've been able to
17 advocate and make sure that as the defense planning guidance
18 goes forward and now gets underway in earnest that my peers,
19 my counterparts, ensure that SOF is adequately and
20 thoroughly accounted for in all three lines of effort there,
21 and not just as an asterisk, that we play a major part.

22 Senator Budd [presiding]: Thank you both again. It
23 appears I'm out of time. Chairman Reed, you're recognized.

24 Senator Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Budd.
25 Gentlemen, thank you for your service and your sacrifice and

1 that of your family. And I endorse your tribute to the non-
2 commissioned officers, General Fenton.

3 General Fenton: Yeah.

4 Senator Reed: I would be in Fort Leavenworth not the
5 military side, the other side without my NCO, so thank you.

6 General Fenton: I think we all would, Senator.

7 Senator Reed: Yes, sir. Mr. Jenkins, SO/LIC is a work
8 in progress, and I think we're making great progress. We
9 want, as we envision a service secretary like civilian
10 overlooking those special operations. And I would note in
11 the prepared partial statement for today, it says, "SO/LIC
12 requires the requisite tools, workforce, and resources to
13 accelerate the implementation of these priorities and enable
14 special operations to be the most effective discipline and
15 strategically relevant force it can be."

16 Could you tell us what additional tool, workforce, and
17 resources you need?

18 Mr. Jenkins: First, thank you and thank you to
19 Congress for having the vision and foresight to make sure
20 that SO/LIC exists, that we do have the tools that we do
21 have right now. And I'd just like to point out, thanks to
22 section 922 and Congress's vision, you can see the physical
23 manifestation back here with Dr. Sandra Hobson, who's the
24 first to sit in that position, that 922 facilitated. So, we
25 are underway in establishing the service secretary side of

1 Special Operations, and that's thanks to Congress. So, we
2 welcome your continued engagement and reinforcement.

3 In terms of additional authorities or funding that we
4 would need, we certainly welcome that, your continued
5 engagement, one. One area that comes to mind, is in the
6 realm of talent management. We want to make sure that SOF
7 officers and enlisted leaders, that we have the ability as
8 SOF enterprise leaders to advocate for their advancement,
9 just like our service counterparts would for theirs as well.
10 As a Green Beret, I come from the Army, but I'm also a SOF
11 officer. And so, we want to make sure that we have that.

12 Then in terms of acquisition authorities we welcome
13 additional discussion on how we can have more agile, more
14 abundant acquisition authorities so that we can answer the
15 need of those quick problems that we encounter out on the
16 battlefield and be able to innovate and modernize and fund
17 those accordingly.

18 Senator Reed: Thank you very much. And General
19 Fenton, from your perspective, have you seen the benefits of
20 this empowered senior civilian like secretary?

21 General Fenton: Senator, absolutely. I think this
22 will be my third time at this table saying how critical it
23 is, how much we appreciate the work this Congress has done
24 in that arena. I think the first thing I offered you
25 before, and maybe even yesterday, and thank you for the

1 office call, was that having Secretary Jenkins at the
2 Service Secretary table, along with the Sec Def representing
3 Special Operations and SOCOM issues, is critical.

4 And I think about that on the service side of the SOCOM
5 organization. Also advocating for issues that support our
6 service members, our civilians, and our family members. And
7 those run the gamut. Certainly, the human performance
8 program, preservation of the force and family, and many
9 other items that we have inside of our enterprise. I would
10 also offer in terms of thinking through modernization and
11 certainly transformation. So, I think there's a great deal
12 that we've been able to achieve together as a team of teams
13 in the SOF enterprise.

14 Senator Reed: Well, thank you very much. And after
15 some notable civilian casualty several years ago, the
16 Department of Defense set up the Civilian Harm Center of
17 Excellence. And in the last year's prepared statement
18 submitted, it pointed out that these policies and procedures
19 outlined by the department through the center assist with
20 counter violent extremist organizations efforts as they
21 prevent the underlying dynamics from creating more
22 extremism.

23 I think in layman terms, it means if you're out there
24 and you're hurting a lot of civilians, the reaction is the
25 enemy gets more recruits, essentially. But I've heard

1 public indications that the department is considering to
2 rescind the policy guidance and to eliminate the center of
3 excellence. Mr. Jenkins, what's your understanding of that?

4 Mr. Jenkins: Well, first, Senator, thank you for
5 pointing that out. We agree that the ability and
6 requirement to mitigate and limit civilian harm on the
7 battlefield is paramount responsibility for us. And second,
8 it's the law. It's the law. And so, we have to be
9 respondent to that.

10 I can also say there have been no decisions made on
11 what the program may be called or the form that it will
12 take. But the requirement and the need to report back and
13 make sure that we are always mitigating civilian harm will
14 always be present no matter what it's called or how it
15 looks, Senator.

16 Senator Reed: And again, let me add to the point.
17 It's not only the law and the sense of humanity, it's also a
18 very practical situation because by antagonizing the
19 population, you'll lose ground.

20 Mr. Jenkins: Yes, sir.

21 Senator Reed: And once you lose it, you don't gain it.
22 Just General, final question. Can you say if SOCOM has
23 received adequate support from the center and that it's been
24 an asset to your operations?

25 General Fenton: Senator, I'm not -- from the center?

1 Senator Reed: From the center.

2 General Fenton: Senator, I think certainly. As we've
3 thought through it, I go back to Secretary Jenkins piece, we
4 absolutely, as your SOCOM team always aim to do the mission,
5 especially in the kinetic ops that you're referring to. And
6 then protect non-combatants and civilians as part of who we
7 are and what we stand for. And I think to your point, that
8 sends a very -- that sends a very powerful message across
9 the globe that we're there to eliminate or disrupt a bad
10 actor, yet at the same time protect innocence and vulnerable
11 and non-combatants. That's a very different signal from a
12 nation. That's what your SOCOM team works to do everyday.

13 Senator Reed: Thank you very much. Madam Chairman,
14 thank you.

15 Senator Ernst [presiding]: Thank you, Ranking Member.
16 We'll recognize now Senator Kelly for five minutes of
17 questions.

18 Senator Kelly: Thank you, Madam Chair. General
19 Fenton, in your opening statement, you highlighted your flat
20 budget since 2019, which appears to be a 14 percent decrease
21 in purchasing power, and SOCOM has also faced some
22 significant personnel cuts over the past years. Is it fair
23 to say right now that the demand for special operations
24 forces continues to increase? Is that a fair observation?

25 General Fenton: Senator, that's absolutely a fair

1 characterization, as I've laid out in the opening statement.

2 Senator Kelly: And so, with this flat budget then,
3 where have you assumed any additional risk because of
4 budgetary and personnel constraints?

5 General Fenton: Senator, I'd actually offer two
6 places. In the operational arena, we've assumed risk in
7 deterrence, as I mentioned in the opening statement, I'll
8 assume no risk in crisis response today. That is a sacred
9 obligation. And as we go across the spectrum in deterrence,
10 as I've laid out, there have been instances where I've had
11 to say no to combatant commander requirements because of
12 operational risk and fiscal constraints in a way I haven't
13 seen before.

14 So, first in operations deterrence. Second is in
15 modernization. Working to have the SOCOM team and at times
16 tying it to the joint force, for sure. Be able to win in
17 the future environment like we have won for years and years
18 and years in an increasingly contested and congested
19 environment. We're taking risks there. The inability to
20 get after the things I think that are asymmetric, that are
21 part of the changing character of war, do it at speed.

22 You could add anything, uncrewed artificial
23 intelligence, additive manufacturing, autonomy, all that. I
24 think we're accruing high risk because we at SOCOM are not
25 able to get after that based on a flat top line on five

1 years, \$1 billion in lost buying power that is reflective of
2 that 14 percent lost buying power.

3 Senator Kelly: Would it be fair for me to say then
4 that a risk in deterrence because if you're not deterring
5 our adversaries, there's a higher chance you're going to
6 have to put some of your troops in harm's way that the risk
7 to your forces, personally risk to them being injured or
8 killed in combat, that that has gone up.

9 And I think it's probably fair to say the same thing on
10 the modernization side of this. If you don't have the
11 equipment you need and you're facing a more challenging
12 adversary, that that's possibly putting folks at risk as
13 well?

14 General Fenton: Senator, I'll take it from the
15 modernization piece first. I think first and foremost, the
16 risk is not winning, not being able to complete the mission
17 in the future environment. Again, against the backdrop of
18 what we're seeing in Ukraine with the changing character of
19 war that has, I call it a version of symmetry and asymmetry.

20 Symmetry, being all the things -- and certainly the
21 Russian Federation had, that any nation needs to go to war
22 tanks, and missiles, and airplanes, and helicopters. And
23 then asymmetry, where Ukraine did not have that, and has
24 imposed costs on the Russian Federation through all things
25 that we're observing, institutionalizing, and

1 operationalizing. I think we're taking risks there and that
2 risk is about winning.

3 It certainly has a force protection component to it,
4 because if you're unable to get through the contested and
5 congested battle space of integrated air missile defense,
6 radio frequency spectrums, knocking your things down,
7 electronic warfare, there is a force protection component
8 for sure to that. And I look at both, but I think it's both
9 of those and modernization.

10 In deterrence, I think it's more about aggregated risk,
11 us not being able to fulfill the parts of a campaign plan or
12 a no plan that the combatant commanders absolutely would
13 rely on. And that probably at some point has aggregated
14 risk for his end states and certainly their operations.

15 Senator Kelly: Right. Thank you, General. And Mr.
16 Jenkins, on China Gray Zone operations, they execute this
17 all the time as an instrument of national power and in their
18 effort to supplant us as the world's preeminent superpower.
19 So, what adjustments, just quickly in statute or fiscal
20 authorities, would you need to better compete and deter the
21 PRC?

22 Mr. Jenkins: In terms of authorities, we are working
23 sufficiently and efficiently with what we have right now.
24 It comes down to what, what the general outlined in terms of
25 resources. We clearly recognize that deterring China is not

1 just in the South China Sea of the first island chain. It's
2 everywhere. And in the closed session, we'll be able to
3 give you some good vignettes on where we are going head-to-
4 head to deter in the irregular warfare arena to make sure
5 that we not only meet China where they are, but where they
6 want to be, where they, where they're trying to be.

7 And so, in terms of authorities, we're moving out and
8 executing on what we have, but we're always looking to
9 evolve with them as well.

10 Senator Kelly: If you identify something --

11 Mr. Jenkins: We will.

12 Senator Kelly: -- please, come to us with that. Thank
13 you.

14 Mr. Jenkins: Yes, sir.

15 Senator Kelly: Thank you, Madam Chair.

16 Senator Ernst: Thank you, Senator Kelly. And now I
17 recognize SASC Chairman, Senator Wicker.

18 Chairman Wicker: Well, thank you Madam Chair, and
19 thank you Senator Kelly as you leave because I'm going to
20 follow up on the very important lines of questioning that
21 you pursued. I was planning on asking about what extra
22 things your command has been required to do for less buying
23 power.

24 But let's talk about the gray zone and follow up if we
25 can on that. Do you find that there's not enough

1 coordination in the irregular warfare field and would you
2 recommend any changes in the way our defense department is
3 organized with regard to no one having a particular domain
4 over that particular issue and coordinating it across the
5 various commands?

6 Mr. Jenkins: Well, thank you for pointing that out.
7 Certainly, over the last 20 years plus, we've seen our
8 counter-terrorism muscle be exercised tremendously and our
9 irregular warfare muscle, not so much. But nowadays, we are
10 certainly exercising that muscle and meeting and deterring,
11 as the Senator alluded, China, where they are and where
12 they're trying to be. SO/LIC itself --

13 Chairman Wicker: Tell us and those listening what sort
14 of things, specifically some examples of what the Chinese
15 are doing?

16 Mr. Jenkins: Well, Senator, certainly we can get into
17 more details in the closed session, but it's safe to say,
18 areas where you would not think China is, they are. They're
19 trying to be there, not only in the South China Sea, the
20 first Island chain, but in the Southern Hemisphere.

21 And we have specific examples that we can point to, to
22 show where we have met, deterred, and even ejected their
23 influence from certain areas. And so, it's incumbent upon
24 us to not only just be counter-terrorist experts, but also
25 irregular warfare specialists.

1 Chairman Wicker: You can talk about the economic
2 warfare in this hearing, can you not?

3 Mr. Jenkins: For sure, yes, sir. And that's as you
4 alluded to. In China, it's a whole of government approach
5 when it comes to economic warfare. And General Fenton's
6 actually starting a new program to bring that together to
7 harness not only attention amongst our economic machines
8 here in the United States, but to show them where they could
9 draw their power to help our nation as well.

10 Chairman Wicker: So, are we organized sufficiently in
11 this area, or should one office, one person be in charge of
12 coordinating this for either of you?

13 Mr. Jenkins: In the irregular warfare arena?

14 Chairman Wicker: Yes.

15 Mr. Jenkins: We are sufficiently organized within
16 SO/LIC. We have a department, we have a team, an actual
17 DASD, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, that has
18 irregular warfare within, its charter that it's responsible
19 for and leads through the department in terms of helping
20 combatant commands draw campaign plans that involve
21 irregular warfare and educating throughout the joint force
22 in terms of its irregular warfare is not just a SOF
23 opportunity. It's a whole of Department of Defense
24 opportunity.

25 General Fenton: Senator, I would add.

1 Chairman Wicker: Sure, General Fenton.

2 General Fenton: I think for now, sufficiently
3 organized, you know, as we talk and work through this, it's
4 through Secretary Jenkins on their policy side. And I think
5 for SOCOM, it's unequivocal that we do irregular warfare and
6 our components in our operational elements know it. They go
7 back to the SOCOM headquarters or geographic combatant
8 commanders.

9 What I would offer is, I think it's always worth
10 relooking because of the pace of the world and the way the
11 world's changing and all type of levels. And I talk about
12 modernizing authorities, and I think it's always good to
13 keep an eye on things so we're not complacent, or even as we
14 think about technology, how fast it's moved. My sense is
15 there's certainly a need to re-look authorities to make sure
16 that they have not stayed stagnant or they have moved as
17 fast as we need them.

18 Chairman Wicker: Well, you know, I might want to have
19 a conversation, an ongoing conversation with you General and
20 for as long as I can, Mr. Jenkins, about how we could
21 perhaps make the coordination better in this area. We're
22 intruding on the time, Madam Chair, but let me just say.

23 There's been a 35 percent increase in from the COCOMs
24 for your capabilities in the last three years. Is that
25 right, General?

1 General Fenton: That's correct, Senator.

2 Chairman Wicker: And 170 percent increase in SOCOM
3 crisis response missions, including, but not limited to
4 hostage rescues?

5 General Fenton: Yes, sir. In fact, we just updated
6 the numbers after we got chance to see you. And I think
7 today I reported 200 percent in three and a half years.

8 Chairman Wicker: So, instead of 170 percent. And then
9 manpower cuts of nearly 5,000 personnel in recent years.
10 How have those come about?

11 General Fenton: Well, Senator a couple things. I
12 think through the lens of the defense planning scenario and
13 the work that the service has to do along with the
14 department, against any potential scenario, and I'll leave
15 at that because we could talk more in a classified session.
16 My sense is that services took a look at the lens that they
17 were given through those scenarios and came away with, we
18 don't need X number of SOF.

19 And over time, my sense is that that continued started
20 to gain traction in the department. And as a result, I
21 think you're very aware of a point last year where Secretary
22 of Defense Austin made a decision to reduce SOF by 3000
23 people.

24 Chairman Wicker: Well, have these crisis response
25 requests gone unanswered?

1 General Fenton: Senator, that --

2 Chairman Wicker: With everything you're facing with
3 the lack of funding and the lack of purchasing power and
4 cuts of 5,000?

5 General Fenton: As I said in my opening statement,
6 crisis response is the one place that I'm taking no risk.
7 So, we put everything we have against the crisis response
8 today because our sense is that is a sacred obligation.
9 Presidentially directed, Sec Def directed, we cannot fail.

10 Chairman Wicker: And so, the other things that you
11 might put behind those crisis response things might be, for
12 example?

13 General Fenton: Senator, I feel like we're absolutely
14 taking risks in two places, modernization, and deterrence.
15 Deterrence would be that mission that we are taking risk in
16 and we're taking risk because in my sense, we are unable to
17 answer the combatant commander's requirements to the level
18 that they have requested and certainly need. And when I
19 look at that, that is risk to them and certainly risk to
20 your SOF forces and that we're bringing the value that we
21 could be bringing to the combatant commands, in preventing
22 great power conflict and certainly preparing for it.

23 Chairman Wicker: One other thing, Madam Chair. I just
24 hope the General understands the committee's position on
25 both sides of the dais, that we need to hear fully from you

1 on your unfunded requirements. Tell us what you need, be
2 honest about it, and we'll try to get it for you. But we
3 have found that some places within our defense
4 establishment, they're reluctant to actually be honest with
5 us about all the requirements that remain unfunded.

6 And thank you for your indulgence, Madam Chair.

7 Senator Ernst: Thank you, Chairman.

8 General Fenton: You got my commitment to that Senator.

9 Senator Ernst: Thank you, General Fenton. Next, I
10 will recognize Senator Shaheen five minutes. Thank you.

11 Senator Shaheen: Thank you, Madam Chair. So, Mr.
12 Jenkins, you talked about feeling confident about our
13 irregular warfare capacity. Where do you put information
14 operations that irregular warfare?

15 Mr. Jenkins: Thank you for pointing that out, because
16 irregular warfare is just like, when you think about a
17 kinetic strike, there are regular warfare strikes that are
18 just as potent or valuable or important and need to be timed
19 accordingly. And so, the coordination for information
20 operations actually resides within SO/LIC, within my
21 organization.

22 And so, we have the unique opportunity to coordinate
23 across the combatant commands, not only within DOD, but also
24 with our sister agencies, with the Agency, with Department
25 of State, and so those information operation plans are

1 coordinated. So, that messages are comprehensive and
2 complimentary was the word I was trying to think of instead
3 of getting each other off track and timed accordingly. So,
4 it's very important.

5 Senator Shaheen: Well, I understand that you have the
6 ability to coordinate. I'm concerned. General Fenton, you
7 talked about the 3000 person cuts to SOF, and my
8 understanding is that many of those were enablers for the
9 military information support operations or MISO. Is that
10 correct?

11 General Fenton: That's correct, Senator.

12 Senator Shaheen: And I am concerned about our ability
13 to compete in those information operations. We had a
14 hearing in the foreign relations committee at the beginning
15 of the year where our China experts said that China is
16 spending \$1.1 billion a year on information operations,
17 disinformation misinformation. And right now, we've
18 completely dismantled our humanitarian and foreign aid
19 presence in the regions where China has a foothold. We
20 don't have anybody in charge of information operations
21 across as far as I can tell -- now, maybe we do, and I just
22 don't know about it -- across defense, state, and the
23 administration and the President just fired General Haugh,
24 the head of cyber command.

25 So, help me understand how we're able to compete in the

1 information arena when we don't have anybody in charge, and
2 when we've lost a lot of our people who are doing that work.

3 General Fenton: Yes, ma'am. In terms of that, who's
4 actually in charge and in coordination for the Department of
5 Defense, that would fall by default to my organization,
6 because I support the Under Secretary of Defense for policy,
7 who is the principal information operation advisor to the
8 Sec Def.

9 And so, we do have a coordination body and ability to
10 do that. And I have a full-time team that that's organizing
11 and actively engaging with the combatant commands in terms
12 of funding, also in messaging. And then they work outwardly
13 with our state and agency partners so that if one agency is
14 going to employ a message or an information operation, it's
15 adequately coordinated with the other so that we don't have
16 fracture side.

17 Senator Shaheen: So, if China's spending over a
18 billion dollars a year on their messaging strategy, how much
19 are we spending in the Department of Defense on our
20 messaging strategy?

21 General Fenton: Ma'am, I'd have to get back to you
22 with that specific number. But what we are doing is we're
23 trying to make sure that we are good stewards --

24 Senator Shaheen: Is it fair to say we're not spending
25 a billion dollars a year?

1 General Fenton: Correct. Yes, ma'am. That is fair.

2 Senator Shaheen: Significantly less?

3 General Fenton: Significantly less. We are trying to
4 be smart with every penny for sure, ma'am.

5 Senator Shaheen: But it's not likely that we're able
6 to match the operations that China's doing, despite our
7 intention and the fact that we think we can do it better,
8 because we don't have the infrastructure to do that. We've
9 dismantled our global engagement center at the Department of
10 State. We're dismantling Voice of America, Radio Free Asia,
11 all of the media that we've relied on really since the Cold
12 War to get messaging across to accurately reflect the
13 position of the United States against our adversaries.

14 So, again, I would ask you, General Fenton, do you
15 think you have -- should we be doing more to resource those
16 information operations?

17 General Fenton: Well, Senator, you and I have talked
18 about this for --

19 Senator Shaheen: We have.

20 General Fenton: -- quite some time. My sense, I'll
21 start with information operations are absolutely critical.
22 You know, there's a sense of you may not win a war with
23 information operations like you could with artillery. You
24 can certainly lose it if you're not a key part of that and
25 putting out the messages. And I would offer, I think as a

1 United States of America, we've got a great message to tell.
2 And my sense is that there is a void. You mentioned
3 misinformation, disinformation by any adversary. There's a
4 void out there that's not being filled by our message.

5 I think we take it certainly in special operations
6 command with our information officer professionals to really
7 work at that in concert with our more often not our country
8 teams, our embassy country teams, to put those messages out
9 that assure populations or reassure and also at points in
10 time, deter adversaries. That is also part of the
11 information operations space. So, thank you for the
12 opportunity to comment.

13 Senator Shaheen: Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair.

14 Senator Ernst: Yes, thank you, Senator Shaheen. We'll
15 move to Senator Rosen.

16 Senator Rosen: Well, thank you, Chairwoman Ernst,
17 Ranking Member Slotkin for holding this hearing. It's very
18 important. I'd also like to thank General Fenton and Mr.
19 Jenkins for testifying today and for your service -- excuse
20 me, I'm going to scoot in a little bit here -- service to
21 our nation.

22 I want to talk about Special Operations Forces in Syria
23 because the U.S. and Syrian Democratic forces, the SDF, they
24 share an interest in preventing an ISIS resurgence in
25 northeastern Syria. Any escalation in the region, which is

1 Turkish backed Syrian National Army and the central
2 government in Damascus engaged military with the SDF would
3 lead to instability that we know ISIS could exploit.

4 That is extremely concerning, as is the possibility
5 that such instability combined with destabilizing efforts
6 from Iran and its proxies could cause SDF personnel guarding
7 ISIS prisons and displaced persons camps to leave their
8 posts in order to defend their territory. This would open
9 the door to the possible escape of captured ISIS fighters
10 and their families, as we saw that just play out in 2019.

11 So, General Fenton, given our SOF partnership with the
12 SDF and the Defeat ISIS campaign, including security
13 training and assistance, what are SOF and the SDF doing to
14 prevent breakouts from SDF run prisons and displaced persons
15 camps to ensure that captured ISIS fighters and their
16 families do not return to the battle space?

17 I know this is a question that geographically pertains
18 to CENTCOM, but our troops performing these counter-
19 terrorism mission missions are Special Operation Forces.

20 General Fenton: Senator, I think the very first thing
21 we do is partner with our SDF partners, it's almost a decade
22 now. And I can get back and certainly provide written on
23 the record how long we've done it, but I think it's about a
24 decade, is disrupt, degrade and work to defeat ISIS in
25 Syria. It's a threat certainly in the United States as

1 we've laid out before. And many of the committees have come
2 before you have talked about it.

3 But I think the first thing we do is disrupt and
4 degrade ISIS along with SDF counterparts, that certainly
5 vectors into protecting the prisons and the camps. And I
6 think that, you know, if you look at it that's keeping
7 improvised explosive ISIS bombers from attacking those,
8 creating a level of or opportunities for breakout, that is
9 taking action in places that may not be close to the camps,
10 but we know have planning going on in the camp.

11 So, I think there's many things your SOF team is doing
12 along with our SDF partners to first and foremost, and that
13 is the mission, disrupt and degrade and diminish ISIS, spur
14 the CENTCOM and Sec Def direction, and also protect those
15 camps from a breakout and a prison as well.

16 Senator Rosen: Thank you. And I'm going to direct
17 this question to both of you staying on the same topic,
18 because how does a continued elimination of ISIS leadership
19 and which SOF you have accomplished time and time again,
20 impact ISIS's ability to plan and carry out attacks on U.S.
21 forces and SDF front prisons and displaced persons camps?
22 And what are we doing more specifically to degrade Iranian
23 aligned militias from attacking or attempting to attack U.S.
24 and coalition forces?

25 And Mr. Jenkins, we can start with you and go on to the

1 General please.

2 Mr. Jenkins: Thank you, ma'am. And we see all those
3 problems clear-eyed for sure. And thank you for sharing
4 that concern with us. As General Fenton alluded to, looking
5 at what SOF can control what we can do in this space. We
6 take that very seriously. We are at the leading edge to
7 make sure that our SDF partners can maintain control of
8 those prisons, that they can repatriate where appropriate
9 and when possible, so that we can decrease the population of
10 potential breakout and under difficult situations.

11 And then in terms of decreasing malign influence, we
12 have to make sure that, similar to China, that we are
13 deterring wherever possible, whether it's at the level of
14 armed conflict or below with irregular warfare. We have the
15 ability and lots of tools across the spectrum to make sure
16 that we are deterring them from being in the battle space
17 where they want to be, and where they're trying to be.

18 Senator Rosen: Thank you. General Fenton, anything to
19 add?

20 General Fenton: Senator, I would offer on the ISIS
21 piece I think is very important, as you've alluded to, to
22 keep the pressure on ISIS by degrading their leadership the
23 operational experience, personnel, the communicators,
24 financiers, all of these things come together for attacks,
25 not only in the Middle East against our forces, and that is

1 force protection as we take it, but also in Europe and
2 against our homeland.

3 ISIS is an ex-op's threat. So, I think that is the
4 multiple responsibility for your special operations
5 teammates, not only ISIS, Al-Shabaab, and Al-Qaeda, but
6 getting after these layers is really important to keep any
7 of those terrorist groups from being able to plan and
8 execute an attack on the homeland.

9 Senator Rosen: Thank you. I'll yield back, but I'm
10 going to actually ask a question for the record about the
11 Houthis relations with Al-Shabaab. So, I'm glad you brought
12 that up because it's critically important we discuss that as
13 well. Thank you.

14 [The information referred to follows:]

15 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

1 Senator Ernst: Thank you, Senator Rosen. And at this
2 time, we will recess for about seven minutes, which will
3 give us time to move over to the SVC-217, and we will go
4 into a closed hearing at that point. So, I call a recess.

5 [Whereupon, at 3:40 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]