

Statement for the Record



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for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict

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Chairman Inhofe, Ranking Member Reed, and other distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on our global posture for the Department of Defense's Special Operations Enterprise. As the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC), my remarks will focus on my statutory authority within the administrative chain of command for U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) overseeing the Special Operations Forces (SOF) Enterprise. Today, the SOF Enterprise is prepared to address the most pressing security challenges our Nation faces. I'm honored to have General Tony Thomas as a partner. His command has safeguarded this Nation for the past three years. I look forward to continued progress working with General Richard Clarke when he assumes command next month.

Having served in this capacity for the past year, I am humbled by the daily service and sacrifice of the over 70,000 Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and civil servants who comprise the SOF Enterprise. Its breadth and capability is astonishing. In over 80 countries, this vanguard force tackles our nation's most pressing national security challenges, from Salafi Jihadism to great power competition. These guardians often serve in hostile environments. In the past two years, 23 SOF personnel have been killed in action, while many more have sustained life-altering injuries. Special operations personnel, just three percent of the Joint Force, have absorbed over 40% percent of the total U.S. casualties. This sacrifice serves as a powerful reminder that special operators are in the risk business. Their families carry the burden of individual tragedy so that we might prevent a national tragedy.

This is a unique time to serve the SOF Enterprise because it is an inflection point. First, the Section 922 legislation has reinvigorated my office's role in overseeing and advocating for the SOF Enterprise. Second, the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) has challenged all of DoD to deter rogue regimes and defeat terrorist networks while placing new focus on the long-term strategic competition with Russia and China. The SOF Enterprise is in the midst of transformation, something special operators have always done very well.

Alignment of SOF Capabilities to NDS Objectives

The NDS calls on us to ensure our special operations capabilities will compete -- and win -- in today's complex national security environment. The NDS emphasizes the importance of counterterrorism in protecting our homeland from threats to our core national interests, while prioritizing investments that restore a decisive competitive advantage with our principal strategic competitors. In November, General Thomas and I issued the first-ever joint vision for the SOF Enterprise. We challenged our SOF professionals to innovate relentlessly in pursuit of decisive competitive advantage. Our enemies have scattered from the conventional battlefield. SOF is a fast-adapting, full-spectrum force, uniquely capable of imposing costs on our adversaries wherever their threat resides and whatever form it takes.

As the Department implements the NDS's vision for strategic competition, the SOF Enterprise must adapt to meet the demands of our modern security environment. In this environment, both state and non-state actors threaten our national security interests with increasingly sophisticated and asymmetric capabilities below the level that would provoke a U.S.

conventional response. SOF's unique capabilities, understanding of the threat environment, and interagency and international partnerships are critically important in addressing these challenges.

My team, in coordination with USSOCOM, the Joint Staff, the Services, and Combatant Commands, is working to institutionalize our approach to irregular warfare across the Department to meet the demands of an evolving and increasingly complex security environment. Although irregular warfare remains a core SOF competency, successful irregular warfare in competition short of armed conflict and against high-threat violent extremist organizations will continue to require support across the entire Joint Force and close cooperation with our interagency partners.

Even as we and international partners eliminate ISIS's physical caliphate, the threat from international terrorists to our interests at home and abroad persists. SOF are essential to direct action against high-value targets, supporting key allies and partners, and deterring state and non-state actors from acquiring, proliferating, or using weapons of mass destruction. In this regard, Southwest Asia and the Middle East will continue to be the focus of these efforts, but, because these transnational threat networks operate globally, USSOCOM's worldwide reach will be essential to confronting them.

Enabling free peoples to fight for mutually shared interests is the original core competency of SOF. Reassuring allies and building and sustaining partnerships remain critical to accomplishing our national security objectives. Along with general purpose forces' increasing

role in security cooperation, SOF provide the Joint Force with deep cultural, linguistic, stabilization, and operational expertise to build the capacity of our partners and allies and develop lasting relationships. SOF also provide critical stabilization expertise and capability, assisting the interagency in addressing instability across much of Africa and the Middle East. From Eastern Europe to South Korea and from Colombia to North Africa, SOF presence and partnerships support U.S. national security interests in key regions.

As the NDS notes, the surest way to prevent a war is to be prepared to win one. In this strategic context, SOF personnel, capabilities, agility, and technological advantages help enable decisive combat power as an integral part of the Joint Force. We have long recognized that the vast majority of special operations depend upon a broad array of Service-provided capabilities. At the same time, SOF's role as part of the Joint Force in a traditional wartime construct is critically important in disrupting our adversaries' operations, creating complex dilemmas and imposing asymmetric costs. Special Operations should not be viewed as distinct but an integral part of the force with a unique role derived from its basic value proposition: quickly and cost-effectively solving risky problems that do not lend to mass or scale. Within this strategic partnership with the Services, SOF capabilities serve as a fulcrum that help maximize the effectiveness of the Joint Force.

USSOCOM is an exceptional National investment. Representing approximately two percent of the overall Defense budget, USSOCOM provides extraordinary leverage to national security. In a transformative era, our basic obligation is to tie USSOCOM's fiscal strategy with its future operating concept, driving budget discipline and delivering downstream performance.

The Section 922 reforms have bolstered this effort. To optimize the efficiency and performance of every dollar spent, we foster a culture of performance, accountability, and innovation, and the Section 922 reforms have strengthened our oversight to better inform budgetary and programmatic decision-making. As a starting point, the SOF Enterprise capability and program guidance is now jointly issued by the Commander, USSOCOM and myself. My office is now responsible for approving USSOCOM's Program Objective Memorandum five-year budget plan and is also now authorized to approve and submit program and budget review issue papers on behalf of the SOF Enterprise.

With fiscal strategy aligned with future concepts, the SOF value proposition as an integral part of the Joint Force is reinforced. Over the years, SOF has also developed a culture of innovation, driving a battlefield technical revolution in developing a surveillance-strike capability that no competitor can quickly replicate. Protecting the nation against a terrorist attack remains our enduring task. Additionally, we must meet the challenge as a vanguard force in great power competition.

Readiness and Resilience of the Force

The SOF Enterprise has enhanced its readiness by balancing deployments and dwell-time for strained units, modernizing equipment and capabilities, aligning our efforts with NDS priorities, and investing in the well-being of SOF members and their families.

Since 2001, SOF has expanded from approximately 45,000 to over 70,000 personnel. As we focus on our core tasks and responsibilities in implementing the NDS, today's SOF is ready and capable to conduct major contingency operations with the Joint Force, conduct and respond to irregular warfare, and provide national leadership with options for responses to high-priority crises. We have prioritized investments in technologies to enhance lethality and effectiveness of the force, focusing our modernization on precision strike, directed energy, artificial intelligence, close-combat lethality, cyber and space operations.

To improve its readiness for contingencies across the vast spectrum of warfare, General Thomas has made tremendous progress in reducing the strain caused by the high operational tempo of certain SOF units. Not long ago, it was common for many SOF units and personnel to operate on a 1:1 deployment-to-dwell ratio. For example, a typical Green Beret could have expected to spend six months deployed followed by only six months in the U.S. before redeploying. This high tempo strained our personnel and their families and eroded our long-term readiness. Given that the demand for SOF from the Geographic Combatant Commands will likely remain high, we must ensure that these forces are provided on a sustainable basis. I am proud to report that SOF is a healthy force, and the men and women who comprise this force are prepared to deploy to combat at a moment's notice in defense of our Nation.

Through General Thomas's leadership, we continue to make progress toward our 1:2 deployment-to-dwell ratio target for the Enterprise, and, today, 90 percent of our deployed forces are at or above this target, allowing more time to train for the full spectrum of special operations

missions and increasing the time our people spend at home with their families. However, we still have more progress to make. Approximately 10 percent of our force remains below a 1:2 deployment-to-dwell ratio. Many of these personnel are high-demand/low-density specialists performing crucial functions. Thanks to the support of Congress and the Department, we have plans in place for small and targeted end-strength growth that will reduce the strain on these essential skillsets.

My primary concern regarding SOF readiness is our ability to continue to attract top talent and retain our high-quality personnel. While the challenges SOF face in this area generally mirror those of the Services overall, our challenges will likely be magnified given the necessary experience levels of our people and our generally lengthy training pipelines. We are addressing current and projected shortfalls by offering special pay and incentives for high-demand career fields, improving recruitment and marketing practices, and optimizing our training pipelines.

Through efforts such as Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF), as well as Service-specific programs and activities, we are enhancing the resilience of SOF personnel and their families. As a community, we are only as good as our people, and that includes the well-being of our families. Programs and resources like these help families overcome significant physical, mental, and emotional difficulties that accompany deployments. POTFF resources help shorten recovery time toward healthy and productive lives, in and out of service.

Culture and Accountability

Despite this clear progress, General Thomas and I are concerned about serious ethical failings by some members of our SOF community. Such incidents erode morale of our force, confidence of our allies and partners, and the moral authority of American values. In other words, moral failings are not individual but can impact our large-scale mission. While these specific incidents are being addressed by appropriate disciplinary mechanisms, General Thomas and I are working to identify any potential systemic problems and to enhance policies that hold leaders and individuals accountable. Because SOF operate at the forefront of highly complex military operations in remote and high-threat environments, we must maintain the highest standards of personal conduct, and the recent joint guidance General Thomas and I have issued emphasizes the standards of trustworthiness and accountability we expect from our SOF community. SOF is a mature and elite force and it will be held to the highest standards – and those standards include professionalism, ethics, and accountability. My office is currently conducting a review of SOF professionalism and ethics, as required by the FY 2019 NDAA, which is due to Congress next month.

These incidents have our full attention. We also recognize that they do not reflect the true nature of the SOF professional. When I visit with our SOF service members at home and in the field, their selfless energy and devotion to mission are clearly evident, and they are exemplars of American values when deployed overseas.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, let me conclude by, again, thanking the committee for supporting SOF with the legislation and appropriations essential to combating terrorists, building critical partnerships, and enabling the Joint Force. Finally, I would like to thank General Thomas for 39 years of distinguished military service and for his partnership in leading our Nation's Special Operations Enterprise. General Thomas has been an inspiration to me and countless others in the SOF formation. From 2001 to 2013, he deployed to Afghanistan every year but one in which he deployed to Iraq, where he was wounded in combat. I have been particularly impressed with his dedication to ensuring the well-being of SOF service members and their families. Under his command over the past three years, USSOCOM continues to field the most professional, most highly trained, best equipped, and most effective special operations warriors in the world.