

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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AND

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Wicker, Ranking Member Reed, and distinguished members of this committee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the posture of our Nation's Special Operations Forces (SOF) at a pivotal moment for U.S. national security.

On behalf of the special operations community, we thank Congress for its enduring leadership and steadfast support. Both the Office of the Assistant Secretary of War for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASW(SO/LIC)) and U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) exist because of congressional foresight – and your continued engagement remains essential to ensuring SOF retains its asymmetric advantage for the Joint Force and the Nation.

The Nation requires forces that can operate persistently, discreetly, and decisively – often below the threshold of armed conflict – while remaining ready to respond to crisis or prevail in high-end combat operations.

SOF provide that capability and optionality. Comprising only three percent of the Joint Force and less than two percent of the Department's budget, SOF deliver outsized strategic value by providing senior leaders with scalable, tailorable, and asymmetric options across the full spectrum of competition and conflict. This posture statement outlines how SOF is adapting its force design, posture, and enterprise to meet the Department's strategic objectives today and in the future – and how continued partnership with Congress is essential to that effort.

The Global Security Environment

Although not all threats are of equal severity, the global security environment is one of the most dangerous in our Nation's history. USSOCOM uses the President's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy (NDS) as the framework to understand this complex security environment and shape our strategic approach. State adversaries, terrorists, and transnational criminal networks operate in contested, denied, and politically sensitive spaces while exploiting advances in technology to complicate attribution and compress decision timelines. They increasingly blur the lines between competition and conflict and challenging traditional deterrence. This environment demands the Joint Force prioritize gravest threats to our nation's security while managing risk alongside allies and partners across multiple regions at once with a force capable of persistent forward engagement, integrated across domains, and with the ability to deny aggression without escalating to large-scale conflict.

Threats to the Homeland originate beyond U.S. borders but manifest domestically as terrorism, cyber activity, and illicit networks. While the Southern border has been secured, unlawful mass migration remains a threat and transnational criminal organizations continue to attempt to exploit the southern approaches to the United States, while state adversaries target U.S. critical infrastructure through cyber-attacks and these illicit networks. Transnational criminal organizations, including narco-terrorist networks, continue to undermine governance and security across the Western Hemisphere while fueling illicit flows that directly impact the United States. In the Arctic, China and Russia are expanding their presence, increasing strategic competition in proximity to the Homeland. These dynamics highlight the growing overlap between external threats and homeland security and reinforce the need for persistent, network-focused approaches to deterrence and disruption.

China is pursuing military modernization and using coercive diplomatic, informational, military, and economic tools to undermine U.S. alliances and constrain access, jeopardizing regional stability and challenging U.S. and allied interests. In Europe, Russia is the most persistent state-based threat, capable of employing conventional, nuclear, cyber, chemical/biological, and information capabilities across all warfare domains to coerce neighbors and undermine democratic institutions. The Middle East is characterized by persistent instability and regional power competition. While Operations Midnight Hammer and Epic Fury focused on eliminating Iran's power projection capabilities so that they will never have nuclear weapons, threats from Iran, its proxy forces, and terrorist organizations, though degraded, are not eliminated. ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates are fully operational in some fragile states and seek opportunities to regenerate in other states. Terrorists in Africa likewise exploit un-governed or under-governed spaces to expand influence and operate freely. In West Africa, extremist groups continue to consolidate control over territory and populations, while in East Africa, ISIS-Somalia remains a threat to the U.S. Homeland and al-Shabaab remains a capable regional threat. This environment requires the Department to prioritize the most important, consequential, and dangerous threats to American interests, focusing our resources on defending the homeland and deterring China in the Indo-Pacific.

These conditions underscore the need for persistent engagement, partner empowerment, and precision counterterrorism to prevent threats from growing and spreading to the Homeland. This environment places a premium on forces capable of operating persistently inside contested spaces, below the threshold of armed conflict. Small footprints are necessary to enable denial strategies, strengthen allied resilience, and contribute to deterrence without triggering escalation, and to counter illicit and malign activity without large-scale military presence. This requires integrating conventional deterrence with irregular approaches to counter coercion, influence, and sub-threshold aggression across all domains.

Changing Character of War and Implications to SOF

The changing character of warfare increasingly includes competition below the threshold of armed conflict, where adversaries employ proxy forces, information operations, cyber activities, and illicit networks to achieve strategic objectives while avoiding direct confrontation. These approaches exploit ambiguity, compress decision timeliness, and complicate attribution – challenging traditional deterrence and force employment.

In this environment, success depends on access, persistence, and integration with partners. SOF are uniquely suited to operate in these conditions, providing the Joint Force with forward presence, regional expertise, and the ability to integrate military and non-military effects across domains. USSOCOM deliberately generates and sustains forces designed to operate persistently in denied and politically sensitive environments while retaining the ability to transition rapidly to crisis response or support high-end combat operations. To address these demands, USSOCOM is actively reshaping how it postures, generates, and modernizes the force. This includes empowering Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) as operational integrators, accelerating the translation of operational problems into capability solutions through experimentation and data-informed decision-making, and strengthening partnerships with the Military Departments, interagency elements, and allies to integrate irregular and conventional approaches.

Lines of Effort: Win, People, and Transform

USSOCOM organizes its efforts around three mutually reinforcing Lines of Effort (LOEs) — Win, People, and Transform — to guide decision-making, prioritize resources, and manage risk across a dynamic global security environment. Together, these LOEs provide the framework by which USSOCOM balances immediate operational demands with the need to sustain and modernize the force for future conflict, consistent with NDS priorities and force planning guidance.

WIN – Our Mission is Our Purpose. Winning remains USSOCOM’s foremost priority. This LOE focuses on maintaining readiness and operational effectiveness required to defend the Homeland, deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific, enable allies and partners to step up, and supercharge the defense industrial base. USSOCOM prioritizes forces, posture, and authorities that allow SOF to operate persistently forward, respond rapidly to emerging threats, and integrate seamlessly with the Joint Force, allies, and interagency partners to provide senior leaders credible, scalable options across the full spectrum of competition and conflict. When resources are constrained, operational readiness and mission execution take precedence, but modernization remains a critical priority.

PEOPLE — Our Competitive Advantage and Top Priority. People are the foundation of SOF effectiveness and the decisive advantage against adaptive adversaries. USSOCOM prioritizes recruiting, developing, sustaining, and retaining an agile, resilient, lethal, and professional force – military and civilian – while maintaining high standards, retaining experienced mid-career leaders, and preserving readiness. Human capital decisions are readiness decisions. SOF commanders make data-informed assessments of risk to force across physical, cognitive, behavioral, spiritual, and family/social domains. These tools enable commanders to take timely actions to preserve combat effectiveness, sustain performance, and mitigate long-term risk to force effectiveness and mission success.

TRANSFORMATION — Our Imperative. Through transformation, USSOCOM leverages the changing character of war to create a competitive edge against adaptive threats. While the nature of war remains the continuation of politics with other means, its character is undergoing rapid transformation driven by the proliferation of penetrating, discerning and precision strike capabilities, commoditization of drone technology and its effect on assault operations, and the increasing power of information. This LOE focuses on adapting force design, accelerating capability development, modernizing institutional processes, and strengthening partnerships with the Services, allies, and interagency partners. USSOCOM deliberately accepts measured institutional risk to accelerate innovation, experimentation, and modernization, recognizing that failing to adapt poses greater long-term risk to mission success and the Joint Force’s ability to remain preeminent, postured to deter aggression, respond to crises, and prevail in conflict. Transformation efforts remain disciplined, threat-informed, and aligned with the NDS and in response to operational needs generated by TSOCs and the Joint Force.

Core Strategic Imperatives

To execute its LOEs – Win, People, and Transform – USSOCOM has identified Core Strategic Imperatives focused on leadership attention, disciplined prioritization, and guided enterprise-level decisions. These imperatives reflect the realities of sustained global demand, finite capacity, and an evolving character of war. These are executed through close partnership between USSOCOM and the office of the ASW(SO/LIC), with the Secretariat for Special Operations (SSO) providing civilian oversight, strategic guidance, and analytical rigor to ensure SOF remain aligned with Department priorities and long-term deterrence objectives.

Empowering TSOCs. Empowering TSOCs is central to USSOCOM’s ability to translate enterprise advantages into sustained theater effects. As the primary SOF integrators for Geographic Combatant Commanders (GCCs), TSOCs require appropriate authorities, resources, and decision-making space to synchronize operations, integrate partners, and adapt to rapidly evolving conditions. Strengthening TSOCs enhances operational responsiveness, improves alignment with theater objectives, and allows more effective use of limited SOF capacity across regions. This imperative is supported by an ASW(SO/LIC)-led initiative focused on analysis of posture, force allocation constructs, and enterprise risk, ensuring TSOC empowerment is analytically grounded, consistent with statutory authorities, and aligned with strategic priorities across regions.

Prioritize SOF Agility in Key Theaters. USSOCOM prioritizes agility in theaters where strategic competitors and transnational threats most directly challenge U.S. interests. The imperative focuses on maintaining operational flexibility, reducing response timelines, and ensuring SOF can operate persistently in contested and politically sensitive environments. Given finite capacity, USSOCOM deliberately prioritizes forces, posture, and enabling capabilities, that generate the greatest strategic effect, while managing risk in lower-priority areas. ASW(SO/LIC) is institutionalizing its force design analysis, demand signals, and strategic risk assessment capabilities to inform these prioritization decisions, reinforcing discipline in how SOF are postured and employed globally.

Empower Partners to Share the Burden. Strong partners are the best partners. Enabling allies and partners to assume primary responsibility for their own defense is essential to sustaining long-term deterrence and managing global demand. SOF’s access, relationships, and irregular warfare expertise position USSOCOM to leverage partner capacity, improve interoperability, and amplify collective efforts across competition and conflict. This imperative reduces the operational burden on U.S. forces while extending the reach and effectiveness of our alliance network through trusted partnerships. ASW(SO/LIC) supports this imperative by providing policy guidance to ensure partner-enabled approaches are aligned with long-term force design, readiness objectives, and capability investments, maximizing strategic return while avoiding unsustainable demand on SOF.

Modernize Enterprise Processes to Support the Force. Sustained operational demand requires institutional processes that are responsive, credible, efficient, and aligned with operational needs. USSOCOM is modernizing how it generates requirements, develops capabilities, allocates resources, and manages forces to better support commanders at the tactical edge. This imperative focuses on eliminating friction, accelerating decision-making, and

ensuring the enterprise is aligned and support functions keep pace with the speed of modern operations. USSOCOM's development of autonomous systems and establishment of Joint Task Force 53-7 – our Joint Task Force for Experimentation – to lead, plan, and conduct the SONIC SPEAR experimentation series focused on SOF capabilities is key. Also critical is our reform of the SOF Capabilities and Integration Development System (SOF CIDS). In-parallel with the Department's comprehensive Joint Requirements, Innovation, and Acquisition reform efforts, USSOCOM is in the process of updating our SOF CIDS process to expedite outcomes, strengthen force design, and accelerate delivery of effective capabilities to our SOF warfighters. This effort is a collective SOF Enterprise approach to reform, involving inputs from ASW(SO/LIC), USSOCOM, SOF Components, and TSOCS. In-line with Secretary of War guidance, we anticipate publishing Capability Requirements Directive by the end of this fiscal year. ASW(SO/LIC) initiatives support both these efforts through strengthened data visibility, performance measurement, and accountability mechanisms, advancing performance-informed assessments and aligning enterprise processes to strategic outcomes rather than legacy structures.

Strengthen Strategic Integration with the Services. USSOCOM's effectiveness depends on strong, enduring partnerships with the Military Departments, which provide most SOF personnel and capabilities. This imperative focuses on aligning force development, readiness, and modernization efforts with the Services to ensure SOF requirements are integrated into broader Department priorities. Clear roles, shared accountability, and deliberate coordination strengthen the SOF enterprise and enhance the Joint Force's ability to compete and prevail. ASW(SO/LIC) provides the civilian policy framework and access to ensure SOF's equities are consistently represented and integrated within the Service's processes, supporting coherence across organize, train, equip, and resource responsibilities.

WIN — OUR MISSION IS OUR PURPOSE

Operational Contributions to Winning

SOF contribute to winning by providing persistent, integrated, and scalable operational effects aligned with the NDS priorities. Through forward presence, deep partnerships, and integration across domains, SOF deliver daily operational value that defends the Homeland, deters China in the Indo-Pacific, empowers allies and partners, and reduces the risk of escalation across the full spectrum of competition and conflict.

Defend the U.S. Homeland. SOF defend the Homeland, NDS LOE 1, by degrading transnational criminal and narcotics networks through precise and risk-managed operations as demonstrated during the recent actions in the Western Hemisphere. Through partner-enabled disruption of logistics, financial flows, and enabling structures, SOF help constrain the resources and influence of criminal organizations, reducing the ability to corrupt institutions and create conditions that threaten the Homeland or can be exploited by state and non-state adversaries.

Cartel-incited violence poses persistent security challenges across the region, including Mexico where 1.6 million U.S. permanent residents live, and 9 million U.S. tourists visit annually. Recent publicity and perceived increase of U.S. support to counter-cartel operations in Mexico raise concerns of risk to U.S. citizens, particularly as Mexico prepares to host thirteen World Cup 2026 games this summer and four qualifying matches in late March. USSOCOM delivers

unique value through long-standing relationships providing support to our trusted partners to develop their capabilities to prosecute high-value target operations. We applaud their recent effectiveness and remain postured to provide tailored SOF support to Mexican military and security forces to dismantle narco-terrorist organizations.

SOF also defend the Homeland by reducing the likelihood that terrorist organizations can project violence against the United States, maintaining sustained pressure to deny adversaries the time, space and freedom of action required to regenerate. Multi-national efforts such as Operation Gallant Phoenix – the intelligence fusion center focused on countering terrorism by tracking extremist threats – exemplify this approach by integrating U.S. and partner capabilities to impose continuous disruption on terrorist networks and lower the risk of strategic surprise. To enhance a layered defense of the Homeland, SOF strengthen early warning and deterrence in key approaches to the United States, including the maritime domain, the Arctic, and cyberspace.

Crisis response operations are also essential to USSOCOM's mission to protect U.S. global interests. In contested environments, SOF conduct agile, integrated operations to maintain relative advantage, preserve freedom of maneuver, and provide strategic options to the President and the Secretary of War. SOF's readiness to scale their crisis response capabilities allows the U.S. to address a wide range of threats, protect U.S. personnel and facilities abroad, and secure strategic objectives in cases of emergency.

Deter China. In support of NDS LOE 2, SOF deter China in the Indo-Pacific through a credible denial defense by providing credible war reserve placement and access, and critical decision advantage for Joint Force commanders, while strengthening the credibility, resilience, and cohesion of U.S. alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. Through persistent forward presence and integration with allies, SOF shape conditions in which coercion, rapid escalation, or attempts to seize territory within the First Island Chain are less likely to succeed.

SOF's irregular warfare approaches and information operations counter coercion, expose malign influence, and reinforce partner resilience below the threshold of armed conflict. These efforts strengthen the ability of allies and partners – particularly along the First Island Chain – to resist pressure, preserve decision space, and deny adversaries the ability to achieve objectives without consequence.

In addition, SOF enable the Joint Force to operate effectively in contested and politically sensitive environments. Through access, relationships, and regional expertise, SOF support denial strategies, enhance situational awareness, and improve interoperability with allies and partners. These contributions complicate adversary planning, cast doubt, and increase the credibility of collective defense.

Should competition escalate to conflict, SOF's posture supports transition to combat operations, providing access, integrating intelligence and targeting, leading Department-wide capability development and experimentation efforts to maximize the use of autonomous systems, and operating by, with, and through partners to support Joint Force objectives. This ability to bridge competition, crisis response, and conflict reinforces deterrence by signaling that the United States and its allies are prepared to respond decisively across the full spectrum of conflict.

Increase Burden-Sharing. Enabling and encouraging allies and partners to assume primary responsibility for their own conventional defense is essential to executing the NDS LOE 3 and sustaining deterrence with finite U.S. forces. For SOF, burden-sharing is not an abstract objective—it is a necessary condition for managing persistent global demand, preserving readiness, and ensuring the Joint Force can prioritize the most consequential challenges to our Nation’s interests in the context of the simultaneity problem.

SOF focus on theater-aligned partnerships to produce independent and interoperable partner capability. Consistent with the NDS focus on results and outcomes, rather than measuring success by the volume of engagement, SOF focus on select strategic partners to plan, execute, and sustain operations: counterterrorism, counter-transnational criminal activity, irregular warfare, and crisis response operations within their own region. Leveraging authorities granted by Congress, these efforts improve partner readiness, expand operational access, and reduce reliance on continuous U.S. presence, lowering force demand, operational tempo, and political risk for U.S. forces.

SOF prioritize access, interoperability, and integration over presence alone. These outcomes complicate adversary planning, reinforce allied cohesion, and reduce opportunities for coercion or *fait accompli* actions, particularly in regions where adversaries seek to exploit seams between allies. This irregular approach extends Joint Force reach, preserves the element of surprise, increases operational sustainability, maximizes effects, and mitigates risk to U.S. forces by distributing responsibility across a broader coalition of partners.

Aligning the SOF Enterprise and Processes for Execution

Effective execution of the NDS requires clear roles, disciplined processes, and unity of effort across the SOF enterprise. Aligned with congressional intent, USSOCOM and the office of ASW(SO/LIC) are continuing to refine the delineation of roles and responsibilities to ensure strategy, oversight, and operational execution are mutually reinforcing.

Under this construct, USSOCOM retains responsibility for operational execution, force generation, and day-to-day management of SOF. In parallel, ASW(SO/LIC), provides civilian oversight, strategic guidance, analytic rigor, and accountability across organize, train, equip, and resources functions. This clearer delineation improves decision speed, reduces duplication, strengthens unity of effort, and provides institutional support to the force, while preserving commander agility and operational flexibility. Importantly, this alignment emphasizes discipline and restraint while better integrating with the military departments.

At the operational level, alignment is anchored in the role of Sub-unified Commands as the primary integrators of SOF within GCCs. Sub-unified Commands – an echelon of command that encompasses both TSOCs and Joint Special Operations Command – translate enterprise capabilities into theater-specific effects, synchronize SOF’s activities with conventional forces, allies, interagency partners, and other instruments of national power, and manage competing demands across competition, crisis, and conflict. Sub-unified Commands are further positioned to serve as the primary irregular warfare integrators within their respective theaters. In this role, Sub-unified Commands synchronize irregular warfare planning, partner capacity building,

information operations, and advisory activities in support of GCC campaign objectives. Regional irregular warfare campaign plans and recurring assessments aligned to the USSOCOM Strategic Enterprise Plan ensure indirect approaches are coherent, measurable, and integrated with deterrence, burden-sharing, and crisis response objectives. Strengthening Sub-unified Command authorities and processes improve prioritization, demand management, and integration of SOF into theater campaigns.

To accelerate innovation and close operational gaps identified at the tactical edge, USSOCOM is institutionalizing a process to bring prototypical solutions to key operational problems. This process enables theater-driven problem identification through standardized, time-bound problem statements tied to GCC objectives, supported by rapid validation, experimentation, and transition pathways. This approach shortens the timeline from operational need to capability integration across doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, facilities, and policy and ensures modernization efforts remain grounded in operational reality.

Advancing SOF Through an Institutionalized Secretariat for Special Operations

As Congress directed in section 907 of the Fiscal Year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act, the Department has taken decisive and concrete steps to institutionalize civilian oversight and strengthen the governance of the Special Operations enterprise. We have deliberately transformed SSO, reinforcing ASW(SO/LIC)'s statutory role. This transformation moves beyond advisory constructs to the direct civilian oversight exercising authority, direction, and control over SOF-peculiar administrative matters, ensuring that decisions on organization, training, equipment, resourcing, and civilian personnel are executed with analytic discipline and accountability.

To achieve this, we administratively separated the SSO from the Office of the Under Secretary of War for Policy, a critical step that clarifies the ASW(SO/LIC)'s autonomy and authority over special operations-peculiar administrative matters while preserving close coordination on policy. Furthermore, the SSO has been realigned and structured as a Service Secretariat, organized around core enterprise functions. This new construct allows for direct civilian oversight across organize, train, and equip responsibilities without duplicating the operational execution role of USSOCOM.

A central pillar of this transformation is the institutionalization of analytic rigor to inform senior leader decisions. As authorized under section 907, we established the Special Operations Analysis directorate within the SSO to provide independent, sustained analysis of force design, posture, and investment, to inform data-driven and strategically sound decisions. In parallel, we are building a civilian-led workforce with specialized expertise in advanced analytics, resource oversight, and SOF-specific policy, reducing reliance on ad-hoc solutions and ensuring continuity. These actions – coupled with the formalization of processes for issuing Department-wide SOF policies – solidify a framework of enduring and effective governance. While the full maturation of these initiatives is ongoing, these foundational changes fulfill congressional intent and provide the structure needed to forge the future of Joint SOF.

PEOPLE — OUR COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE AND TOP PRIORITY

Forging the Future SOF Warrior: A Commitment to Elite Talent and Meritocracy

USSOCOM's decisive advantage rests with our people. The effectiveness of our force depends on fostering elite tactical skills, developing sound judgment, adaptability, moral courage, and resilience under sustained operational demand. Buttressed by a cadre of first-rate civilians and integrated with industry-leading contract support, SOF operators and enablers have the distinct privilege of representing our Nation's interests and providing security in the Western Hemisphere and beyond. To preserve this decisive edge, we execute deliberate talent management strategies anchored in a steadfast commitment to a culture of meritocracy. We align recruitment, retention, assessment, and development of our elite warfighters with force design, operational realities, and long-term readiness.

While facing significant headwinds in a competitive talent market, USSOCOM, in close partnership with the Military Departments, is taking prudent action to continue to meet our recruitment and assessment goals. The focus is on attracting and selecting the highest-quality candidates whose cognitive, physical, and ethical attributes produce the high-quality operators for which USSOCOM is renowned. This ensures that the uncompromising credibility and excellence that define Special Operations endures through future wars and conflicts.

To posture the force for current and future operational demands, we are evaluating the accessions, assessment, and selection approaches as well as production pipelines to inform inter-department cooperation, improve enterprise policy, and develop targeted solutions. This evaluation is designed to provide a durable basis to mitigate challenges while ensuring recruiting outcomes and selection pathways remain aligned with the warrior ethos, long-term force design, and future SOF operator skills as the demands evolve (e.g., exceptional cognitive agility, information warfare, human-machine teaming).

To retain this elite force, USSOCOM and ASW(SO/LIC) take a holistic view of SOF retention drivers to establish personnel policies, incentives, and support programs aligned with readiness. We continue to invest in resilience, health, and outcome-based human performance systems under our Preservation of the Force and Family, strategically prioritizing them in line with future force design assumptions. This effort sustains and regenerates the SOF operator and their families. Delivering this support to families is critical, as we know decisions to stay in the service are made around the kitchen table and not on the battlefield.

We are committed to the career-long development of SOF as a continuous process that extends well beyond initial tactical mastery. To address the evolving character of warfare, USSOCOM and the Military Departments use specialized education, such as at the Joint Special Operations University, to forge adaptive leaders. This approach cultivates the essential cognitive agility, strategic acumen, and adaptability required for SOF teams to integrate across domains with joint and international partners, leverage emerging technologies, and exercise sound judgment under ambiguous and high-risk conditions, thereby sustaining their strategic advantage.

Through these concerted efforts, we are building a resilient, adaptable, and lethal force. To secure this future, we require continued, robust support and strategic investment to empower

these initiatives. This commitment is essential to guarantee that our SOF warriors have the backing they need to answer the nation's call, now and for generations to come.

TRANSFORM — OUR IMPERATIVE

Force Development and Design

In support of our transformation, we continue to embark on SOF Force Development and translate strategic guidance into the concepts, capabilities, and force structures required to deliver asymmetric advantage to the Joint Force.

SOF's force development and force design are informed by a combination of conceptual thinking, operational experience, and rigorous assessment. Rather than relying on a single prescriptive construct, USSOCOM and ASW(SO/LIC) leverage and employ a range of analytic and assessment mechanisms to demonstrate how SOF can contribute to the Joint Force across competition, crisis, and conflict in contested and denied environments. USSOCOM applies this approach through experimentation, campaign assessments, and wargaming to translate operational lessons learned and emerging requirements into capability and force design insights. SOF-specific venues such as SONIC SPEAR, USSOCOM's joint force integration exercise, are used to examine modular force employment, TSOC and JSOC integration, human-machine teaming, and the operational application of emerging technologies, providing detailed insight into how SOF can generate asymmetric advantage in complex environments. Collectively, these activities inform near- and mid-term force development decisions while identifying longer-term capability and design implications. These efforts reflect SOF's role in adapting its own force design and in shaping broader Joint Force approaches to emerging operational challenges.

SOF's force design assumptions are also assessed with Joint and Department-level venues. This includes the Globally Integrated Wargame, joint warfighting constructs looking toward 2040, and Title 10 wargames such as SHADOW WARRIOR, the USSOCOM initiative that serves as a wargaming and experimentation framework to test, evaluate, and develop future operational concepts and to evaluate SOF's role in future joint campaigns. These venues provide opportunities to stress-test SOF's contributions within Joint campaigns, illuminate dependencies and tradeoffs between SOF and conventional forces, and assess integration with allies and partners across multiple theaters.

To complement this execution, ASW(SO/LIC) conducts mission-based and scenario-informed analysis to examine what SOF are required, where, in what mix, and for how long across steady-state competition, crisis response, and large-scale conflict. Additional analyses are needed, and CSOA plans to conduct future analysis, which will account for sustainment, readiness recovery, and resource constraints to ensure force design options are possible and enduring.

Due to their unique capabilities in addressing complex security challenges, SOF are in persistently high global demand. This demand must be carefully balanced against near-term force generation, readiness, and modernization requirements. As SOF continues to meet current operational demands, we must concurrently allocate forces and resources for modernization exercises, experimentation, testing, and fielding of new and enhanced materiel and non-materiel capabilities to meet future operational requirements across the spectrum of conflict.

Together, USSOCOM's execution-focused experimentation and participation in SOF-specific and Joint assessment venues, combined with ASW(SO/LIC)'s analytic integration and governance, ensure SOF's force development and design decisions are grounded in operational reality, informed by rigorous analysis, and aligned with Joint Force requirements, while retaining flexibility as strategic guidance and leadership priorities evolve. Additionally, USSOCOM's management of operational employment and ASW(SO/LIC)'s analytic integration and governance enable more deliberate decision-making about where SOF provide unique value, where demand must be prioritized or constrained, and where risk is being accepted. While processes, staffing, and tools continue to mature, these efforts represent meaningful progress toward disciplined stewardship for a force under persistent demand.

SOF Capability Development and Innovation

SOF rely on rapid and adaptive capability development to maintain asymmetric advantage against evolving threats. SOF's operating environment – characterized by contested access, ambiguous attribution, and compressed decision timelines – demands the ability to identify, develop, and field capabilities faster than traditional acquisition processes were designed to support. As a result, SOF often serve as a pathfinder for the Department, accelerating the adoption of disruptive technologies and rapidly delivering tools to warfighters at the point of need. This is most recently manifested in USSOCOM being the only Joint Force provider to the Defense Autonomous Warfare Group, which is a Department of War-led activity focused on integrating autonomous systems to solve GCC problems with the Joint Force.

USSOCOM and ASW(SO/LIC) continue to lead SOF capability development and innovation by leveraging experimentation, rapid prototyping, and close engagement with operators, industry, and interagency partners. These efforts equip SOF to adapt quickly to emerging operational needs in irregular warfare, information environments, and denied spaces where speed, discretion, and modularity are decisive. A persistent challenge, however, is transitioning successful prototypes into enduring capabilities.

To foster a competitive and responsive industrial base, USSOCOM and ASW(SO/LIC) employ a wide range of acquisition tools and authorities, including Other Transaction Authorities, Commercial Solution Openings, Small Business Innovation Research, and Small Business Technology Transfer programs. Innovation hubs such as SOFWERX connects operators, industry, and academia through continuous experimentation and problem-driven collaboration, while SOF VENTURES aligns private capital with urgent operational needs to accelerate the delivery and scaling of relevant technologies. SOF VENTURES connects TSOCs, Program Executive Offices, science and tech, and interagency partners with venture capital, private equity, and growth investors, positioning private capital as a force multiplier for national security.

International collaboration further sparks SOF innovation. Through bilateral and multilateral agreements with allies and partners, USSOCOM and ASW(SO/LIC) co-develop interoperable capabilities at reduced cost and accelerated timelines. These efforts enhance coalition effectiveness while incorporating battlefield lessons learned from allied operational experience.

Despite these advantages, transitioning promising technologies from prototypes to enduring capabilities remains a persistent challenge. The SOF enterprise is poised to accelerate within the Department's acquisition, innovation, and requirements reform initiatives to demonstrate synchronization across those typically stove-piped bureaucratic functions that contribute to the traditional pitfalls associated with the technology transition "valley of death." By addressing gaps quickly within execution year, energizing the requirements and budgetary process in parallel, enacting acceleration focused authorities such as Middle Tier Acquisition, and focusing on early and operationally representative experimentation, SOF will innovate at the speed of relevance and continue to pioneer for the Joint Force.

Together, USSOCOM's execution of SOF capability development and innovation – characterized by speed, experimentation, and partnership – combined with ASW(SO/LIC)'s alignment and governance, delivers operational advantage without sacrificing coherence, sustainability, or accountability. USSOCOM and ASW(SO/LIC) work together to align structure, strategy, and policy to modernize and streamline acquisition processes, emphasizing speed, adaptability, and rigor to leverage cutting-edge technologies, from both established players and emerging innovators. This collaboration will shorten the timeline from Research, Development, Test, and Evaluation (RDT&E) through acquisition to better support the near-term needs of theater special operation commands while preparing the force for future warfare.

SOF Programs and Resourcing

Sustaining SOF as a decisive asymmetric advantage requires disciplined stewardship of resources aligned to strategy, force design, and operational outcomes. Although SOF represent less than two percent of the Department's budget, USSOCOM's total annual funding is roughly equivalent to the procurement cost of a single aircraft carrier, yet it sustains a globally employed force operating daily across multiple theaters in competition, crisis response, and conflict. This scale, combined with specialized capabilities and persistent demand, places unique pressure on programming, execution, and risk management. To provide the Nation credible asymmetric options across the spectrum, it is imperative that SOF and the Services have the required, dedicated, and persistent resources necessary to prevail across the NDS lines of effort.

USSOCOM continues to program, budget, and execute Special Operations-Peculiar resources primarily through Major Force Program (MFP)-11, supporting force generation, readiness, capability development, and global operations. These resources are executed in an environment characterized by high operational tempo, emergent requirements, and frequent in-year adjustments to meet time-sensitive mission needs. As a result, SOF resourcing often operates on a wartime footing, requiring agility while managing long-term readiness and modernization risk. At the same time, the SOF enterprise remains dependent on indispensable Service-common equipment and enablers (MFP-2), making continued congressional support for Service contributions essential to SOF effectiveness and modernization.

Sustained investments in RDT&E remain critical to maintaining SOF's technological edge (in areas such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and autonomous systems) and operational superiority. Any delays or setbacks in RDT&E funding pose a significant risk to achieving these capabilities, potentially delaying the integration of advanced systems essential for countering future threats. Delays or instability in RDT&E funding increase risk by slowing

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the integration of advanced capabilities required to counter future threats. Likewise, operation and maintenance funding underwrites SOF's ability to sustain high readiness levels amid persistent global operations and crisis response demands. Predictable funding in both areas is essential to preserving SOF's role as a rapid, reliable response force. Also, operation and maintenance is a key modernization driver as our experimentation, test, and validation, and integration of new technology is funded with the same operation and maintenance we use to cash flow current operations and crisis response.

Improving execution transparency and audit readiness across special operations peculiar accounts remains an ongoing priority. Enhancements to data integration, standardized reporting, and tracking of reprogramming actions will increase visibility into how resources are applied over time, strengthening confidence in MFP-11 stewardship and compliance.

Together, USSOCOM's execution of SOF's programs and resources — distinguished by agility and operational responsiveness — combined with ASW(SO/LIC)'s strengthened review, portfolio governance, and performance-informed analysis, ensure that resourcing decisions balance near-term operational demands with long-term readiness and modernization. This approach preserves SOF's ability to respond rapidly to emerging threats while improving accountability and strategic alignment across the enterprise. The enduring partnership with Congress remains essential to sustaining predictable resourcing and managing risk under persistent command.

CONCLUSION

SOF continue to play an indispensable role in securing U.S. national interests as state adversaries act across regions and domains, terrorist organizations adapt and persist, and technological change accelerates the character of conflict. As a globally employed, low-visibility, and partner-enabled force, SOF provide senior leaders with credible options to impose costs, manage escalation, and respond decisively when required.

Purpose-built for this era, SOF leverage persistent global presence, generational relationships, and unique authorities to shape the operating environment, strengthen partners, and impose costs on adversaries below the threshold of armed conflict. Through irregular warfare, counterterrorism, crisis response, and strategic partnerships, SOF deliver effects across all lines of effort in the NDS, reducing demands on the broader Joint Force while preserving U.S. strategic focus on priority threats.

When deterrence fails, SOF are postured with the Joint Force to prevail in high-end conflict, operating forward in contested and denied environments to extend operational reach, generate decision advantage, and create opportunities for commanders across all domains. This combination of persistent campaigning and crisis responsiveness allows the Nation to manage risk today while preparing for future conflict.

SOF deliver these effects with a modest footprint – less than three percent of the Joint Force and under two percent of the Department's budget – providing optionality and an outsized return on investment. This value is sustained through disciplined stewardship of resources, deliberate force design, and continuous adaptation to the changing character of war.

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Looking ahead, maintaining SOF's competitive edge will require sustained partnership, predictable resourcing, and continued modernization. Enduring collaboration among Congress, the Department, the Services, ASW(SO/LIC), and USSOCOM is essential to ensuring SOF remain ready, relevant, and accountable, able to meet today's mission while transforming for tomorrow's challenges.

On behalf of the special operations community, thank you for your steadfast support and commitment to ensuring SOF can create asymmetric advantages and multi-domain effects so the Joint Force wins across the spectrum of conflict, and protect our Nation's interests.