The inauguration of the new Presidential administration brings with it the opportunity to adjust national security priorities and strategies. But the year 2021 will also be marked by many challenges stemming from the coronavirus pandemic, not the least of which include the financial impact on global markets, the U.S. economy specifically, and thus also the defense budget. The Global SOF Foundation (GSF) remains focused on ensuring U.S. special operations forces (SOF) receive the capabilities, resourcing, and direction they require and deserve. As vaccinations increase and we settle into a “new normal”, our adversaries will not cease. We will continue to face significant threats from both violent extremists and near-peer competitors, and SOF will continue to be one of the most effective components of our military force.

With the recommended priorities and initiatives listed below, the GSF aims to highlight the importance to U.S. Congressional leadership of U.S. and partner SOF as among the most capable and affordable instruments in safeguarding our security.
Previous National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAAAs) established a new administrative chain of command that runs from USSOCOM through the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD SO/LIC) to the Secretary of Defense, thereby mirroring the relationship between the Secretary of Defense and the Service secretaries. Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller implemented this change in November 2020. However, to ensure that ASD SO/LIC fully exercises authority, direction, and control of all special operations- peculiar administrative responsibilities, to include the organization, training, and equipping of special operations forces, ASD SO/LIC should be elevated from an ASD position to an Undersecretary of Defense position to ensure SOF has the appropriate level of influence and oversight in the Department of Defense (DoD).

Many SOF Components are struggling to recruit and retain people - SOF’s most precious asset. Moreover SOF seeks greater diversity and people with skills from cultures that are not common in the current force. The Lodge-Philbin Act was a U.S. federal law, passed in June 1950, which allowed for the recruiting of foreign nationals into the U.S. military. If they successfully served five years with an honorable discharge, they were guaranteed U.S. citizenship. Congress should consider a modern day Lodge-Philbin Act designed to recruit a diverse and robust number of men and women for Special Operations that are from nations that are critical to the U.S. National Security Strategy and better capable of supporting Irregular Warfare.

Our adversaries see the “competition” space as a phase of war while the US often treats it like training with the utilization of Joint Combined Training Exchanges, for example. To ensure proper management and programming, but also to better integrate SOF effects and capabilities into defense planning, Congress should add Preparation of the Environment as a core U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) mission to ensure proper management, oversight, manning, and programming.

Inter-state strategic competition—not terrorism—is now the primary concern in U.S. national security as stated in the latest National Defense Strategy. The Services are viewing this next conflict as a conventional fight and do not see a primary role for SOF. Sufficient attention is not paid to activities short of major conflict, and this affects SOF participation in the planning, training, and exercises with conventional forces in preparation for potential conflicts. Our competitors see the next conflict much differently and will employ the use of indirect capabilities and SOF to the largest extent possible. Congress should direct the Services to include SOF more fully in the planning, preparation, training and exercises in support of the National Defense Strategy focused on near-peer contingencies and competition. This includes early phases of operations in which SOF has the capacity to shape the operating environment for subsequent major joint operations by conventional forces. Additionally, Congress should appropriate more funding in the European Deterrence Initiative and the Pacific Deterrence Initiative to support irregular warfare.

Section 1202 funding and authority allows the Secretary of Defense to “provide support” of up to $13.5 million annually to “foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals” that are acting in support of authorized U.S. special operations activities. This authority is off to an excellent start in many countries.
Congress should double funding for the Section 1202 activities and expand their use in other theaters such as INDOPACOM, which have a significant impact on the effectiveness of SOF Building Partner Capacity activities.

Congress should direct the Joint Staff J7 to conduct an analysis to recommend a single government entity or agency to serve as the lead proponent for Personnel Recovery (PR) operations with responsibility and authority to establish standardized processes and procedures for training, preparation, planning, and execution of PR activities.

Tactical SOF urgently need low probability of detection/low probability of intercept (LPD/LPI) communications to be effective in both the competition and conflict phases. Further, the tactical SOF aligned with INDOPACOM, CENTCOM and EUCOM need BICES communications to connect with their regional allies and partners. Congress should fund and require USSOCOM to develop and field advanced, modernized, survivable high frequency communications systems for employment in uniquely hostile environments of the competition and conflict phases of the great power scenarios envisioned in the National Security Strategy.

In the current era of Great Power Competition, we expect space communications to be denied and degraded by our adversaries in an escalation of force. SOF must consider reliable and secure backup communications that will enable mission accomplishment, even if satellite communications are inaccessible.

Given upcoming changes to the relationship between ASD SO/LIC and USSOCOM regarding acquisition due NDAA Section 922, Congress should direct USSOCOM to execute a study to review and implement an improved procurement and contracting process, to include proper training of personnel, and to clarify/update agreed-upon practices for determining SOF-unique and Service-provided equipment and services.

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Theater SOF conduct a broad range of sensitive activities by which the Theater Special Operations Command (TSOCs) achieve Geographic Combatant Command operational objectives. However, TSOCs must work with the theater contracting commands and theater executive agents to secure contracting for operational support to sensitive activities which is well beyond the theater’s expertise. Congress should direct USSOCOM to develop contracting processes that are SOF-unique and support TSOC-led sensitive activities.

There has been little research, development and procurement funding allocated to advance simulation capabilities to meet significant medical training gaps in caring for human and canine patients. Congress should create and fund a SOF Medicine Program of Record that provides advance development, procurement and lifecycle management of SOF medicine training systems.

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SUPPORT TO THE FORCE

Congress should ensure that veterans exposed to toxins at Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan, known as “K2”, get their illnesses recognized by the DoD and Department of Veterans Affairs as connected to their time at the base. This recognition should be executed preemptively—prior to the conclusion of the study mandated by the FY21 NDAA.

Congress should support ORIEN, a joint program of USSOCOM and the John Murtha Cancer Center at Walter Reed, to track cancer rates among SOF. There should be cancer screening and treatment plans for SOF veterans and retirees who have been exposed to a myriad of toxins.

Congress should ensure DoD expands treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) via stellate ganglion block (SGB) therapy—in which an anesthetic agent is injected onto a collection of nerves in the neck—so as to eliminate the current requirement that someone suffering with PTSD first fail traditional therapies before SGB becomes an option.

The provision of Imminent Danger Pay, Hostile Fire Pay, and income tax exemption must reflect the realities of modern warfare and should be afforded to all service members deployed in harm’s way—not based solely on geography—nor whether they are badged operators or support personnel.

SOF have struggled recently to get the best people in the military because the demands on SOF personnel are tremendous. Assessing and selecting SOF is hard work, and it is closely followed by a long training pipeline. Retaining trained SOF is critical and the retention bonuses help a lot. To further support retention Congress should make all SOF retention bonuses tax free.

Congress should provide additional funding for military construction and faculty in support of the SOF Human Performance (e.g., THOR3) Programs. Additionally, the HPP programs should be made available for use by the critical enabler and support personnel in SOF units.

The PME and Tuition Assistance programs for SOF should adapt so that servicemembers can train on relevant skill sets such as artificial intelligence, mental toughness, cyber operations, data analytics, energy resilience, as well as traditional education programs such as finance that may be relevant to deterrence and full scale operations.
Counter Unmanned Aerial Systems (CUAS) are critical for SOF because small SOF elements need freedom of movement without detection to be successful. UAS are cheap and prevalent all over the modern battlefield, and SOF needs to be able to neutralize drones to ensure operational security. Congress should fully fund CUAS in support of U.S. Army SOF.

Congress should fund the Combating Terrorism Technical Support Office to rapidly deliver additional 120mm mobile mortar systems to provide organic, highly accurate fires in increasingly dangerous remote operations in the conflict zones. These mobile mortar systems should be transitioned to USSOCOM’s Family of Special Operations Vehicles as vehicle variants within platform relevant Programs of Record.

Congress should fund military construction to complete the Special Warfare Center construction, and to replace and refurbish the facilities at the multi-Service Combat Diver School in Key West, as they near the end of their 25-year life cycle.
Congress should direct a study to determine if Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) is currently structured correctly, if it should grow in size, and if so, in what areas or additions (e.g., aviation). Additionally, the Marine Corps should designate MARSOC enablers (i.e., Special Operations Capability Specialists or SOCS) as a primary Military Occupational Specialty and allow a structured vetting, assessment and selection of these personnel.

The coupling of electrical (battery) power with other technologies such as diesel and AIP (Air Independent Propulsion or Power) will substantially increase operational range, decrease risk to mission, and increase the number and type of possible employment scenarios.

With the proliferation of radars, night vision devices, thermal imaging, and long-range precision munitions, maritime infiltration has become considerably more difficult for surface craft. Congress should increase the number of heavy and medium stealth maritime combatant craft and crews to ensure the force is capable of meeting GCC mission requirements.
Armed Overwatch (AO), which will provide long-dwell aerial surveillance capacity as well as the ability to deliver precision aerial fires in support of small units in remote areas, should be designated as a specified mission to ensure it is properly resourced as a program of record. The AO platform must operate in very austere environments, possess longer endurance, and be more modular than traditional close air support aircraft. The aircraft should also be simple and affordable enough for our partners to purchase and operate on their own. Lack of dedicated Rotary Wing assets have increasingly made it difficult for special forces units to maintain qualification and currency for critical skills such as fast-roping, cast and recovery, various forms of extraction, etc. Congress must address the lack of Rotary Wing support for maintenance and requalification of special forces personnel.
There is not enough SOF aviation for tactical formations to train at home station. The lack of aviation assets means units rarely receive the training necessary prior to deployment. Congress should fund USSOCOM to provide the Components with aviation capabilities for routine home station training. These assets may or may not have to be fully compatible with existing SOF-unique airframes, which should be assessed and reported to Congress ahead of funding.