




2024
IMPERATIVES



With the recommended priorities and initiatives listed in this document, the Global SOF Foundation aims to highlight the importance of U.S. and Partner Nation special operations forces (SOF) as among the most capable and affordable instruments in safeguarding national security.

As we approach the two-year anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the world is also wary of the widening attacks by Iranian-backed militants throughout the Middle East. The terrorist attacks conducted by Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023, demonstrated the continued threat of violent extremists, be they state-supported or networked threats. And the unchecked 20-year militarization of the South China Sea has culminated into weekly confrontations at sea where China flaunts international norms and threatens the sovereignty of U.S. partners in the Indo-Pacific region. It is against this backdrop that the Global SOF Foundation releases the 2024 SOF Imperatives document to the U.S. Congress. The Global SOF Foundation remains steadfast in its belief that the world's special operations forces provide unique and irreplaceable strategic value to their nations. SOF, combined with precision weapons, modern intelligence capabilities, and innovative and non-conventional platforms like autonomous systems, are having and will continue to have a critical role in the current era of competition.

The current and future security environment will be characterized by a persistent and long-term struggle with a plurality of adversaries seeking to overturn the post-war order of international norms established to maintain global stability, promote international cooperation, and resolve disputes through dialogue in order to prevent a global conflict. While the U.S. National Security Strategy focuses on the desire to avoid a major conflict while in strategic competition with China and Russia, the complexities of security dynamics go beyond the traditional great power rivalry and require a robust capacity to address regional threats and non-state actors. The special operations forces of the United States were built specifically for this purpose, serve as ambassadors of our values, and deftly wield elements of both hard and soft power. The competitive advantage for SOF is its network of partnerships and mutual trust built over decades of enduring engagements, and its ability to operate in diverse environments to disrupt our adversaries and execute precise, targeted missions that further U.S. strategic interests and are an essential component of successful campaigning.

Given the complexity of the future security environment, and the flexible range of military and diplomatic options achievable through the employment of our nation's elite SOF forces, the U.S. Congress and the Department of Defense must resource SOF accordingly. The 35-year evolution of joint U.S. SOF since the creation of USSOCOM has resulted in the creation of a skilled, experienced, and elite force capable of building local capacity and relationships while being ready to deploy on high-risk, high-value missions - all for a fraction of the total Department of Defense budget.

The current and future security landscape is not solely defined by great power rivalry but is also significantly influenced by regional actors and non-state entities that pose unique threats and require distinct strategies. There are some in the U.S. government looking for financial savings by reducing SOF resources and manpower, taking a narrow, misunderstood purpose of SOF and its capabilities across the spectrum of conflict with multiple adversaries. SOF creates dilemmas for adversaries by building capacity and capability among partners, providing access and intelligence, and deterring major armed conflict. **It is critical that Congress prevent any further cuts to SOF force structure and make an incremental increase in USSOCOM budgets over the five-year Future Year Defense Program to approximately \$20B.**

In 1987 Congress enacted the Nunn-Cohen Amendment to establish the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD/SOLIC) and USSOCOM to provide SOF with “Service-like” leadership, ensuring the proper resourcing of US SOF. Despite SOF’s critical role to national security, bureaucratic bloat pushed SOF to the margins. In 2019 Congress enacted Section 922 of the National Defense Authorization Act to strengthen ASD/SOLIC and in November of 2020, Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller signed the 922 Implementation Instructions. It is now three years since the Implementation Instructions were signed, and the improvements are negligible at best. **Congress should ensure the forthcoming GAO study on the implementation of 922 is released to the public.**

Section 1202 funding and authority allows the Secretary of Defense to “provide support” to “foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals” that are acting in support of authorized U.S. special operations activities. The 1202 authorities should be extended from 2025 to 2029 and the funding should increase from \$15M to \$30M, building on the program’s success in several countries already. **It should be expanded to enable coherent, interagency Building Partner Capacity activities in additional non-combat theaters.**

Operational Preparation of the Environment (OPE) is a category of traditional military activity, defined in DoD doctrine—not in statute—as “the conduct of activities in likely or potential operational areas to set conditions for mission execution.” OPE is extremely important although often overlooked. Examples of OPE could include close-in reconnaissance of a target, infrastructure development in a targeted area, or the reception, staging, onward movement and integration of forces in an anticipated area of operations. OPE can also include clandestine intelligence collection, conducted by the U.S. Armed Forces. **Currently Section 127f authorizes the SECDEF to expend up to \$15M annually on this mission, but it should be increased to \$25M to meet the demand signal and request for capability from the Geographic Combatant Commands. Additionally, Congress should transfer the authority of Section 943 that supports non-conventional assisted recovery activities to Section 127f.**

Congress should amend Section 4061 of Title 10, United States Code, to establish the Software and Digital Technology Pilot for Non-traditional Innovation Fielding Enterprise with Defense Innovation Unit as the Service-level lead and USSOCOM as the Non-traditional Innovation Fielding Enterprise lead. This amendment will accelerate the development of next-generation technologies that are shaping the current battlefields in Ukraine, Russia, Red Sea, and the Middle East.

Irregular Warfare

Congress should direct the Department of Defense to report on how it prioritizes Section 333 “Authority to Build Capacity” funding, with specific focus on shortfalls and its support to irregular warfare, as well as any needs for authority modifications. Section 333 funding receives approximately \$1.3-1.4 billion annually, allocated across the geographic commands, but very little supports irregular warfare.

Recognizing that Russia often conducts irregular or hybrid operations to avoid a conventional conflict, the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) enables the United States to enhance the U.S. deterrence posture, increase the readiness and responsiveness of U.S. forces in Europe, support the collective defense and security of NATO allies, and bolster the security and capacity of U.S. allies and partners. Most of the Eastern European partners appreciate the presence of U.S. forces, but these nations know that Russia will conduct irregular or hybrid operations to avoid a conventional conflict. Most of these small European nations have built their national defense strategies around conducting irregular warfare. The majority of the EDI provides limited support to irregular warfare. **Congress should establish a “Lend Lease” program for Irregular Warfare that will provide affordable capabilities to our partners and increase the deterrent posture in the European region. Similarly, Congress should direct a study to determine how much of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) supports SOF, cyber, intelligence and Information operations.** China intends to compete with the U.S. through irregular warfare, but very little of the PDI funding does much to counter these types of Chinese activities. The FY2023 PDI request, for example, is for slightly over \$6B of which roughly \$82M goes to USSOCOM.

Congress should conduct a study to determine if Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) is receiving sufficient resourcing and policy support. Within Irregular Warfare, the lack of OSINT+, or hybrid Open Source Intelligence, solutions that fuse the right amount of data from the right source at the right time leveraging commercial scale analytics disproportionately challenges SOF mission success. The Services and DIA continue to lag behind, while SOF is tasked with data exploitation in the gray zone. Near peer competition exploits this capability gap daily, and the need is urgent not only for US SOF but all military partners across the Indo Pacific and Eastern European regions.

The 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) correctly identifies that global competitors use destabilizing activities in pursuit of their objectives. Part of the deterrent response relies on societal resilience: “Denying the benefits of aggression also requires resilience – the ability to withstand, fight through, and recover quickly from disruption.” Building medical capability and capacity directly impacts societal resilience and can support resistance efforts in the event of crisis or conflict. The U.S. SOF medical community has unique experience and skills in operating in austere environments that would directly support this important line of effort. Critically, medical training needs to extend beyond uniformed military personnel; in extremis, civilians will be central to supporting resistance efforts. **The Department of Defense should be authorized to build the medical resilience of foreign civilian medical personnel and entities.**

Support to the Force

Public and private housing projects are required in the Eglin AFB region to ensure junior enlisted personnel have safe and reliable housing. With inflation, increases in housing costs, and the rise of interest rates, it is increasingly difficult for junior enlisted personnel from the Air Force Special Operations Command, Eglin AFB, and 7th SFG to find affordable housing in the region.

SOF for Life

The special operations service member has borne the load of the Global War on Terror and post – 9/11 conflicts for the United States for over 20 years. Making up just three percent of the total force, SOF has borne more than fifty percent of the wounded and casualties in recent years. As such, the needs of a SOF operator are likely to require a tailored and coordinated program that addresses the specific challenges special operators face when transitioning to civilian life. **Using the current study conducted by GAO, Congress should determine if a new three-year pilot program should be authorized to support a dedicated SOF service member transition program.**

There is increasing evidence that service in special operations poses unique challenges to long-term health and readiness. Allostatic load (impact of sustained chronic stress) and exposures each impact our warfighters in unique or disproportionate ways due to mission requirements and operational tempo. **The Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs should collaborate on a study of the unique long-term health and readiness needs for SOF warfighters.** This study should be used to prioritize further investment in research to ameliorate the impact of both allostatic load and exposure.

Congress should appropriate federal funding for larger and more numerous clinical trials of psychedelic therapies for military personnel, conducted with rigorous scientific standards using guidance provided by the Food and Drug Administration. Although nascent results are promising, as of the end 2022, there were only 16 studies published regarding clinical research of classical psychedelics enrolling a total of 630 participants. Researchers still do not fully understand the safety and efficacy of these compounds, the mechanism of action for how these drugs work, in which populations they work in and why, and finally, which compounds are best suited for which conditions.



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