

Role of Special Operations Forces In Supporting the National Defense Strategy, Including Activities That Contribute to Long-Term Strategic Competition with China and Russia

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U.S. Senate - Committee on Armed Services

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) [presiding]	Joni Ernst (R-IOWA)
Gary Peters (D-MI)	Ted Budd (R-NC)
Jacky Rosen (D-NV)	Eric Schmitt (R-MO)
Mark Kelly (D-AZ)	

WITNESSES:

Dr. Jonathan Schroden - Research Program Director Countering Threats and Challenges, Center for Naval Analyses

LTG Kenneth E. Tovo, USA (ret.) - Former Commanding General, United States Army Special Operations Command

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SENATOR GILLIBRAND: [Technical problems] – committee meets this morning for a hearing with the outside experts on the role of our Special Operations Forces in supporting the national defense strategy. This includes activities that contribute to long term strategic competition with **China** and Russia.

I would like to welcome our witnesses, Dr. Jonathan Schroden, the Research Program Director for the Countering Threats and Challenges Program at the Center for Naval Analysis, and retired Lieutenant General Kevin – Kenneth Tovo, former Commanding General of the United States Army Special Operations Command.

For more than 20 years, after 9/11, our military and especially our Special Operations Forces, were heavily committed to counterterrorism and stabilization missions around the world. However, changing global security dynamics, as reflected in the 2018 and 2022 national defense strategies, have required the Joint Forces to refocus on long term strategic competition with **China** and Russia.

For our Special Operations Forces, this change in focus has required a more resource-efficient approach to counterterrorism and increased investment in capabilities necessary to operate in contested environments.

The focus on competition has also provided an opportunity for our Special Operations Forces to leverage the network of allies and partners forged in recent decades to collectively address challenges posed by **China** and Russia. As a Defense Department's new joint concept for competing puts it, our adversaries intend to, "win without fighting." This strategy warns that if we do not adapt our approach to compete more effectively, "the United States risks ceding strategic influence, advantage, and leverage while preparing for a war that never occurs." Special Operations Forces, enabled by their unique skills and small footprint approach, have a central role to play in strategic competition.

That being said, U.S. Special Operations Command, or SOCOM, will need to adapt new – will need to adopt new operational approaches, field new capabilities, and develop new organizational structures to adequately support the National Defense Strategy.

Civilian oversight and advocacy by Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, as the Service Secretary like individual for SOCOM, will also be critical to facilitating this transition.

I hope you will both provide your candid views on these issues this morning, including areas where you believe policy resourcing and legislative changes may be necessary. I would like to welcome our Ranking Member, Senator Ernst.

SENATOR ERNST: Thank you, Madam Chair. And thank you to our witnesses for appearing before the subcommittee.

I have sat on the Emerging Threats and Capabilities subcommittee my entire tenure in Congress, governing our nation's Special Forces operations, ensuring they have the authorities and resources they need to carry out their role in our nation's defense. For over eight years, I have gotten to know this community at every echelon.

I know a community expertly operating at the tip of the spear, dismantling terror networks, disrupting plots against the homeland, and removing jihadist leaders from the battlefield. Our nation is more secure because of their skill and sacrifice.

But the threats imposed by **China** require our Special Operations enterprise to adapt to the demands of great power competition. Deterring and defeating **China** means optimizing the joint force to win. The terms and progress of those efforts remain undecided, especially concerning our Special Operations Forces.

I have engaged with the SOF community at every level.

They are being told across the Command, service components, and teams that the counterterrorism mission is a no fail mission set that SOF must continue to own.

Executing the shift to great power competition while continuing to shoulder the counterterrorism burden, coupled with projected manpower cuts and a frozen budget, is beyond daunting. As threats increase, ongoing discussions in the Department about cutting SOF's budget and force structure is out of step with the threats and SOF's growing requirements.

The numbers don't add up. Today, I worry clarity and task, mission and

purpose is lacking. We need to figure out how to shape the SOF enterprise to best fulfill its missions across the spectrum of competition and conflict.

This committee must push the Department to clarify requirements, clearly task the Command, and give our Special Operations Forces opportunities to shape and contribute to future fights.

I believe SOF must reactivate its muscle memory as a force born in great power competition. Skills in conducting irregular warfare, foreign internal defense, and sensitive activities must be rediscovered and cultivated.

A budget that gives funds and space for the training, operations, and equipment required in the relevant theaters of conflict is an imperative.

For the SOF community, outside perspectives are necessary to inform this change. Gentlemen, I look forward to your testimony. Thank you for being here. I yield, Madam Chair.

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: I will now turn to our witnesses for any opening remarks they may wish to make. Let's start with Dr. Schrodin, followed by General Tovo.

DR. SCHRODIN: Chair Gillibrand, Ranking Member Ernst, members of the subcommittee, thank you for having me here to discuss this important topic today.

I am speaking to you as a military analyst with CNA, which is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, independent research and analysis organization. For the past 17 years, I have worked with U.S. special operators in various capacities.

For the past seven of those, I have directed CNA's Special Operations Program.

As you are aware, the 2018 National Defense Strategy marked an inflection point for the U.S. military, and by extension, our Special Operations Forces. The NDS's statement that, "inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. National Security" sent a shockwave through the Department of Defense that is still generating ripple effects today.

In that regard, the current environment to me surrounding the idea of competition is reminiscent of the immediate aftermath of 9/11. At that time,

there was a strong impetus to get after the problem of terrorism, but minimal strategic guidance regarding how to do so.

The net result was some overarching strategic principles and a lot of good ideas and activities generated at the tactical level, with little in the way of operational art to translate principles into action.

Conversely, there was little in the way of understanding an assessment of how tactical actions summed over time to achieve or potentially undermine our strategic goals. It took well over a decade of sustained counterterrorism operations before the messy middle between policy and action was crystallized in the form of campaign plans, operations, orders, enduring authorities, and routine assessments.

While the 2022 NDS took the idea of competition a step further by advancing the concepts of integrated deterrence and campaigning, we are still lacking a translation of these ideas to tactical actions via a clear framework of activities and associated authorities, policies, permissions, and oversight.

This situation is especially challenging for SOF, as they have been tasked to remain the nation's premiere force for crisis response and counterterrorism, while being pressured to do more in support of competition. In our work at CNA, we have sought to help the SOF enterprise bridge this gap between policy and action.

This has included the conduct of detailed studies such as the Independent Assessment of Special Operations Force structure that Congress mandated in the 2020 NDAA, as well as a series of force design war games that we have conducted for multiple SOF commands.

Much of that work cannot be discussed in detail here, but one of my own efforts in this vein is a framework for competition campaigning that I published via the Modern War Institute in January.

This framework contains 15 campaign elements, 8 of which are operational aspects designed to compete for global influence today. You would recognize many of these subjects – many of these mission areas as ones for which SOF already have substantial capability, intelligence operations, working with foreign militaries and irregular forces, and information operations are some examples.

SOF have a strong value proposition to make for near- term competition campaigning in these areas, if they can evolve their capabilities to be relevant in semi or non- permissive environments against adversaries with capabilities that far exceed those of terrorist groups.

The other seven components of the campaigning framework, however, are designed to compete for influence in the decades to come. These include strategic planning, force design and development, posturing, exercises, and strategic assessment, elements that were not often integral to counterterrorism operations.

These institutional or service like areas are ones for which the skills and capabilities of SOCOM and other SOF commands have atrophied over the last 20 years. Thus, for SOF to develop capabilities that are relevant for future campaigning, SOCOM, in partnership with ASD SO/LIC needs to dramatically reinvigorate its service like role.

SOCOM's What Winning Looks Like Initiative, and some newly created analytic efforts at ASD SO/LIC are positive steps towards addressing these intellectual challenges, though much work remains to be done in this area. At the same time, a host of other issue areas need to be addressed.

These include technical ones, like how to overcome persistent surveillance and anti-access technologies.

Structural ones, like how to divide resources between the TSOC and other SOF headquarters. And cultural ones such as how to pivot a kinetically oriented force to a future that increasingly calls for non-kinetic activities and engagement.

Make no mistake, we are asking a lot of SOF today.

Effectively, to respond to crises at a moment's notice, to hold the line on terrorist threats, and now, to lead the way in competition. As they have for decades, SOF are evolving their capabilities to meet that challenge.

A lesson learned from the past 20 years, though, is that writing big checks with minimal guidance and oversight for an aggressive and creative force can create unintended and counterproductive consequences.

For SOF to become the nation's premier and trusted crisis response,

counterterrorism, and competition force will require sustained resourcing, clear guidance, and strong oversight. I look forward to your questions toward that end and thank you again for your time today.

GENERAL TOVO: Madam Chair Gillibrand, Ranking Member Ernst, and distinguished Senators of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the role of Special Operations Forces in supporting the National Defense Strategy, particularly how SOF contributes to the strategic competition with **China** and Russia.

I last appeared before this subcommittee as a Commander of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command five years ago, several months before I retired from active service. While I have remained involved and close to the SOF community in my civilian professional pursuits, nonprofit volunteer work, and personal relationships, I am no longer, to paraphrase President Teddy Roosevelt, in the arena.

I testify today as a private citizen. My comments are purely my own judgments and opinions. As a nation, we are faced with an incredibly complex and dangerous global security environment.

The rules based international order created after World War II is under significant attack, at best faltering, at worst crumbling. **China** and Russia, supported by like-minded regional actors such as Iran, are aggressively challenging international norms to pursue their aims at the expense of U.S. and allied interests.

While our adversaries prefer to employ coercive measures below the threshold of armed conflict, Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, Crimea, and Eastern Ukraine in 2014, and today's ongoing conflict in the Ukraine demonstrate that they have no reluctance to resort to war.

Each invasion was preceded by a period ripe with indication and warnings.

In each case, the U.S. and its allies and partners endeavored to deter war, and in each case, deterrence failed. You can be assured the **Chinese** are drawing lessons from this history. Adding to this complex environment are continuing conflicts and instability, enflamed and in some cases caused by the activities of violent extremist organizations. Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Lebanon, Tran

Sahel, now the Sudan, may head the list, but there are many others.

As we saw routinely in the Cold War and are witnessing today, our adversaries seize on these conflicts as an opportunity to further their aims, providing arms, money, and support on the ground. Russia's actions in the Sudan are just the most recent example.

In this period of strategic competition, we should expect a near continual parade of challenges, spanning everything from active information operations to degrade our will and disrupt national and allied cohesion, cyberattacks to undermine our competitive advantage, state and non-state sponsored acts of terror with the potential to diffuse our focus from the existential threats, proxy conflicts that threaten regional stability, and of course, up to a traditional conflict with one or both of our peer adversaries.

U.S. Special Operations Forces are uniquely suited to operate and contribute to the interagency and joint force in this turbulent environment, whether in strategic competition or conflict. In the interest of brevity, I will focus on the role in competition.

SOF enterprise provides the nation a multilayered capability to respond to crises that will be essential for navigating the emergency strewn landscape of the competitive space. Primarily developed through the engagement activities of its regionally aligned forces, SOF has a global network of allied and partner forces that are often able to respond rapidly and effectively. In some cases, our partners obviate the need for U.S. forces.

In others, they are effective teammates in the response, providing both tactical capabilities and a deeper understanding of the situation on the ground. At any given time, SOCOM's global footprint of approximately 6,000 personnel in 80 to 90 countries, provides another layer of crisis response capability.

On numerous occasions, SOF elements and individuals deployed abroad for campaigning, training, or other activities have been re-missioned on short notice to respond to everything from humanitarian disasters, terrorist incidents, and the outbreak of conflict. And of course, as you know, SOF provides a variety of highly capable alert forces, rapidly deployable on little to no notice anywhere in the world.

The key ingredient to all these crisis response capabilities are the specially assessed and selected special operators who possess the mental agility, complex problem-solving skills, and high state of readiness and training to rapidly adapt to dynamic crisis situations.

They are adeptly enabled by an irreplaceable team of assigned intelligence professionals, logisticians, comms specialists, and medical personnel. The NDS highlights the concept of campaigning as a key way to successfully gain military advantage, deter adversaries, and address grey zone challenges in an environment of strategic competition.

SOF is well-versed in this campaign approach.

Under the design of the geographic Combatant Commands, and the direction of the Theater Special Operations Commands, SOF have played an integral role in theater campaign plans for decades. They are primarily conducted by the regionally aligned, culturally attuned, and local language capable forces who have an unparalleled ability to operate in austere and complex environments, with a small footprint, low resource requirements, and in synchronization with the U.S. country team.

Often executed as continual persistent presence missions, these activities have been essential to developing our partners' capability, signaling U.S.

commitment to the relationship, developing influence, and providing unique insights and understanding into local and regional dynamics.

SOF campaign activities are long term investments that often take years or even decades of patience, persistence, and presence to fully mature. Classic examples are SF deployments under Partnership for Peace in Eastern Europe in the 90s and Plan Colombia since 1999.

In the case of PFP, these activities and relationships helped pave the way for a session of our Eastern European counterparts into NATO, and directly contributed to helping them build their own credible special operations forces.

We reaped the return on that investment a decade later, as they fought alongside us in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In Colombia, SOF was a significant component of the decade and a half

investment in Plan Colombia that eventually brought the FARC to the negotiating table. SOF helped build and improve the ability of Colombian forces to combat the FARC, while also improving its professionalism and its human rights approach.

Despite the myth that SOF did nothing but direct action in counterterrorism for 20 years, this is one example of myriad SOF campaign activities that continued around the globe, despite heavy commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Campaign in an era of strategic competition will be more challenging than it was in the post-Cold War era and during the GWOT.

For one, **China** and Russia have been aggressive in spreading influence globally. To some extent, we have been absent from the field. In other instances, our efforts have been reactive and defensive. The recent diplomatic effort in Solomon Islands comes to mind. We have significant ground to regain in the competition for influence.

Another challenge to effective campaign in this era is the trend of decreasing willingness to accept calculated risk. The U.S. fairly routinely shuts embassies, ceases ongoing programs in support of a host nation, and withdraws personnel, to include deployed SOF personnel, in the face of developing crises.

We lose access to the environment, situational awareness and understanding, the ability to impact events, and undermine the relationship and influence with our partners. During GWOT, SOF actions outside of declared combat theaters generally had to each be approved individually, often at the highest levels of our Government.

This CONOP process applied to both kinetic and non-kinetic operations. Indeed, the comment that it is easier to get permission to drop a bomb than gain approval for an information operation was heard as frequently in combat theaters as elsewhere. It is a bureaucratic process that can't scale to the volume of a global campaign against multiple aggressive adversaries, and where many in the approval process can say no and few can say yes.

It is a process that focuses on all the risks that can be imagined in regard to proposed operations, but rarely assesses the risk of taking no action. It is a process that will stymie initiative, fail to match the pace and volume of our adversaries' activities, and result in an arthritic campaign that neither deters

our adversaries nor sets the necessary conditions to prevail in competition or conflict.

Finally, to be effective, any campaign approach must be nested within a coherent national strategy. While the recent unclassified National Security and defense strategies are useful aspirational statements of purpose and intent, one hopes that there is a classified NSC 68 like document to drive unified action across U.S.

Government and Departments.

I would offer a cautionary quote from Sun Tzu, strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory.

Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat. Some of our current SOF organizations were created to meet the requirements of the last period of strategic competition, the Cold War with the Soviet Union.

In some ways, this is a return to our roots.

Regardless, all our nation's SOF have a history of successful adaptation to meeting changing demands. SOCOM and its components are well on their way in this journey.

I am confident they will meet the challenge.

In my view, SOF is a critical capability for strategic competition, but it is not sufficient. It must be incorporated in an ecosystem that promotes action to advance our strategic games. Senator, thank you for your time and attention. I look forward to your questions.

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: Thank you. Can you just continue along that line of thinking? What ways would you change the ecosystem?

GENERAL TOVO: Senator, there are a variety of tactical actions that, in my understanding, the force is already starting to develop and propose that would be more aggressive in pushing back on **Chinese** and Russian influence.

The challenge is twofold. One, it is very hard to get those actions through a system, as I described, that is, you know, one campaign or one at a time in its approval process. But the other challenge, and this is part of the challenge of

the approval process, is that lacking a strategic vision – it is hard for decision makers at any level to view these CONOPS and say, yes, this supports the national strategy.

This is an effective tactical action or series of tactical actions that are appropriate to achieving these strategic objectives within a framework that has been approved. And some of this will have to mean pushing authorities and approval processes down lower in the chain of command.

Certainly, information operations is one of those where clearly we need to push things a little further down the chain, all within a pre-approved national level set of themes and campaigns.

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: I want to talk to you both about irregular warfare. As I mentioned in my opening statement, our adversaries are becoming more aggressive in challenging U.S. interests through the use of asymmetric means that often fall below the threshold of conventional conflict, commonly referred to as irregular warfare gray zone operations.

In your view, what role does Special Operations Forces encountering these challenges – do you believe that Special Operations Forces have the appropriate authorities and capabilities to operate effectively in this domain of warfare? Dr. Schroden.

DR. SCHRODEN: It is a great question. I think irregular warfare has to some extent come back in vogue after having fallen out of, you know, fashion as a term for a period of time.

And I think it is good that we are having this conversation again and that Congress has taken actions to, you know, compel the Department of Defense to stand up things like the irregular warfare center to draw more, you know, sustained attention and focus on this.

I would agree with General Tovo, though, that the incorporation of that more fulsomely into things like the national defense strategy still isn't there, right. The 2018 NDS didn't talk about irregular warfare.

There was an annex that was written separately that was largely ignored by most of the people, except those who wrote it. There is not such a – you know, there is no annex like that for the 2022 NDS, nor do I look at the NDS and see

irregular warfare, part and parcel of what it advances.

So, I think that is still a missing aspect of this.

To your point about specific capabilities, I think SOF are well placed to do a lot with respect to irregular warfare in a competition setting based on extant authorities, like 127 Echo, 1202, etcetera, 333. Where I see the biggest gaps residing are in the information operations space.

You know, if you look at DOD's IO capabilities, their organization, their doctrine, their use of terminology, it is about as big a mess as you could imagine. None of the services use the same terms. When they say information warfare or information operations, they are all talking about different things.

They are developing different capabilities in those areas. There is no synchronicity across the Department when it comes to the use of information or how – or even how to think about the use of information. So, I would highlight that.

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: Okay. Lieutenant General.

GENERAL TOVO: Yes. Just to add, Senator, first of all, my – I would offer there is a challenge with definitions. Everybody has got a different view of what irregular warfare means. In plain English, I would offer that conventional warfare is very enemy force focused, whereas the suite of capabilities and activities we call irregular warfare are more often focused on the human terrain.

The – a population or a nation or a partner or an ally force that we are working to help develop, or a resistance force that we are working with to overthrow an occupying power. So that essence, I would say, it is important to understand that SOF is purpose built for those environments.

That is what we designed. Particularly our regionally aligned SOF, your Green Berets, Civil Affairs, PSYOPS.

They were purpose built for this irregular warfare or unconventional warfare environment and are adapted very well for that.

And over the last decade, the component particularly, but also SOCOM has endeavored to build capabilities within those forces that update to operate in

today's irregular warfare environment, as well as field capability gaps that we have really had for a long time.

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: Well, let me just give you – so Section 1202, which you mentioned, Dr. Schroden, in the 2018 NDAA authorizes the provision of support to regular forces – irregular forces and individuals supporting or facilitating irregular warfare operations by U.S. Special Operations Forces.

So just what is your assessment of that authority? Is that sufficient to be able to create more investment in this space? And what is your response to critics that, or to critiques to the authority that would draw us into conflict with strategic competitors? You can start, General.

GENERAL TOVO: [Technical problems] – sorry. I think the authorities have – are pretty well drawn. I think our challenge is often moving from authorities to permission, to actually taking the authority and being able to conduct an activity under it, on the ground. You know, there are some quirks, right.

The – we had some programs that were, according to open source, being executed in the Ukraine under some of these authorities that had to cease when war started. I don't think that was ever the intent of Congress, but that is what the Office of General Counsel has inferred from it.

And as a result, we stopped programs for a partner in the Ukraine at the very moment they needed it the most.

[Technical problems.]

SENATOR ERNST: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair. And General Tovo, I want to say thank you as well. I do remember the last time you were in front of our committee and certainly appreciate your candor. And this discussion today comes from a valuable background of time on the ground.

So, thank you. So, gentlemen, we have to balance the future force development with day-to-day employment across our joint force. And so, General Tovo, I will start with you, and then we will go to Dr. Schroden.

Is the SOF enterprise presently striking the right balance with their requirements to fulfill missions across the spectrum of competition and conflict?

GENERAL TOVO: Senator, I think right now they are.

As currently built in the force structure they have available, I think they have got adequate forces to balance both this need for crisis response, counterterrorism, as well as competition force.

Certainly, if some of the service plans to reduce SOF in one case up to 10 to 20 percent of the current authorized strength will impact that capability, particularly if it reduces some of those enabling capabilities, such as intelligence personnel.

That will be very difficult. And I think just the last thing I would say is that it is important to recognize that these are not three stovepipes that are mutually exclusive. In many ways, our efforts on the ground to help a partner in a counterterrorism problem they have is actually part of how we get access and placement in a country that then allows us to compete and gain influence at the expense of our adversaries.

So often counterterrorism may be the vehicle we ride, so to speak, in order to have a means to compete with our adversaries.

SENATOR ERNST: Very good. Thanks, General. Dr.

Schroden.

DR. SCHRODEN: Yes, ma'am. So, I agree with what General Tovo said. I would add a few things to that. So, when we did the force structure assessment that was mandated in the 2020 NDAA, which I had the honor of leading.

One of the things we did was to look very closely at what is the demand signal for SOF coming from the geographic combatant commands, as well as from the services, and how does that compare to the extent force structure that they have today? We ran a bunch of different, you know, calculations, scenarios, etcetera.

One of the common themes in terms of, you know, force structure requirements that emerged from those is in almost every scenario we looked at, there was a higher demand for PSYOP forces, for Civil Affairs forces, for undersea warfare and maritime capabilities than what the force has today.

So, I think there is, you know, there is a lot of capacity for counterterrorism that

still exists, that hasn't been fully repurposed yet, in my view. And I think there is still room for a rebalancing of some entities that were dedicated to counterterrorism for a long time that could be repurposed towards other areas.

But there is, I think, room for additional development and expansion of capabilities of the types that I mentioned that, again, our calculations seem to indicate an increasing demand for those, and yet the supply has remained roughly static for a very long time.

SENATOR ERNST: So, let's continue with that. I think that is really important, Dr. Schroden. Then, how can the DOD rebalance that demand signal from the global combatant commanders then when it varies theater to theater? What would you recommend – if you were sitting down at the Pentagon, what would you say? How do we balance that?

DR. SCHRODEN: I think that is the million-dollar question, Senator. You know, when we are talking about campaigning, as you well know, there is no single entity that you could point to in the Department of Defense and say that entity is in charge or is fully in the lead for a global competition campaign against the likes of **China**, for example.

Notionally, **INDOPACOM** is supposed to be the global integrator or global synchronizer for that type of thing.

But I think it is pretty clear to anyone who looks at **INDOPACOM's** capabilities and where its focus areas are that that mission exceeds its ability to conduct, right. That mandate is just not something that **INDOPACOM** can reasonably fulfill.

And so there is a lot of debates that then emerge about, well should the Joint Staff play that role? Joint Staff isn't really an operational entity. It is an advisory entity for the most part. So, it may not be appropriate for the Joint Staff to play that role. If not the Joint Staff, then who? And there is – right, there is a bunch of different options.

At CNA, we are currently in the midst of the independent assessment of the unified command plan that Congress mandated last year. So that will lay out some options to look at this, but that is not complete yet. I wish I had a firmer answer to give you, but I think there is not one to be had at this point in time.

SENATOR ERNST: I do, too. And I think that is really important. General Tovo and I visited about this a little bit in my office yesterday as well. And just the fact that there is no single entity, no single entity, and we have to have the right path forward and we don't have that right, right now.

A cohesive strategy in any one of these silos, I guess, or the three different buckets that we have with SOF currently. So, we will delve into that a little bit more.

My time has expired. We will come back to that in a moment. But Senator Rosen, please.

SENATOR ROSEN: Well, thank you, Senator Ernst. I really appreciate you, and of course, Senator Gillibrand holding this hearing. Thank you for the two of you for service to our country and for being here today.

And I really want to build a little bit on what some of the things Senator Ernst is talking about. We are in an era of great power competition, right. And Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine and **China's** increasing assertiveness in the **Indo-Pacific**, they both confirm the National Defense Strategy's classification of Russia and **China** as strategic competitors who threaten the rules based international order.

So, General Tovo, given that these theaters pose far greater challenges for the U.S. to operate than where our counterterrorism operations of the past 20 years have taken place, how are the Special Operations Forces evolving to confront this great power competition, and how does this impact SOF's ability to operate effectively in denied areas for extended periods of time?

GENERAL TOVO: Yes. Thank you, Senator. I would offer that the SOF community has actually been evolving for about a decade now.

Within USASOC, back in about 2013, my predecessor as the Commander of USASOC retook – took the opportunity afforded by some force cuts driven by sequestration to reorganize what we call a line battalion, a traditional battalion of the Special Forces of eight teams into a more sensitive activities and irregular warfare focused capability.

And that was just one of a series of actions that has continued for the last decade. Changes in, for example, in how we train and organize our psychological

operations forces to bring them a little bit more into the digital age, if you will.

And that continues to today. For example, within – for Special Forces Command, a component of the – of USASOC, they have stood up an integrating headquarters to try and do what Dr. Schroden identified as a gap, which is just global view of these campaigns with Russia and **China**.

And so, they are focused obviously on the SOF that they control and deploy, Civil Affairs, PSYOP, and Green Berets. But they have created this headquarters to try and first sense and see what the environment and what our adversaries are doing, particularly in the information domain, as well as synchronize our operations through the TSOC, and then leveraging close connections with CYBERCOM and SPACECOM to understand potential tools that could be used to push back on our adversaries.

So, I would say the evolution has been ongoing for quite some time. You specifically talk about the ability to do it in non-permissive environments, which is going to be a huge challenge, frankly.

The, you know, ubiquitous technical surveillance environment that is being created around the world in many places, so called smart cities, will make it increasingly challenging for, particularly in urban areas, for SOF to operate in those places or anybody else to operate, intelligence agencies.

Which I think is really going to drive us much more towards what is a core our SOF capability, the Army SOF capability, which is working through partners and others who do have natural access and placement to these environments in order to fulfill our objectives.

However, we will never lose the ability, I think, to for, in the right place, right time, right circumstances to penetrate into permissive – or non-permissive environments with our high-end capabilities, both Air Force, Army helicopters, and other means, to put folks on the ground.

SENATOR ROSEN: Thank you. And I want to turn now to you, Dr. Schroden, because we have to work in countries all around the world, multi-domain environments and missions, and the U.S. simply can't abandon.

We may recognize Russia and **China** are the leading threats, but we can't abandon the Middle East, for example, and our ongoing terrorism –

counterterrorism operations there. And so, do you think that SOCOM has the capacity to manage both of these missions at once?

And are there tradeoffs? What are these tradeoffs that could be involved from balancing these two very distinct missions and maintaining the security and stability that we need?

DR. SCHRODEN: It is an excellent question, ma'am. I think the, a key development over the last couple of years that has helped SOCOM in that regard has been a sort of downgrading of our national objectives with respect to various terrorist groups.

So, the Department of Defense has made quite clear that we are not – we are no longer trying to defeat most of these terrorist groups around the world, right. We have downgraded our objectives to monitor, disrupt, and degrade, you know, those groups that are specifically able or have capabilities or intend to target the U.S. homeland.

That sort of reduction of ambitions, if you will, has then translated into a reduction in requirements for counterterrorism, which has then freed up some degree of SOF capacity to focus on other challenges.

So, there is some amount of ability to repurpose now, and SOCOM is in the midst of trying to do that.

SENATOR ROSEN: Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR ERNST: Thank you, Senator Rosen. Senator Budd.

SENATOR BUDD: Thank you, Ranking Member Ernst. Good morning, gentlemen. Again, thank you both for being here.

General Tovo, thank you for your many years of service at Fort Bragg. And thanks for staying a North Carolinian as well.

So, I want to follow up on Ranking Member Ernst's remarks regarding planned force structure cuts, specifically the administration's plans to cut 10 percent of U.S. Army Special Operations Forces.

General Tovo, given your experience as a former commander, how do you assess such cuts would impact use of SOF's ability to provide combatant commanders

with options for great power competition, counterterrorism, and crisis response? And then if we did lose that capacity, how long would it take to rebuild it?

GENERAL TOVO: Thank you, Senator. Appreciate the question. Yes, I mean, in a word, I think that it will be crippling, right. 10 percent of the force is going to be a significant – and there have been – the higher end is even 20 percent.

So, and a lot of the cuts, I believe – once again, I know I am not living in the process anymore, but are focused not just on SOF, but on SOF enabling capabilities.

So, we are a force that is very much driven by our intelligence community. And if the cuts are taken there, and that is one of the places that the service, I believe, wants to take the cuts, that will be devastating.

Without the intelligence capability, our operational capability is hobbled at best. It is also likely that many of the cuts will affect proportionately the regionally forces much more, the Green Berets, PSYOP, and CA areas where we really can't afford. They are the prime forces for competition.

They are the persistent present forces out in the crisis parts of the world who are working with partners and have the ability to do all the things that are last two NDSs have said we want to be able to do to leverage partners and allies. And if we take cuts in those, we will certainly have less capability.

As to how long it will take to rebuild them, hard to say, but it will be measured in years.

SENATOR BUDD: Years, wow. Thank you. Dr. Schroden, I would like talk about information, both as an instrument of national power, as well as information operations as, of course, SOF activity. Successful information operations can have significant deterrent value. How do you assess U.S. strength in the information domain?

DR. SCHRODEN: I don't think we are very strong in the information environment right now, and I don't think we are likely to get stronger any time soon, if only because, in my view, we are not putting the right degree of emphasis on that. I think you could start with the National Security strategy.

If you pull up that document, you will see clearly, you know, sections that are

clearly dedicated and labeled as dedicated to diplomacy, military, and economic levers of U.S. military might. A glaring absence in that document is any discussion of information as a tool of U.S. national power.

So even at the most senior strategic levels, we have effectively ignored information as an instrument of U.S.

national power. And it just flows downward from there.

The further down you go, the messier it gets, because there is no strategic direction about how we intend to use information as a nation.

SENATOR BUDD: You know, in Fiscal Year 2020, the NDAA, in addition to creating a new principal information operations advisory, calls for – called for a holistic strategy and posture review of information operations within the DOD.

Now, it is my understanding that your organization, the Center for Naval Analysis, completed that study and submitted it to the Department. Is that correct?

DR. SCHRODEN: That is correct, sir.

SENATOR BUDD: I don't think we have seen it here in committee, yet despite being more than a year late. Do you know the current status of the report?

DR. SCHRODEN: As I understand it, it is with the senior most officials in the Defense Department for their review, and they will transmit it whenever their review is complete. But I don't have any more detail on when that might happen, sir.

SENATOR BUDD: Okay, thank you. In the brief time that I have remaining, sticking with you, Dr. Schroden, you recently wrote a piece for the Modern War Institute on SOF competition campaigning.

Now, from an oversight perspective, some have argued that campaigning against nation state competitors carries significant more risks than campaigning against terrorist networks. On the flip side, properly planned irregular warfare campaigns could increase deterrence and provide additional tools for de-escalation.

How should we think about this as we craft authorities and conduct oversight of

the SOF and great power competition?

DR. SCHRODEN: That is a great question. Certainly, irregular warfare against the likes of **China** and Russia carry much higher degrees of escalatory risk than counterterrorism operations. And we have seen this in the war games that we have conducted for SOF and for other entities as well.

That as a military, we are still in some ways relearning how to think about escalation dynamics in these types of operations, especially irregular warfare ones.

So, I wouldn't be able to look you straight in the face and say we have a good understanding right now of what those escalation ladders look like and how to effectively manage them.

I think we are learning that as we work through these analyzes and war games now. And that is something, I think, that the Congress will want to keep a close eye on going forward. Is how are – how is the Department assessing risk of escalation?

How is it mapping out what escalation ladders look like under various scenarios? And how do irregular warfare and activities and authorities play into those types of escalatory ladders and scenarios? That we have that that fulsome understanding, or that we develop it.

SENATOR BUDD: Thank you both for your time.

SENATOR ERNST: Okay. Thank you, Senator Budd.

Senator Schmitt.

SENATOR SCHMITT: Thank you, Madam Chair. I wanted to ask a couple of questions. I made clear in a bunch of committees so far this year that the threat that **China** poses is as paramount, I think, to our – and not only our – the National Security of our friends and allies, but of the United States.

And I know that Senator Rosen, I think, asked a question or two about the, you know, the different terrain and training in places like Afghanistan to sort of island hopping in Southeast Asia, or in the **Indo-Pacific**.

And I am pleased to see the growing relationship between the Philippines and

the United States. Could – I guess I will direct this to you, Lieutenant General, on the Philippines. Could you just discuss what those recent agreements mean, how they can help our special forces?

And do you think that activity there can help discourage or dissuade **China** from moving on some of their grander designs?

GENERAL TOVO: Senator, thanks for the question. I think– and thanks for turning the attention to the Philippines, because it is a classic example of how we can campaign over the long term with SOF to great effect, not only at a tactical level, but a strategic level.

So, the engagement in the Philippines began under the GWOT in 2002. It was largely to help the Philippine military combat terrorist problems they had in some of their Southern islands.

And that relationship, the bond that has been built, carried the U.S. and Filipino relationship through some hard times under the past President, who was somewhat leaning towards **China**, to a position now where we have got a new administration in the Philippines who is, you know, kind of turning back to the U.S., if you will.

But what a lot of that rides, I would offer, on the fact that we demonstrated we were a committed ally when they needed it. We had presence on the ground, we built relationships, etcetera. And so, it highlights the long- term investment of some of these SOF campaigns in an irregular warfare environment.

To the specific question on the PI and its importance, I think the, you know, the **INDOPACOM** Commander is on record and open sourced basically saying that without basing in the Philippines, it is almost impossible to orchestrate a campaign in defense of Taiwan, if called to.

So, you can't underestimate the value of those bases.

And I think, you also can't underestimate the strategic value that it sends to the rest of the region, that the U.S. is still committed to its partners and allies throughout the **Indo-Pacific** region.

SENATOR SCHMITT: Yes. Thank you. And Dr. Schroden, I do want to ask a couple of questions on Taiwan. Can you briefly touch on foreign, or military

sales to Taiwan? I think they have a, you know, a laundry list of things that they have ordered that they have not gotten, and I think this is critical.

I mean, obviously, the deterrence here is making sure that they have what they need. Could you just speak to sort of what they are asking for, what they have got, what they don't have?

DR. SCHRODEN: So, I will say, thanks for the question. It exceeds my subject matter expertise at a grand level.

I can say, though, from a Special Operations specific perspective, right, a lot of what the Taiwanese, at least my understanding, are asking for is more training, more engagement with Special Operations Forces on the ground in Taiwan to help them prepare to become more resilient, to develop, you know, capabilities that would be useful in the contingency of a **Chinese** move on Taiwan.

So those types of capabilities are at least what I have seen, it appears that they are asking for from our Special Operations Force.

SENATOR SCHMITT: Are there certain types of actions that the United States could be taking to further strengthen Taiwan's asymmetrical capabilities? I mean, clearly, **China** has a much larger population, but that isn't always how these things go down. Is there anything that we can be doing to help strengthen their asymmetrical capabilities?

DR. SCHRODEN: I think there is. And there is a lot of lessons to be drawn on the, what was called the resistance operating concept, that SOCEUR has been employing in the Baltics and other parts of Eastern Europe, right.

The idea, the colloquial idea is to turn those countries into, you know, they call them hedgehogs or porcupines, to the Russian bear. And so, now there is a lot of discussion about, is there a way that we could turn Taiwan into a porcupine looking island to the **Chinese**?

And a lot of the types of things I just described in terms of, you know, SOF interacting with specific parts of the Taiwanese military, specific parts of the Taiwanese population to help build that resilience, to help prepare for resistance in the eventuality of a **Chinese** occupation of the island, those are things that SOF could be doing now, if they had the authorities to do them.

And obviously those are things that also have a long shelf life in terms of building those capabilities. So, the longer it takes to get such approvals in place, the less likely those capabilities are to be useful in the, you know, in the eventuality of a **Chinese** invasion.

SENATOR SCHMITT: Thank you.

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: I want to talk a little bit more about information operations. And Senator Ernst, if you have a second round, you can take it too. Several of the combatant commanders have expressed a need for the intelligence community to be more responsive in downgrading and declassifying intelligence to share with foreign partners and for messaging purposes.

With respect to Ukraine, the administration has been successful in deliberately releasing information derived from intelligence in an effort to expose Russian true plans and intentions. What are the lessons learned from Ukraine for our broader information operations activities? Do you believe the tactics used in Ukraine could have – could be used to expose **China's** coercive behavior and aggressive actions towards others?

In your view, what is the appropriate role of the Department, and specifically Special Operations Forces in the broader information operations and strategic communications efforts of the U.S. Government?

And do you believe that SOCOM's military information support capabilities can be more effectively utilized? And I think you both said yes on that earlier. If so, are there any modifications to doctrine, policy, or authorities that you believe can make the military information support capabilities more effective?

DR. SCHRODEN: Sure. It is a great question and there is a lot to unpack there. I will try and keep my answer brief. I think, you know, I would start by saying more capacity would be useful. Again, coming back to the force structure assessment that I mentioned earlier. Almost all of the scenarios that we looked at, there was a demand for more PSYOP forces.

So, you know, having two PSYOP groups, in my opinion, professional opinion, is not enough capacity for that mission. So, I think additional capacity there would be helpful.

With the additional capacity, I think you could do some other things as well,

such as modern – further modernization of those PSYOP forces to, as General Tovo mentioned earlier, to make them more attuned to the digital age, to give them tools and capabilities that are more aligned with the way, you know, people consume information around the world today.

So those are things that I would start with, and there is obviously a lot more that you could build on, if you were able to get to that point.

GENERAL TOVO: Senator, thank you. Specifically in response to your question about, are there lessons from the Ukraine? Yes. I think it is important to note that the SOF presence, Civil Affairs, PSYOP, and SF, really started persistently in 2014.

And so, from that point until 2022 invasion, there was a constant presence on the ground. And so specifically in the information space, we had PSYOP teams that were helping our Ukrainian counterparts work on countering Russian propaganda efforts, trying to send – build messages of national resistance and resilience, and in general to strengthen the will of the populace to resist Russian invasion.

And so, in the end, I think, the Ukrainians own the large measure of the success, but I would like to think that all our efforts, particularly in the information domain, helped in some ways, as well as on the Special Forces side.

The work that was done through SOCEUR, as Dr. Schroden mentioned, to help them develop and legalize a national concept of resistance on which they could then build capability on that framework.

So, I think there are a lot of lessons from the Ukraine. I think Taiwan will have some of its own challenges that make it a little bit different case.

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: [Technical problems] – throughout SOF, women service members representation has increased approximately 40 percent over the past five years." However, late last year, the GAO identified a number of barriers to women serving in Special Operations and made a number of recommendations for revisions to policy gathering of data and process improvements to address the challenges.

Dr. Schroden, can you describe the value of women that they bring to the Special Operations unit, and what more needs to be done to increase

participation?

DR. SCHRODEN: Well, it is a great question. I mean, I think we – so let me start with the value. I think there is a lot of value that women bring to SOF. And one doesn't – the people who argue most vehemently against that, to people like me on Twitter, for example, I find to be the ones who are also the most ignorant of SOF history, right.

If you go back to the origins of Special Operations in this country, the OSS, right, the original sort of incarnations of special operations like forces, you will see many stories of women involved in very, very interesting and, you know, fascinating in operationally effective ways. Getting back to that in an era of competition, I think makes a lot of sense, both on historical grounds but also relative to current requirements.

So, I think there is a lot of value to having women in SOF. In terms of barriers to entry, you know, in early on, a lot of it had to do with, you know, making equitable facilities. And there is still some challenges with that, as the GAO pointed out.

So, there is still some work to be done there. A lot of it had to do with making sure the requirements were operationally focused and not sort of arbitrarily derived based on, well, this is the way we have always done it.

A lot of work was done on that immediately after these occupational specialties were open to women. So, I think we are at a point now where, you know, the vast majority, if not all, of the standards, have been, you know, operationally validated and sort of made gender neutral.

What I am seeing now is, in order to get more women into especially the parts of SOF that require assessment and selection, you need trailblazers, right.

You need people to actually make it through those programs so that other women can look at that and say, somebody made it through, that means I could make it through, too. And that is just, I think, a natural part of, you know, a new population breaking into any career field or population, etcetera.

We are starting to see that now, right. More women have broken through the – you know, we have women Rangers.

Rangers who have led, you know, other Rangers in combat.

We have women Green Berets now.

There are women trying to become Marine Raiders, as well as, you know, special tactics operators in AFSOC. So, as we get more women into the force, I think it will have sort of a gravitating effect of showing that it can be done and hopefully inspiring other women to try as well.

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: Lieutenant General, anything you want to add?

GENERAL TOVO: Yes, I would just – a couple quick points. First, I agree on the aspect of history, right.

We have had women involved in our special operations since our roots of the modern force with the OSS.

As Commander at USASOC, I was actually the, you know, had the – lived through the process by which we had to recommend through the SecDef to open up combat specialties of the Rangers and the Green Berets.

And we did put a tremendous amount of effort into studying the issue, looking at what other nations and services had done, to ensure that we built the best possible framework for women to join and succeed. I think across the SOF force right now, women are at a pretty high density, and as you quoted, they are higher than they have ever been.

We are still in fairly low numbers, though, in the combat specialties of rangers, you know, infantry rangers.

They are in other aspects, but also within the Green Berets. But certainly, we have had many years now of women in some of our sensitive activities roles, and they have performed remarkably.

And then lastly, I would just highlight that USASOC about a year ago did a study on some of these barriers to entry, but also challenges once women are in the force, and have a pretty significant ongoing effort to overcome everything from, you know, facilities, but also just equipment challenges, etcetera.

So, I think the command is focused on any remaining issues and are working through them.

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: Thank you.

SENATOR ERNST: Thank you very much. And I will start by just reflecting upon the conversation directed by Senator Budd when it came to cuts across the force in SOF.

And I was going to focus a little on that, something that we discussed yesterday, General Tovo, but I feel strongly about SOCOM and their numbers because at some point, and just to give everyone that is here listening a little background.

Any time that there is a cut or additional requirements placed upon SOCOM, our SOCOM Command team will, you know, salute smartly and move out, and say, we can do it, we can do it, yes, sir, yes, ma'am – we are going to do it.

We keep cutting in that area. We see force structure challenges coming up in the near future. And I am very concerned about this, because while SOCOM will always take on that mission and move out, at some point those cuts become untenable and we can't continue to do it.

You know, SOF truth, you know this very well, General Tovo, that you cannot mass produce SOF in a crisis. And we can't get to a point where we are faced with a crisis, and we do not have the operators that are able to step forward.

So, we really do have to push back against that. I am glad that Senator Budd went down that line of questioning.

Gentleman, as I said in my opening statement, SOF is purpose built.

We were just talking about some of those, you know, those – from the Ranger community. Remember William Darby, you know, and Darby's Rangers in World War II. They were put together for various specific purpose in World War II. And they are purpose built to lead competition in the force within the Department of Defense.

Yet I am very, very concerned that a number of our senior leaders in the Department have yet to formulate clear strategies and the role that SOF will play, that associated guidance to drive the actions of SOF and the broader joint force.

So first, Dr. Schroden, I would like to start with you. In your view, how should we be thinking about the strategic objectives of competition when it comes to

China?

And what role should SOF play in supporting these efforts?

DR. SCHRODEN: You know, again, another million-dollar question, Senator. I think a lot of it starts with what is the theory of success of competition. And I have yet to see anyone in the Department firmly articulate –

SENATOR ERNST: Bingo.

DR. SCHRODEN: – what that is. If you were asking me, in my professional judgment, you know, what would I advance as a particular theory of success for that, I might advance that what we are competing for is the relative alignment of non-allied states around the world.

And if we would take that, for example, as a theory of success for competition and then ask, well, what role can SOF play in helping to generate relative alignment of countries with the United States relative to **China** or Russia, for example, there is a lot that SOF could do, right.

In terms of training, engagement, mil-to-mil, you know, sort of tactical level diplomacy, support to, you know, diplomatic and informational lines of effort that would not be led by SOF but would be led by, for example, the State Department, but that SOF have capacity to support.

You know, there are also things SOF could do in terms of gathering intelligence that could be used to illuminate the behaviors of **China** and Russia in some of these countries.

That, to Senator Gillibrand's earlier question, that could be used in a potential, you know, release this information to try and make clear what **China** is doing in some of these countries that might be antithetical to those countries' own interests.

So that, you know, that is one way of thinking about competition. But again, I have not seen anything like that firmly codified in the Department itself.

SENATOR ERNST: And neither have we, Dr. Schroden.

General Tovo, thoughts?

GENERAL TOVO: Yes, I think Dr. Schroden hit the nail on the head. I mean, we would call it a defeat mechanism or, as he said, the theory of success.

You know, for the Cold War, we had a containment strategy with the idea that if we contained communism, and in some cases it moved into a rollback strategy to kind of press back on the boundaries, but the idea – there was a theory that we agreed on for a 50-year effort that focused all our activities underneath it. So, I think we have got to start there, and then he did a great job highlighting where we can help.

Certainly, the engagement with partners. Illuminating the activities of our adversaries, the nefarious activities can't be overstated. And that then turns into fodder for the information campaign, if you will.

And then I think we can support the interagency in a more progressive and offensive, if you will, narrative development that highlights the strengths of the Western way and the American way of life and the rules-based order.

I mean, we have – we are a force – my view, we are a force for good in the world and have been since the rules-based order we enacted post-World War II. And we all, every aspect of the USG that has its component of this information campaign globally, ought to be on message, pushing that narrative as a counter to what the **Chinese** and the Russians offer, which when you actually put them side by side, aren't that appealing to anybody in the world.

SENATOR ERNST: Thank you. Thank you, gentlemen.

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: Just to follow up on that question. Do you have any alignment with defense intelligence? Like, do you do defense intelligence operations ever?

GENERAL TOVO: Given that this is an open hearing –

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: We will do it – in closed setting –

GENERAL TOVO: I will just say, Senator, that in my experience as a TSOC Commander, and then subsequently in other jobs, yes, we work very closely to ensure that we were presenting a – or creating a coherent and synchronized effort, not only with defense intelligence, but with all the intelligence community.

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: The entire intelligence community. Well, that makes a lot of sense to me. Senator Ernst, do you want to close the hearing, or do you want to ask more questions? I think I probably have a couple more if you – yes, or are you done? Okay, I have one more round. In the wake of several – this is about culture and accountability.

In the wake of several high-profile ethical lapses, SOCOM completed a comprehensive review of SOF culture and ethics in 2020, which identified 16 corrective actions to be taken by SOCOM in the areas of force employment, accountability, leader development, force structure, and selection and assessment, most of which has been completed.

Alleged widespread use of performance enhancing drugs by SEALs and ongoing investigation into illegal drug use by soldiers assigned to special – to Army Special Operations have raised a few questions about whether more actions are necessary.

Do you have any additional reforms that you would suggest that you believe are necessary to address perceived cultural issues within Special Operations communities? For both of you. Dr. Schroden – General, go ahead.

GENERAL TOVO: Thank you, Senator, for that. I would note that in my professional life, I am actually involved in the effort to implement the comprehensive review and so on, and have been for about three years, I guess, now.

So, I am fairly conversant, and I would say that, in short, I would say the command is very focused on the idea, and I have heard this from the commander himself, that the journey of focusing on professionalism and accountability across the force is an indefinite journey. It is not a – the comprehensive review, as you noted, listed some actions to take.

They are mostly completed, but the journey is not over. And that his focus, and I think there in fact, he is holding essentially a leadership town hall at the end of the month, that is directly focused on professionalism and accountability across the force, and really instilling this culture that, as a SOF community, we can do better.

It is still going to be composed of humans. You are never going to eliminate acts

of ill-discipline, but certainly the command is focused on driving them down to the bare minimum.

[Technical problems.]

GENERAL TOVO: I would view – I view the comprehensive review as a hypothesis. That the force was over-employed. Leaders were disengaged in some cases because they were operationally employed away from their forces, and that that led to acts of ill-discipline. I will tell you that there has been a pretty good effort on data to try and prove or disprove the hypothesis, and that correlation has not been proven.

I think it is a much more complex environment than just over employment, under engaged leaders. And that is what part of the effort is still ongoing to do, is to provide an ability to supplement senior leader, and commander, and senior NCO their own collective judgment and intuition about what is going on in the force, with some data – you know, some data approaches that allow them to understand what is truly going on in the force.

Do we really have a crisis at any given time and in certain portions of it as far as ill-discipline, etcetera, and so that they can act in a much more responsive manner, when in fact they are –

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: Do you have a force survey to give you data on what the force thought the issues were?

GENERAL TOVO: I am sorry, Senator –

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: Did you have a force survey, meaning let people fill out questionnaires?

GENERAL TOVO: Actually, the effort has tried to take advantage of the ongoing surveying tools, the DIAC survey that happens every year. Big effort to look particularly at the written comments to understand what folks are actually taking the time to put down on paper, and then characterize trends that they have provided to the command for their information.

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: My last question is about civilian oversight. As I mentioned in my opening statement, recent National Defense Authorization Acts have included important reforms designed to enhance the ability of the

Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Ops and Low Intensity Conflict to act as service secretary-like civilian responsible for oversight and advocacy of Special Operations Forces.

To both of you, what is the value to the Special Operations enterprise in having a properly empowered service secretary-like civilian in the Pentagon, or not?

DR. SCHRODEN: I think there is enormous value in that, in part for the reasons that we just discussed in terms of, you know, negative incidents in the force and providing appropriate accountability and oversight.

And part of that stems from having a strong civilian, you know, hand on the SOF enterprise in terms of oversight.

I think ASD SO/LIC does – you know, it does its literal best to try and do that, but it is, I think, hobbled in its ability to do that, both by structural issues, and – I mean, you know, the Assistant Secretary of defense relative to a four star is not much in the way of horsepower inside the Pentagon, so there is that sort of structural imbalance, which I think is exacerbated by, you know, the actual secretariat.

The service secretary is run by DASD, which is even less horsepower relative to a four-star command. And then there is just a mismatch in manpower. I mean, the service secretariat in ASD SO/LIC is some tens of people trying to provide civilian oversight of an enterprise of 70,000.

It doesn't take much math to see that they are an overworked and overwhelmed staff, and they could – I think in Secretary Maier's testimony some weeks ago, he said another 20, 25, 30 people would be useful, and having more senior leaders so that they could show up at all the right meetings with the right level of seniority would also be helpful, and I concur with those recommendations.

GENERAL TOVO: I think I agree with everything the doctor said. The only thing I would add is, in addition to being short on manpower, the ASD SO/LIC also has several other tasks that one might – have been given to it, that also diffuse its efforts to focus on oversight.

But also, and the other piece is that SOCOM needs a strong advocate inside the building when it is battling things like force cuts. And because of its relative under empowerment compared to the service secretaries, it can't really fulfill

that role of advocacy for the force in some of these resourcing fights that I think it could if it was more powerful.

SENATOR ERNST: Thank you. And just to go a little bit further with the civilian oversight, you alluded to it a little bit earlier, but General Tovo, it was actually in your opening statement that the current process that governs how we use SOF to conduct operations around the world is overly bureaucratic.

I think we can all agree in this room. It is risk averse and undermines our ability to effectively compete with our adversaries. Now, you went on to state that it is a process that will, "stymie initiative, fail to match the pace and volume of our adversaries' activities, and result in an arthritic campaign that neither deters our adversaries, nor sets the necessary conditions to prevail in competition or conflict." Our special operators are – they are really the most innovative force within the DOD. They can take what they are given, come up with solutions. They provide enormous value in competing with **China** and our other adversaries.

But instead of empowering them to think creatively and make those decisions, the bureaucracy has literally forced them to fight with one hand tied behind their back.

One of my trips to Afghanistan during GWOT, I spent some time with the 75th Ranger Regiment there and sitting in their ops-cell, and literally half of the discussion was focused on their JAG and what ops they could continue in and what they couldn't, according to the JAG's estimate.

And it goes back to the point where you have so many of those that can say no, and very few that can say yes, on moving out. So, General Tovo, will you talk more about how this bureaucracy undermines SOF's ability to effectively operate? And if you can tie that more broadly to how it ties us up when we are dealing with **China**.

GENERAL TOVO: Yes, Senator, thanks for that. Yes, it comes down to the fact that one of the strengths of our military writ large, and really across our Government, are our people, right.

The ingenuity, complex, problem-solving skills, and particularly in SOF, we pride ourselves on specially assessing and selecting individuals who are

problem solvers. But if you don't give them the authority to act, all they become is frustrated. And in many ways, that is where we have been in a lot of ways, both, I would say the last portion of the GWOT, but also now in competition.

They are being told, you need to help compete against **China**. They are coming up with ideas, they are pushing forward CONOPS, but it is just translating that to action has been very difficult.

And it – once again, I am a believer that part of this challenge is without an overarching strategy that defines what we are trying to accomplish as a nation to achieve success, as Dr. Schrodin talked about, it is hard for decision makers at every level in between to understand, is this the kind of activity that supports the strategy, or is this kind of activity that will be counter to the strategy?

And so, God bless our SOF operators. We will come up with a lot of good things. And there may be some things in there that might be counterproductive from a strategic perspective. So, you have got to have the framework as a start, and then that – and then empower those below to take it on.

You know, and it is – nowhere is this more apparent, frankly, than in the information sphere. You would think that information, yes, words matter, but there is this fear that somehow if we put the wrong message out, we are going to break the internet. I think the internet is fairly resilient. I think, you know, it can survive a bad – what is that?

[Laughter.]

GENERAL TOVO: It is already broken.

[Laughter.]

GENERAL TOVO: But we need to be more aggressive, and part of being more aggressive in every environment, information included, is that we have got to power down decision making. You know, provide our information experts with the themes and messages that are acceptable at the national level, and allow them to figure out how to apply it.

And they will do it effectively, particularly in those places where we do it in conjunction with partners who really understand their micro-information and human environment, so that our professionals help partners craft the right

things that will resonate inside their populations to support our objective.

SENATOR ERNST: Thank you. I appreciate it. A lot of takeaways today, Madam Chair. I think very important discussion. Of course, the strategy of success. We have to understand what is that ultimate objective, and then how does SOF progress to get to that level of success or that objective? I think we need that clearly defined within the Department of Defense.

I think force structure is another big takeaway from our conversation, that we as leaders are very concerned about the impending force restructure of SOF and the fact that we may lose so many valuable operators throughout the forces. And information operations, another good takeaway there.

But I want to go back, just as I close, to the very first question, I think that you had General Tovo, where you talked about relationships and building relationships around the globe. And as we look at our force structure, if we are pulling these forces out of places like the Philippines and elsewhere, we lose those relationships.

And if we really do want to compete against our adversaries in global power competition, we have to have these operators, these forces out there working with those populations, developing those relationships and trust, in order to push back against Russia, push back against **China**.

I think it is incredibly important. And those that are tasked to do it are Special Operations Forces. So, gentlemen, thanks for being here today. Madam Chair, thank you very much for convening this subcommittee.

SENATOR GILLIBRAND: Thank you. Thank you, gentlemen.

Committee adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 10:50 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]