

**SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE HEARING ON POSTURE OF USCENTCOM  
AND USAFRICOM IN REVIEW OF THE DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION REQUEST  
FOR FY24 AND THE FUTURE YEARS DEFENSE PROGRAM**

**MARCH 16, 2023**

**I. INTRODUCTION:**

**A LANDSCAPE OF INCREASING COMPLEXITY**

In 1983, US Central Command was formed to serve as a hedge against the expansionist goals of Iran – then in the nascent days of its new anti-American regime – and to serve American interests in the Middle East, Levant, and Central Asia amidst strategic competition with the Soviet Union. On November 14th 1982, Caspar Weinberger, the 15th Secretary of Defense, who oversaw the creation of CENTCOM, said: “the central region is among the most important regions in the world as far as we’re concerned and as far as the free world is concerned.” The Senate Armed Services Committee’s January 17, 1982 legislation authorizing this new command explained that “US Central Command, alongside local and regional forces, will be America’s security guarantor in the world’s central region.”

Forty years later, while much of geopolitics and policy has transformed, the security landscape of this part of the world remains largely unchanged. In many important ways, the region’s most vexing problems have grown more complex.

Now, as then, the world’s geographically central region remains critical to American security interests, global trade, global energy, and global security. Today, more than a third of global container traffic transits the Suez Canal and more than a quarter of global oil transits the Strait of Hormuz. The region is home to almost 50% of the world’s known oil reserves and more than 40% of the world’s national gas. This part of the world produces 37 percent of the world’s oil, 18 percent of its gas, and houses four of the world’s top five OPEC oil producers: Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

The central region remains among the most important regions in the world. A disruption in the maritime choke points flowing through the Middle East or the spread of instability throughout the region could threaten vital national interests and hold the global economy at risk.

Four decades after revolutionary students overran the American embassy, Iran possesses the largest and most diverse missile arsenal in the Middle East, with thousands of ballistic and cruise missiles, some capable of striking the entire Middle East and Levant. The Iranian regime now holds the largest and most capable Unmanned Aerial Vehicle force in the region. The advancement of Iranian military capabilities over the past 40 years is unparalleled in the region; in fact, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps of today is unrecognizable from just five years ago. Even more concerning, Iran has advanced its nuclear program such that Tehran can now produce sufficient fissile material for a nuclear weapon in less than 14 days. In addition, the regime invests heavily in information operations, including broadcasting, coordinated inauthentic activity, and cyber-attacks.

Alongside the state threat posed by Iran, violent extremist groups continue to threaten the security and stability of the region. For example, ISIS, long past its 2014 pinnacle of capability, remains able to conduct operations within the region with a desire to strike beyond the Middle East. Though degraded, the group’s vile ideology remains unconstrained.

In Afghanistan, the reduction in collection, analytical resources, and Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance assets means our campaign against Al Qaeda and ISIS Khorasan is challenged; while we can see the broad contours of attack planning, we lack the granularity to see the complete

threat picture. ISIS-Khorasan has increased attacks in the region and desires to export those attacks beyond Afghanistan to include the US homeland and our interests abroad.

The group also seeks to expand its operational presence and influence regionally and beyond. We are addressing this through the development of innovative Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance platforms and increasing additional collection methods to build out a more fulsome threat picture.

While Afghanistan's security situation deteriorates, the United States has a moral obligation to safely extract the tens of thousands of Special Immigrant Visa holders, many of whom aided US troops as interpreters, translators, and advisors during our longest war.

Meanwhile, strategic competition in the central region has grown more urgent over the past 40 years. Only now, the Soviet Union is replaced with Russia and the People's Republic of China, both of whom seek to undermine American interests in the region. Russia looks to aggressively expand its foothold of influence in the region amidst its war in Ukraine. Moscow leverages its military presence by propping up Syria to garner influence in the Middle East. The People's Republic of China aggressively expands its diplomatic, informational, economic, and military outreach in this part of the world.

These challenges and complexities, combined with the opportunities offered by our partnerships in the region, form the basis of CENTCOM's three strategic priorities.

## **II. CENTCOM STRATEGIC PRIORITIES: DETER, COUNTER, COMPETE**

### **Strategic Priority 1: Deter Iran**

Deterring Iran is arguably more urgent than at any time in CENTCOM's history due to Iran's cutting-edge missile and UAV capability as well as its uranium enrichment program. As it was at the time of CENTCOM's formation, Iran is the most destabilizing actor in the region. Today, Iran is undeterred from its malign activities, which include conventional threats to neighbors, support to violent proxy groups that spread chaos and instability throughout the region, and support to Russia's war in Ukraine.

The evolution of the Iranian threat – the primary threat against which this command was born – is a story that runs the full timeline of CENTCOM history. Early in the Iran-Iraq war, the regime realized its armed forces could never fully recover from the crippling losses suffered during that ruinous conflict. Instead, to develop an asymmetric advantage against regional militaries, the regime invested in precision missiles with extended reach. It now commands an imposing measure of missile capability it uses to coerce, intimidate, and bully its neighbors.

Tehran has also manufactured increasingly sophisticated Unmanned Aerial Vehicles. The regime now commands an arsenal of drone systems, ranging from small, short-range systems to modern intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems to long-range One-Way Attack platforms. They are building larger drones that can fly further with increasingly deadly payloads. Until the United States helped secure the Yemen truce, Iran was regularly using Yemen as a testing ground for these weapons, threatening both U.S. partners and tens of thousands of Americans in the Gulf.

Meanwhile, Tehran continues to furnish weapons, support, and direction to proxies across the region who engage in acts of terror and undermine local governments, all advancing Iranian interests. The proxy forces are more emboldened and dangerous through the increased proliferation of these Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, which allow them to target US and partner interests with increased speed, range, accuracy, and explosive capacity.

This story grows more foreboding. Today, Iran continues to enrich and stockpile uranium far above what is needed for commercial use. Increasingly more centrifuges are the advanced IRN-6 models, capable of enriching uranium far faster and more efficiently than Iran's first-generation centrifuges.

The regime is now stockpiling highly enriched uranium under the guise of commercial use. The International Atomic Energy Agency report released on February 28th on Iran's enrichment program reveals that Iran's stockpile of uranium enriched up to 60% has grown substantially in less than three months and that Iran now has sufficient nuclear material for manufacture of several nuclear explosive devices. The region is increasingly worried about a nuclear-armed Iran.

Iran also puts itself increasingly further outside of international norms; Tehran continues to ignore United Nations Security Council resolutions, violate sanctions and embargos, proliferate weapons to its network of proxies and affiliates, and attack shipping vessels in international waters. The regime continues the brutal beatdown of the rights of its citizenry, crushing dissent, protest, and human rights. Iranian-aligned groups routinely strike at American troops and our partners in Iraq and Syria.

Recently, Iran's advanced weapons are seen on the battlefield of Ukraine alongside their Russian partners. Iran often aligns information operations with or in support of Russia. An internationally isolated Iran has clearly thrown in its lot with an also isolated Russia.

### Strategic Priority 2: Counter Violent Extremist Organizations

While Iran poses the most ominous threat to the central region, Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) operating in the Middle East, Levant, and Central Asian States also represent a danger to security and stability. The Central Command Area of Responsibility serves as the epicenter of violent extremism, with 19 of 21 top tier terrorist groups operating across the region. ISIS and Al Qaeda are the principal Sunni violent extremist organizations in the Middle East and Levant. Both groups maintain numerous affiliates pursuing local, regional, and global objectives.

ISIS continues to organize attacks throughout the Middle East and must not be allowed to operate uncontested. Alongside our Syrian Democratic Forces partners, we continue to put pressure on ISIS in Syria. In Iraq, we continue to advise, assist, and enable the development of the Iraqi security forces in their fight against ISIS. We see ISIS in Iraq and Syria in three groups:

#### 1. ISIS At Large.

This is the current generation of ISIS leaders and fighters we face in Iraq and Syria today. While we have significantly degraded this group's capability, it retains the ability to inspire, direct, organize, and lead attacks in the region and abroad. This group offers the most straightforward solution: partner with Syrian Democratic Forces and advise, enable, and assist Iraqi Security Forces until ISIS At Large is defeated. The two other groups represent far more complex problems.

#### 2. ISIS In Detention.

These are the roughly 10,000 ISIS fighters in detention facilities throughout Syria, and approximately 20,000 in detention facilities in Iraq. We rely on the Syrian Democratic Forces and our Iraqi partners to secure these sites, keeping this population off the battlefield. The Government of Iraq has sufficient infrastructure to keep these fighters in detention. The only long-term solution in Syria, however, is transfer of these detainees to the custody of their countries of origin.

Last week, during my sixth visit to Syria since taking command 11 months ago, I again visited the Hasakah detention facility, which houses more than 5,000 detained ISIS fighters predominately from the terror group's tactical defeat at the March 2019 battle in Baghuz. I observed the structural damage incurred during the January 2022 ISIS attack on the facility in which more than 1,000 ISIS fighters escaped. The vast majority were later recaptured by SDF forces. During that ten-day battle involving SDF and US forces, more than 400 ISIS fighters and 121 SDF Soldiers were killed.

This population of detainees represents a looming threat to Syria, the region, and beyond. Syrian Democratic Forces leaders securing the site as well as camp administration officials described the detainee population as unrepentant and subject to further radicalization. One Syrian Democratic Forces official referred to the more than 5,000 detainees as a "ticking time bomb." Unlike the first group, there is no military solution to this ISIS detainee population. We must support the Syrian

Democratic Forces who continue to secure these sites while working with the countries of origin of these ISIS detainees to repatriate and rehabilitate or find a judicial solution.

### 3. The Potential Next Generation of ISIS.

This, the most concerning group, includes the more than 30,000 children in the al-Hol camp for internally displaced persons and the more than 1,000 children in the al Roj camp who are in danger of ISIS indoctrination on a daily basis.

Last week, while in the al Roj camp, I spoke with dozens of residents from at least 16 countries, including: Russia, Egypt, Türkiye, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Morocco, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Yemen, Tunisia, Iraq, Syria, Canada, and the 9 United States. These residents told me that the vile ISIS ideology remains a threat throughout the camp. To a person, they all expressed a desire to return to their country of origin.

During four trips to the al Hol camp in 11 months, I've seen first-hand that these children are prime targets for ISIS radicalization. The al-Hol camp is a flashpoint of human suffering, with more than 51,000 residents, more than 90 percent of them women and children, living in tents. These children have little meaningful education, no access to the outside world, limited hot water, and few constructive outlets to develop their potential. They are at risk of becoming casualties to an ideological war within the camps: ISIS leaders want their minds.

As with the second category of ISIS, there is no military solution for this group. Our long-term goal must be the successful repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of the camp residents back into their country of origin.

While progress against ISIS in Iraq and Syria continues apace, the underlying conditions that led to the group's 2013 and 2014 expansion remain. The ruinous effects of Assad's rule and civil war in Syria lingers, employment and educational opportunities remain scarce for many young men, and millions live in appalling conditions. ISIS' vile ideology remains uncontained and unconstrained, and a seething hatred remains open to exploitation.

Our continued, limited presence in Iraq and Syria allows us to assist the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Iraqi Security Forces in maintaining pressure on ISIS to prevent the group's resurgence to 2014 levels. The minimal U.S. troop strength in those countries allows us the ability to advise, assist, and enable partner forces with the goal of the enduring defeat of ISIS and the prevention of external attack plots against the U.S and nations throughout the region. Our support is essential to ensuring regional stability as well as protecting the homeland.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban's hold on security is maintained through ideology, continued humanitarian aid, and persistent abuse of human rights to dissuade unrest. Extremist groups see opportunity and ISIS-Khorasan grows emboldened amidst the chaos, seeking to expand its ranks and inspire, enable, or direct attacks in the region and beyond. ISIS-Khorasan is building a capability in Afghanistan from which to strike Western interests worldwide, with the ultimate goal of a strike on the American homeland.

Al Qaeda remnants remain in Afghanistan. While the July 2022 death of Ayman al-Zawahiri set the group back, Al Qaeda desires to rebuild. Though this will take time, Al Qaeda remains a long-term threat to American interests and citizens as well as the homeland.

### Strategic Priority 3: Compete Strategically

In addition to its primary role as a redoubt against the spread of Iranian-directed instability across the region, this command was established in 1983 to maintain a military advantage over the Soviet Union amidst Great Power Competition. This was, after all, in the moments after the surprising 1979 Christmas Eve Soviet invasion of Afghanistan – the first major combat operation involving Soviet troops outside of Warsaw Pact territory since the close of World War II. Today, CENTCOM's role in Great Power Competition, clearly defined in the 2022 National Defense Strategy, is more urgent and complex.

### Strategic Competition with PRC

China's goal to serve as the world's leading superpower by 2049 puts this region squarely in its crosshairs. The US Central Command area of responsibility shares a 2,200-mile border with the People's Republic of China – larger than the U.S. border with Mexico. China looks across that border and sees only opportunity for advantage in influence. Beijing's willingness to take on higher-risk projects threatens American preferential ties and unfettered access. On its current trajectory, the increased technological and military presence serves as a growing strategic challenge to US partnerships, access, force presence, and security in the region.

The People's Republic of China aggressively expands its diplomatic and economic outreach across the region. Last week's PRC-brokered reestablishment of relations between Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia underscores the emergence of China's diplomatic role in the region. China, dependent on the region for half of its crude oil, is also moving beyond energy-based investments to encompass physical and telecommunications infrastructure. Beijing also encourages greater military cooperation in the Middle East and Central Asia, aiming to challenge our standing in the region. More than half of all the oil and more than a third of all the natural gas imported by China is supplied by countries within the CENTCOM area of responsibility.

Expanding regional arms sales by Beijing provides economic opportunities, expands influence and increases People's Republic of China interoperability in the region. China seeks to undermine American economic, commercial, and security interest in this part of the world to become the region's leading power. And Beijing has reason for optimism here. China is often viewed by regional partners as more accommodating than the U.S., offering lower costs, favorable financing, faster delivery times and no end-use monitoring agreements. During my trips to the region and calls with regional Chiefs of Defense, I routinely hear how much faster and easier China's foreign military sales program is than ours. While the American foreign military sales process involves multiple steps going through multiple layers of government bureaucracy, the PRC can move much faster, often making us non-competitive by comparison. Although this multi-layered process is a reflection of our form of government and U.S. law, it often has a deleterious effect on our ability to compete for the sorts of long-term relationships that the sales of major defense systems create.

The Belt and Road Initiative remains a strategic lever to supplant U.S. leadership in the region under the guise of benign economic initiatives and broadening security relationships. Of the 21 countries comprising the CENTCOM area of responsibility, have Belt and Road Initiative agreements with China. Regional powers see the Belt and Road Initiative as an opportunity to modernize their cities and societies to advance regional economic and social reform programs including Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Oman's Vision 2040, Qatar's Vision 2030, Kuwait's Vision 2035, and Egypt's Vision 2030.

Three Belt and Road Initiative land corridors and one of the three maritime corridors transits the CENTCOM area of responsibility. As the US reduced force posture in the region, Chinese investment and influence grew steadily.

Consider the following:

- The eight-year period from 2013 to 2021 represented the largest investment period in the CENTCOM region in PRC history with \$408.7 billion in commercial investments;
- From 2015 to 2021, just as it was accelerating commercial investment, the PRC devoted \$2.6 trillion in trade with CENTCOM countries;
- In 2021, in Israel's largest shipping hub, the PRC opened a new, \$1.7 billion modern technological port which is significantly larger than Israel's three international ports and supports large shipping vessels capable of carrying more than 18,000 containers;
- The PRC is building and operating a container terminal in Abu Dhabi; • The 10-year, \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, begun in 2015, is the BRI flagship;

- Saudi Arabia is China's largest supplier of crude oil and with December 2022's comprehensive strategic agreement, PRC reliance on Saudi crude is set to increase;
- Huawei has 5G contracts with 19 of the 21 countries in the CENTCOM region; and
- The PRC targets Iraq for influence and resources – Beijing invested \$10.1 billion in BRI projects in Iraq in 2021 alone.

China's economic interests, transactional approaches and perceived lack of Chinese bias in internal and regional affairs, will continue to provide inroads in the region.

#### Strategic Competition with Russia

Today, 32 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia's objectives are to weaken Western security structures in the Middle East and Central Asia and continue to challenge U.S. security interests and critical relationships in the region.

The U.S. Central Command region holds a 4,750-mile border with Russia - more than six times the length of NATO's border with Russia – through the Central Asian States. Since Catherine the Great in 1762, Russia has sought this region as part of its empire. The Kremlin has viewed the Central Asian States as its territory since the 1922 Treaty on the Creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The emphasis on ownership over Central Asia took on a fever pitch after World War II, when Stalin used the region for resource extraction and strategic depth. Putin seeks to take advantage of this proximity and history by establishing a foothold of influence leveraging long-established relations and a perceived decline in U.S. engagement to challenge our influence in that critical part of the world. Russia retains extensive interests in Central Asia, spanning energy, military sales, counterterrorism, counter-drug efforts, and others.

Today, Putin's interests in the Middle East range from energy transit to security relationships to military sales. His overall strategy in the region remains largely unaffected by the war in Ukraine. Despite the recent damage to its reputation and influence, Russia continues apace on several fronts to preserve its influence and access in the Middle East. This includes sustaining military support in Syria that is indispensable to Assad and influential with Syria's neighbors. Russia has more than 2,500 Russian troops in Syria, which Putin views as a base from which to project power and influence throughout the region and into Europe and Africa. Russian maritime forces maintain a permanent presence in Syria's coastal city of Tartus. In 2019, the two countries signed a 49-year lease for rights to Tartus' Mediterranean deep-water port. And, just as CENTCOM was formed to serve as the "security guarantor" of the world's central region, Russia views itself as the security guarantor of the Central Asian States. However, as a result of the invasion of Ukraine, the Central Asian States increasingly view Russia as a threat to their sovereignty.

### **III. CENTCOM'S STRATEGIC APPROACH: PEOPLE, PARTNERS, INNOVATION**

As it enters its fifth decade, CENTCOM requires a new Strategic Approach to guide all operations, activities, investments, and initiatives against these complex and confounding challenges. That Strategic Approach is defined by three words: People, Partners, and Innovation.

#### People

Throughout CENTCOM's lifespan, its People have served the region, our Nation, and this command. Since our 1983 inception, our People have fought for and provided assistance to the citizens of the world's central region. Over the course of four decades, they have displayed the grit, discipline, compassion, and empathy that the United States expects out of its military force.

Today, our People – our servicemembers, civilian workforce, contractors, and supportive Families – serve as the bedrock of everything we do and how we succeed. They underpin all aspects of our strategic approach and drive us along our strategic priorities. Our People at CENTCOM are our

greatest asset and our most critical resource. We hire, invest in, retain, and care for our People and their families.

### Partners

Partners are our nation's comparative advantage against competitors like the People's Republic of China and Russia and serve as a barrier against the ramifications of Iran's most destructive behavior. No nation can face the complexity described above alone. We therefore cultivate deep abiding relations with forces in the region that can serve as a hedge against threats in the region while deterring Iran from its worst, most destabilizing activity. We are in a race to integrate our partners before China and Russia can deeply penetrate the region.

For China and Russia, partnerships are transactional relationships. For CENTCOM, our partnerships are based in our values and our commitment to the region. China views regional countries as possible customers and clients, while we seek partners and allies. Our values and our commitment make us the partner of choice in the region. We must always hold true to our commitments to partner forces and nations as our actions speak for us to the region.

CENTCOM was formed to serve in support of and alongside Partners – the “local and regional forces” referenced by the legislation directing the formation of US Central Command. Today that focus is more urgent than ever in our 40-year history.

For a period of almost 20 years, CENTCOM served as the priority resourcing requirement for the US Department of Defense. This was an anomaly in America's national security history: the only period in which the Nation was committed to two simultaneous wars since World War II. With the conclusion of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have significantly reduced our force posture in the Middle East. Without the large volume of planes, ships, and troops we had in the region just five years ago, we must integrate our partners into all security constructs to foster regional security and stability.

Referring back to the Senate Armed Services Committee legislation guiding CENTCOM in 1983 – this command was established to serve as a “security guarantor of American interests in the world's central region.” Today, we uphold that responsibility by serving as a security integrator: integrating our Partners into a framework of operations, activities, investments, and initiatives that will ensure sufficient regional security to protect our vital national interests.

The kind of deep, abiding partnerships CENTCOM seeks is exemplified by the Coalition Maritime Forces, a multinational maritime partnership led by US Naval Forces Central. The Combined Maritime Forces, the world's largest international maritime partnership, exists to uphold the rules-based international order. Through this mutually supportive partnership, the 38 CMF participant countries counter illicit non-state actors on the high seas and promote security, stability, and prosperity across international waters.

The realignment of Israel from European Command to Central Command 18 months ago has immediately and profoundly altered the nature and texture of many of CENTCOM's partnerships for the good. Back in 1983, the boundaries of the CENTCOM Area of Responsibility excluded Israel; Secretary Weinberger and National Security Advisor William Clark were concerned that CENTCOM leaders would be challenged to build enduring, trust based relations with Arab military leaders while also partnering with the Israel Defense Force. While that concern may have been well-founded then, CENTCOM today readily partners with Arab militaries and the Israel Defense Force alike. In fact, the inclusion of Israel presents many collaborative and constructive security opportunities. Our partners of four decades largely see the same threats and have common cause with Israel Defense Forces and the Arab militaries in defending against Iran's most destabilizing activities.

### Innovation

Through Innovation we multiply the capability of our People and strengthen our partnerships to deter Iran, counter VEOs, and compete with China and Russia for influence across the region. Innovation will strengthen our partnerships, assist our operations, and allow us to increase progress across all

efforts. In so doing, it will allow us to serve as that security integrator on behalf of regional security and stability.

Innovation is not just about technology for us; it is innovation of thought, innovation of concept, innovation of process. We are building a culture of innovation and our partners are with us on this journey. For example, across all domains, through employment of systems on hand and newly acquired systems, we are building an interconnected mesh of sensors that transmit real time data. When viewed together through data integration and Artificial Intelligence platforms, this real-time data builds a clearer picture of the operating environment. Across CENTCOM, our formations use unmanned systems paired with Artificial Intelligence to give us better information faster. This allows us to employ our manned systems more efficiently and strategically and thereby achieve decision dominance. We're able to cultivate information and use Artificial Intelligence to make decisions faster than our adversaries and use our manned systems more efficiently.

The U.S. Central Command theater holds almost no assigned forces, and with the declining emphasis on defeating violent extremist organizations and the National Defense Strategy shift in primary focus to U.S. strategic competitors, our forces decreased 15% over the course of 2022 alone. CENTCOM force posture saw a reduction of 85% from its 2008 peak. With so many looming and existential threats in the region and such a strong possibility of chaos spreading and driving the region to again become a strategic distractor, we must innovate to expand our presence beyond those allocated forces. This is enabled by the creative application of technology and innovation.

CENTCOM's three innovation task forces – Task Forces 59, 99, and 39 – apply these concepts to specific domains. For example, the most advanced – Task Force 59, our maritime innovation task force – operates a fleet of unmanned vessels, both on the surface of the water and under the water. These unmanned vessels carry sensors which are collecting vast amounts of data. That data, pushed through data integration and artificial intelligence platforms, helps build a clearer picture of the operating environment. Through Task Force 59, 99, and 39 CENTCOM is rapidly improving maritime threat detection and maritime domain awareness and building an integrated, unmanned, and artificial intelligence network to achieve safer seas and stronger protection for global trade.

Just this month, Task Force 59 completed a three-week International Maritime Exercise involving 7,000 personnel, 50 partner nations and organizations, 35 ships, 30 unmanned systems, and more than a dozen AI tools. The exercise, which took place in the Arabian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and East African coastal regions, strengthened participants' interoperability and command and control.

More importantly, our international and regional partners are right there with us. Task Force 59 has established hubs in Bahrain and Jordan. Four months ago, Bahrain participated in a naval drill in the Gulf during which seven crewed ships from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Kingdom, and the United States teamed with unmanned systems. By the end of this year, our goal is a Task Force 59 fleet of more than 100 vessels – at least 75 from partner maritime forces – operating together, communicating together, and providing a common operating picture to all participating militaries.

In addition to Task Force 59, which operates at sea in the maritime domain, we have Task Force 99, based in Qatar, operating in the air domain. Through implementation of Commercial Off-The-Shelf Technology and collaboration with industry and academia,

Task Force 99 creates a technology transition ecosystem that allows increased awareness and faster decision-making and places cutting-edge tools in the hands of warfighters and decision makers. The task force's three lines of effort (LOEs) are: increasing awareness of the air domain, accelerating the speed of the targeting cycle, and imposing dilemmas on adversaries. Task Force 99 also focuses on aerial drones complete with tailored payloads and other capabilities operating together to observe, detect, and gather data that feeds into an operations center. This increases our air domain awareness and rapidly accelerates the speed of our decision making. Task Force 99's

fleet of unmanned aircraft will impose dilemmas on our adversaries and detect and defeat threats to our systems and to our partners.

Finally, we have Task Force 39, our newest innovation task force. Task Force 39 tests concepts and technology in the land domain with a heavy focus on testing new technology to defeat adversary drones. In the coming months, this task force will experiment with robotic sustainment vehicles.

Through these innovation Task Forces, CENTCOM seeks to serve as the experimentation center for new drone-defeat systems, ideas, and technology, to include directed energy. At CENTCOM, we consider opportunities for innovation as limitless. They are boundless and cross all realms of possibility.

CENTCOM is also accelerating the employment of Joint All Domain Command and Control solutions to combat operations to achieve vertical integration from the Joint Task Force and Components, all the way to the Joint Staff and National Command Authority. Every day, we drive Joint All Domain Command and Control capability forward to allow our People to make faster, more informed decisions in combat's critical moments.

As a data-centric warfighting headquarters, we've transformed our targeting process from PowerPoint slides to the employment of live data. Our goal is a Single Pane of Glass that builds better situational understanding and allows commanders to achieve decision advantage like never before.

In late January and early February of this year, our headquarters led Scarlet Dragon Oasis, our Joint All Domain Command and Control live fire exercise on the eastern seaboard, the mid-Atlantic Electronic Warfare range, and across the US Central Command region. The operation successfully passed digital targeting data and mission threads between multiple commands across the United States, from Nevada to Utah to Tampa and our operations centers in South Carolina and Bahrain. From computer vision, full-motion video, and synthetic aperture radar algorithms identifying targets, to digital workflow tools improving speed and precision of targeting teams, to optimizing machine-to-machine communication flow, the exercise marked a critical step toward digital warfighting.

Each of these tools, concepts, initiatives, and task forces are singularly focused on providing our People with the best tools, the most comprehensive rapid situational awareness, and the fastest and most accurate decision-making capability. This, in turn, serves a great benefit to our Partners and to the security and stability of the region. Innovation is about linking our People and our Partners with ideas and capabilities that enhance all efforts to deter Iran, counter violent extremist organizations, and compete strategically with Russia and China.

#### People, Partners, and Innovation and the National Defense Strategy

The strategic approach outlined above is heavily nested underneath the 2022 National Defense Strategy. By empowering our People, building out abiding Partnerships, and embracing Innovation, CENTCOM looks to allow the National Defense Strategy to manifest across the Joint Force. A flashpoint with Iran, a crisis in the region, a successful large-scale attack on a partner country, or an attack on the homeland by a VEO all will likely require a response, drawing resources not forecast away from higher priority theaters to the Central Command region. Therefore, a modest investment in People, Partners, and Innovation serves as a hedge against National Defense Strategy derailment.

Furthermore, the Central Command region is literally and figuratively central to competition with Russia and China – a National Defense Strategy priority for all of the Joint Force. Our strategic approach aligns People, Partners, and Innovation against Strategic Competition with the People's Republic of China and Russia, which the National Defense Strategy identifies as the priority across all global regions.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION: A VISION AND A PROMISE**

US Army General Robert Kingston saw the future.

At the pinnacle of a career leading troops in heavy combat – Kingston fought in some of the heaviest fighting of both the Korean and Vietnam wars and was among the most decorated military officers of his generation – he was selected as the first commander of U.S. Central Command. A soft-spoken, battle-hardened warfighter, Kingston knew the central region from his time leading a contingency force focused on Iran during the early moments of the hostage crisis. He understood the unique set of challenges facing the new command and he knew that the answers to all of them relied on an enduring CENTCOM commitment to regional forces.

In assuming responsibility for US Central Command in a ceremony on MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida on January 3rd, 1983, Kingston told the assembled crowd: “CENTCOM will require regional military forces to accomplish its mission for the Nation.”

This posture statement is informed by my 14 trips to the region and the hundreds of calls, video teleconferences, and meetings with partnered Chiefs of Defense and their military component leaders in my 11 months in command. Those engagements crystallized in my mind that 40 years after Robert Kingston spoke those words, one thing is clear: CENTCOM requires regional military forces [i.e. Partners] to accomplish its mission for the Nation. So it will into the future.

The challenges faced by Kingston and his staff and component leaders have only grown more complex. The threats, more capable. The competition for influence with external powers, more urgent.

People, Partners, Innovation is our glidepath to deter Iran, counter VEOs, and compete strategically, allowing us to meet the challenges posed by these threats, complexities, and adversaries and ensure regional security and stability.

We employ this strategic approach along a foundation of regional stability earned by American servicemembers over the course of four decades. In peace, in war, in years and years of sustained combat, in the toughest conditions faced by American servicemembers since the Vietnam War, these men and women bought time and space for American leadership and preserved our vital national interests in this critical region. From the Tanker War to the Gulf War to the Global War on Terrorism and many contingency and humanitarian assistance operations in between – CENTCOM troops have fulfilled the original promise of this command: “US Central Command, alongside local and regional forces, will be America’s security guarantor in the world’s central region.” Today’s CENTCOM servicemembers have transitioned this command to a security integrator.

Those troops are the forebears of the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coastguardsmen, and Guardians who serve in CENTCOM today – the greatest men and women in the country, thousands of them in harm’s way as you read this, advancing American policy and representing the Nation. It is my life’s greatest honor to lead them. Armed with the right strategic approach and the right measure of resources, I know they will succeed.