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2023



THEATER STRATEGY

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8 June 2023

In 1983, U.S. 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 protect American interests in the Middle East, Levant, and Central and South Asia amid strategic competition with the Soviet Union. As a new command, CENTCOM would serve as America's security guarantor in a region critical to the world's security and stability. Forty years later, the security landscape in this part of the world is familiar, but in many important ways, the region's most vexing problems have grown more complex.

This 2023 Theater Strategy describes CENTCOM's strategic approach to address that complexity. This document underscores that the world's geographically central region remains critical to American security interests, global trade, global energy, and global security. Further, a flashpoint security event in this part of the world could threaten vital national interests and place the global economy at risk. As it was at the time of CENTCOM's formation, Iran is the most destabilizing actor in the region. Deterring Iran is arguably more urgent now than at any time in CENTCOM's history due to the regime's cutting-edge missile and Uncrewed Aircraft System capabilities as well as its uranium enrichment program. Violent Extremist Organizations operating in the Middle East, Levant, Central, and South Asia also represent a danger to security and stability. Meanwhile, strategic competition in the Central Region has grown to include two competitors – the People's Republic of China and Russia – both of whom seek to undermine American interests in the region.

These challenges and complexities, combined with the opportunities offered by our partnerships in the region, are the focus of CENTCOM's three strategic priorities: Deter Iran, Counter Violent Extremist Organizations, and Compete Strategically with the People's Republic of China and Russia. This strategy seeks to develop those priorities with a strategic approach centered on People, Partners, and Innovation.

Throughout CENTCOM's lifespan, People have served the region, our Nation, and this command. Today, our People – our servicemembers, civilian workforce, contractors, and supportive Families – serve as the bedrock of everything we do. They are our greatest asset and our most critical resource.

Partners are our Nation's comparative advantage against competitors like the People's Republic of China and Russia. We cultivate deep, abiding relationships with Partners that protect shared values in the region while deterring Iran from its worst, most destabilizing activity. While CENTCOM was formed 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,

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activities, investments, and initiatives that will ensure sufficient regional security to serve mutual vital national interests.

Through Innovation, we multiply the capability of our People and strengthen our partnerships to achieve our strategic priorities. Innovation of thought, process, concept, and technology will assist our operations and allow us to increase progress across all efforts.

This Theater Strategy is a guide to allow us to deter Iran, counter Violent Extremist Organizations, and compete strategically with the People's Republic of China and Russia leveraging our People, Partners, and Innovation. Armed with this strategy, we will campaign to secure our vital national interests in this critical part of the world and preserve the security and stability of the region.



Michael E. Kunilla
General, U.S. Army

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INTRODUCTION

USCENTCOM has an opportunity to strengthen three critical pillars for the future of the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Joint Force: People, Partners, and Innovation. Our success will extend our nation's advantages over strategic competitors—geographically and temporally—for multiple instruments of national power. By transforming from a security guarantor to a security integrator, USCENTCOM will enable integrated deterrence, trans-regional campaigning, and modernization to create effects against multiple threats, across the competition continuum, and in concert with like-minded Allies and Partners.

At the same time, military strategic risk to our homeland, vital national interests, and to our Allies and Partners emanating from the Central Region has the potential to derail the National Defense Strategy (NDS). The challenges to maintain relationships with Partners in the face of eager strategic competitors and to enable sufficient Partner capacity against growing Iranian and Violent Extremist Organization (VEO) threats both present threats to NDS implementation.

This Theater Strategy organizes and focuses our efforts to make the Central Region a theater of opportunity, efficiency, and enduring advantage while managing risk. We will maximize the strengths of our people and our culture of innovation to demonstrate our commitment to our Partners. Partners are the U.S. strategic comparative advantage in the region, and our strategy focuses on retaining this critical advantage in the face of strategic competitors and regional threats.

Layered Assurance is our Theory of Success for prevailing as the security partner of choice in the Central Region. Layered Assurance applies integrated deterrence as described by the NDS and supports strategic discipline as emphasized by the National Military Strategy (NMS) by combining the layers of institutions, innovation, and influence. By enabling Allies and Partners to address the threats they face through Layered Assurance, we will build regional security constructs that sustain deterrence of regional threats and advantage over strategic competitors.

STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT



The geostrategic location of USCENTCOM's Area of Responsibility (AOR) positions it as a foundational source for global energy and a thoroughfare for international commerce. More than 27% of global oil still travels through the Strait of Hormuz, and over 20% of all global commerce depends on the Suez Canal. As a result, the Central Region is the nexus of global competition with China, as it provides a key foothold for People's Republic of China (PRC) influence over global energy, commerce, and politics. China and Russia remain poised to fill security vacuums created by the abandonment narrative that they propagate, and our service members and partnered forces also remain under threat of attack by the Iranian Threat Network while countering Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) abroad. Iran's continued development and proliferation of ballistic missiles and Uncrewed Aircraft Systems (UAS) increase the risk of conflict escalation while offering competitive space for China and Russia to exploit through military sales.

China continues to expand its influence through economic, diplomatic, and military investment. Militarily, China has increased its basing access in the vicinity of key maritime transit routes in the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and Arabian Gulf. Many U.S. Partners are turning to China out of necessity, due to a lengthy U.S. foreign military sales process and constraints imposed by U.S. policy. The PRC threat extends beyond the Indo-Pacific, as the Chinese conduct significant trans-regional gray-zone activity to advance their strategic objectives.

Russia continues its malign activities in the information domain and maintains the capability to frustrate our operations in the electromagnetic spectrum. Russia is also playing a spoiling role with our Partners and regional populations to sow distrust and portray the U.S. as unreliable. While Russian military provocations against the U.S. and Coalition in Syria did not increase immediately after the invasion of Ukraine, they continue to contest our presence in the region, presenting the potential for horizontal escalation and miscalculation.

Iran remains the most significant regional-based threat facing USCENTCOM and our Partners. Tehran's actions drive instability across the AOR and routinely increase the risk of conflict escalation by utilizing proxies to attack U.S. and Partner interests. Iran has the largest military in the Middle East and the continued development of its ballistic missile and UAS inventories are of particular concern. Iran presents a persistent threat in cyberspace based on its demonstrated ability to attack DoD information networks, the U.S. Homeland, Allies and Partners. The Iranian regime has shown willingness to conduct calculated responses (attributable and non-attributable) in retaliation to perceived U.S. and Israeli threatening actions.

The USCENTCOM AOR remains the Sunni VEO epicenter, with a large number of the most dangerous terrorist groups operating in theater—each with vastly different operational priorities and capabilities. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda (AQ) are the primary VEOs in the region, and each group maintains numerous affiliates pursuing various local,

regional, and global objectives. The loss of access and influence with the Afghan government will increasingly challenge our ability to monitor and disrupt ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) and AQ activities. The resultant reductions in consistent counterterrorism pressure likely will enable the groups to pose increased threats to the West and potentially the Homeland.

The AOR also has a history of state and non-state actors use of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). DoD policy is to support U.S. government and international efforts to deny Iran and VEOs WMD. WMD threats that have broad impacts beyond the USCENTCOM AOR include Iran's ballistic missile advancements and progress toward a nuclear weapon, should they choose to pursue one. Pakistan shares a contentious border with India, and there is potential for vertical escalation between these nuclear powers. Syria's use of chemical weapons in 2017 and 2018 are indicative of its retention of some chemical weapon capabilities, which will continue to be a threat to the people of Syria and its neighboring countries.

Many AOR nations face challenges to provide services and security to their constituents, as national leaders struggle with worsening socio-economic conditions and other transboundary challenges such as climate change. Ethnic, sectarian, and tribal rivalries pose further systemic challenges to government legitimacy. State and non-state sponsored drug trafficking organizations emanating from and/or transiting the USCENTCOM AOR continually grow in capability, pose an increasing threat to AOR partner nation governance and stability, and directly threaten U.S. national security. Moreover, areas of weak governance and instability offer transnational criminals an opportunity to operate in the seams between law enforcement and military authorities. Ongoing conflicts in Syria and Yemen and the collapse of legitimate governance in Afghanistan have undermined stability throughout and beyond the region and given rise to humanitarian and refugee crises.



STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Mission

The USCENTCOM mission endures.

USCENTCOM directs and enables military operations and activities with Allies and Partners to increase regional security and stability in support of enduring U.S. interests.

Allies and Partners remain central to all U.S. efforts in the region.

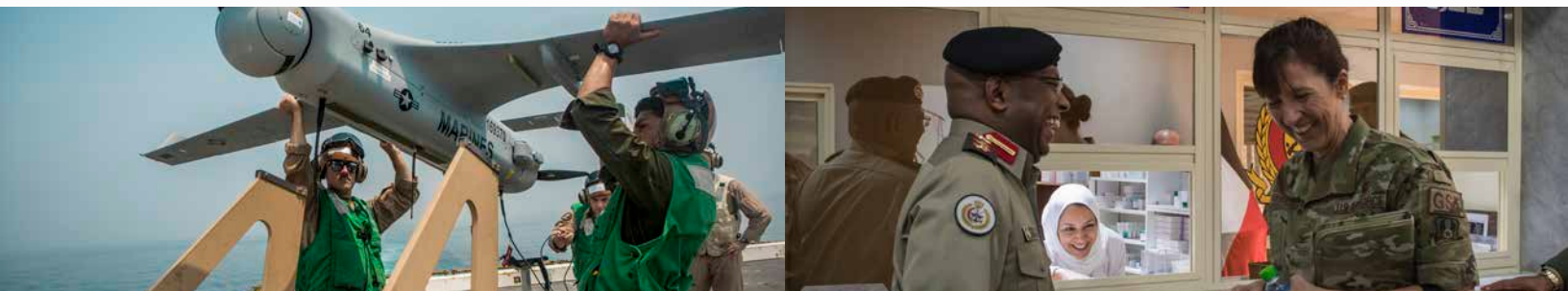
Vision

The USCENTCOM five-year vision focuses on sustaining and building upon the strategic comparative advantage U.S. Allies and Partners present:

The United States prevails as the security partner of choice in the Central Region, sustaining deterrence of regional threats and advantage over strategic competitors with an integrated network of regional security constructs.

USCENTCOM values the sovereign choices of our Allies and Partners. Prevailing as the security partner of choice begins with recognizing that changes in the U.S. national strategy and approach to the region have impacts on our Allies and Partners. These changes manifest in potential abandonment perceptions and strategic hedging, a persistent Iranian threat, potential VEO resurgence, rising competition to the United States from China and Russia, and challenges with transborder instability. Realizing our vision requires commitment to our Allies and Partners amid these threats.

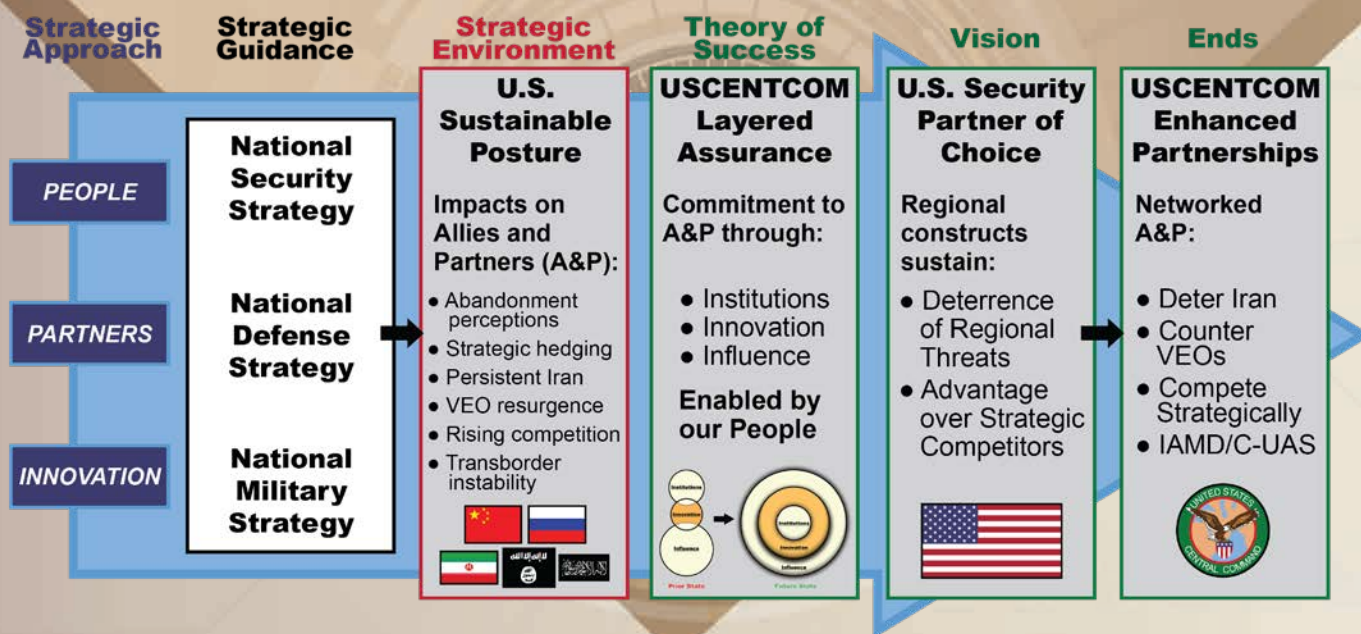
Refining our understanding of the threats Allies and Partners face will lead to an enhanced form of partnerships with broader cooperative space, greater commitment, and more efficient use of resources on both sides. Over time, enhanced partnerships will support resource efficiency, integrated deterrence, and enduring advantage for the Joint Force, Allies, and Partners. We aim to build patterns of security cooperation that will endure through crisis or conflict. When our Allies and Partners repeatedly choose the United States as their security partner of choice, the collective capability and capacity of our network of Allies and Partners will sustain deterrence of regional threats and advantage over strategic competitors.



THEORY OF SUCCESS

Our Theory of Success is that USCENTCOM can maximize our people and our culture of innovation to strengthen partnerships through Layered Assurance. With Layered Assurance, we can implement integrated deterrence and support strategic discipline in an efficient campaign.

Assurance is using the military instrument of national power to demonstrate commitment and support to Allies and Partners. From the perspective of our Allies and Partners, institutions provide an opportunity to cooperate, innovation demonstrates the value of U.S.-supported institutions, and influence shapes the environment in support of our Allies and Partners. By applying each layer simultaneously, USCENTCOM will demonstrate the commitment and support necessary to retain the trust of our Partners by enabling them to address the threats they face.



Layered Assurance implements integrated deterrence and supports strategic discipline by combining institutions, innovation, and influence to allow the United States to prevail as the security partner of choice in the Central Region.



ENDS

As we build the collective capability and capacity of our Allies and Partners, we are transforming to accomplish the ends of our Theater Strategy with a collective group of networked Allies and Partners enabled by support from USCENTCOM sufficient and sustainable posture. Sufficient and sustainable posture is essential to stabilizing developing regional constructs and preserving strategic freedom of action.

Regional Constructs

Regional security constructs integrated across the USCENTCOM AOR innovate, expand interoperable capabilities, and share critical intelligence and information.

Deter Iran

Networked U.S. Allies and Partners limit the freedom of action of Iran and its proxies, supporting broader efforts to deny Iran a nuclear weapon, deterring large-scale attack or destabilizing activity against U.S. vital national interests, Allies, or Partners and maintaining options to respond decisively should deterrence fail.

Counter VEOs

Networked U.S. Allies and Partners are capable of detecting, degrading, and disrupting top-tier VEO External Operations (EXOPs), denying the acquisition, development, or employment of WMD or Chemical, Biological, Radioactive, Nuclear (CBRN) weapons, and supporting broader efforts to repatriate and reintegrate former extremists and their family members.

Compete Strategically

Networked U.S. Allies and Partners create relative advantages over China and Russia in maritime Freedom of Navigation, energy security, and deterrence to support broader efforts during competition, and enable opportunities for domain control during crisis or conflict.

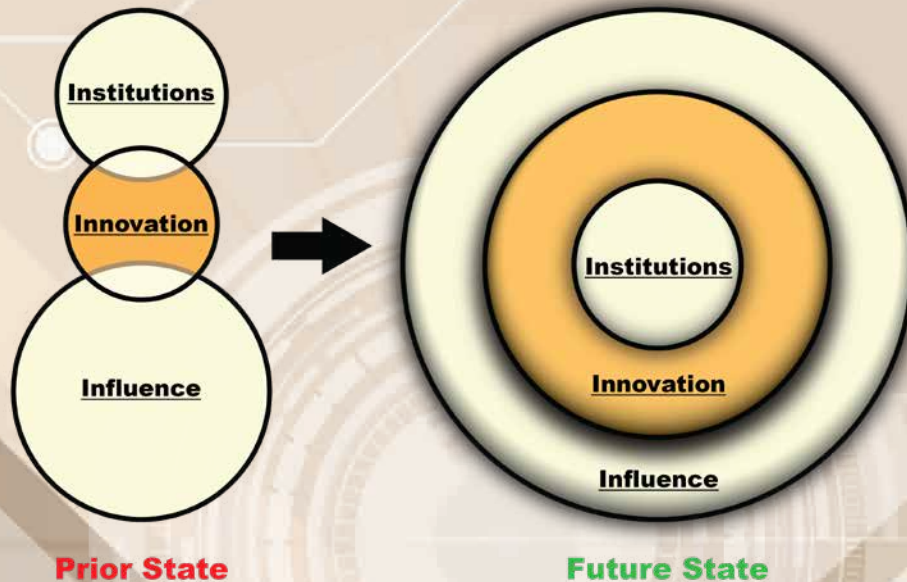
Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD)/Counter-Uncrewed Aircraft Systems (C-UAS)

Networked U.S. Allies and Partners develop capabilities that deter air and missile attacks, neutralize the proliferation and technological improvement of UAS, and enable self-defense and Partner control of the air domain during crisis or conflict.



DEVELOPING LAYERED ASSURANCE

Layered Assurance organizes and focuses efforts in theater through deliberate layering of institutions, innovation, and influence. Within each layer are an interaction of ways and means. In the past, USCENTCOM efforts have focused most heavily on influence—particularly through conventional posture and operations—with institutions and innovation trailing in terms of their relative weight of effort. There has also been relatively little overlap between institutions, innovation, and influence efforts. To reach our future vision, institutions will be at the core with increasing innovation and new ways and means for influence to complement sufficient and sustainable posture. It will take the talent and synchronization of all of our people to layer these efforts to effectively demonstrate commitment to our Allies and Partners.



Institutions are the core of Layered Assurance. Institutions are norms, processes, and structures for cooperation and interoperability.

Innovation is the middle layer of Layered Assurance, connecting institutions and influence by demonstrating the benefits of cooperating with U.S.-supported institutions and enabling more potent influence. Innovation also supports Partner and Joint Force modernization by allowing testing of emerging concepts and technologies.

Influence is the outer layer of Layered Assurance, and it shapes the environment in support of Allies and Partners. USCENTCOM applies operations in the information environment, irregular warfare, nontraditional cooperation, and posture to influence the environment.



Institutions

Interagency Collaboration

Interagency collaboration ensures we are supporting diplomacy first. It is only with interagency collaboration that the United States can address the underlying causes of shared security challenges like climate change, cyber norms, food and water insecurity, health, humanitarian need, and violent extremism. Interagency collaboration also enables resource efficiency and access in some areas where traditional defense efforts might be resisted. Particularly important for collaboration will be collective efforts to reform the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system, enhance Title 10 U.S. Code Section 333 authorities, invest in International Military Education and Training (IMET), and advance security partnerships toward security agreements.

Networked Constructs and Exercises

Networked constructs allow Allies and Partners to tailor their participation in institutions by domain, function, and sub-region, according to the threats most relevant to them. Tailored multilateral frameworks and the complex network of regional constructs they create directly deter threats and create dilemmas for competitors seeking to counter U.S. regional influence. Constructs and exercises are inter-related as constructs help identify gaps and exercises work to address them. Multilateral exercises offer a high payoff, bilateral exercises develop norms and interoperability that can feed multi-lateral capability and capacity, and the State Partnership Program's enduring engagements enhance both multi-lateral and bi-lateral exercises.

Regional Integration

Integrating Allies and Partners geographically across the Central Region will create significant advantages for the network of U.S. Allies and Partners. Building on the momentum of integrating Israel with its neighbors in accordance with the Abraham Accords will enhance net capabilities in the western portion of the Central Region. Integrating Central and South Asia states into regional constructs will expand U.S. influence in the eastern portion of the Central Region. Maintaining integration transregionally will also contribute to addressing transborder challenges that can impact multiple countries in the AOR or stretch beyond the Central Region.

Centers of Excellence

Centers of Excellence are a link between institutions and innovation as physical locations for experimentation, particularly for IAMD and to C-UAS. These centers allow collaborative work with Partners and support testing new Joint Force capabilities and interoperability.



Innovation

Integrated Planning

USCENTCOM is bringing Allies and Partners into our planning efforts early and working to reduce barriers to cooperation. We will sustain transregional planning efforts with other combatant commands and cooperate with Allies and Partners to develop coalitions and plans for contingencies.

Data and Digitization

USCENTCOM will be a leader in the digital transformation of the Joint Force and will support digital integration of Partners to enhance collective information sharing and data analytics. Data and digitization include the USCENTCOM data strategy and improving digital common operating pictures with Partners. In addition, aggregating and organizing this data and analysis through functional, campaign, and net assessments will enable continuous adjustment of our campaign and partnership investments.

Robotics and Artificial Intelligence

USCENTCOM is developing a culture of innovation with Allies and Partners, and we have a central role in enabling the Joint Force to expand advanced capabilities and apply emerging technologies. We will continue expanding these advanced technological capabilities, such as through Task Forces 39, 59, and 99.

Creative Experimentation

USCENTCOM will assist Allies and Partners in their innovation efforts, especially with interoperable systems and capabilities that generate asymmetric capabilities and improve resilience for conflict. We will continue to include experimentation in every mission, and we will do so with our Partners. Experimentation allows USCENTCOM to remain on the cutting edge of information collection and analytics to maximize domain awareness in cooperation with Allies and Partners while also strengthening our ability to respond to contingencies.





Influence

Operations in the Information Environment

Integrated campaigning and synchronization of operations in the information environment (OIE) with other operations, activities, and/or investments will address threats and shared interests of the United States, Allies, and Partners in regional and global information environments. OIE will compete below the threshold of armed conflict to deter or degrade threats and counter attempts to preempt the United States as the security partner of choice.

Irregular Warfare and Counterterrorism

Irregular Warfare (IW) includes any operation that contributes to the struggle for legitimacy and influence, and the USCENTCOM focus for IW will be on operations below the threshold of armed conflict. USCENTCOM will continue to work with the Department to ensure the appropriate authorities, permissions, and funding for IW in support of integrated deterrence to include authorities for counterterrorism.

Nontraditional Cooperation

Nontraditional cooperation includes increasing our intelligence and information sharing with Partners, training in new areas of concern to Partners such as counterterrorism, border security, counter-narcotics, and C-UAS, and maintaining the agility to concurrently cooperate and compete with adversaries. Nontraditional cooperation creates new opportunities for partnering or to de-escalate tensions.

Sufficient, Sustainable Posture

Sufficient and sustainable posture includes maintaining the forces, footprints, and agreements to respond to threats and maintain commitments to Partners. The Western Access Network is vital to USCENTCOM posture for increasing access and readiness options, and agreements—such as those for access, basing, and overflight or FMS—can have an outsized effect for making our posture sufficient.



Conclusion

This strategy provides a Theory of Success for the Central Region. By applying Layered Assurance to prevail as the security partner of choice, and building the collective capabilities of our Allies and Partners to manage risk, we are developing strong, sustainable advantages for the Joint Force and our Allies and Partners. Strategy implementation will require continuous cooperation and assessment with our Allies and Partners. Our successful transformation will make USCENTCOM's People, Partners, and Innovation an enduring source of strength for the nation.





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