



AFSOC Strategic Guidance

Air Force Special Operations Command
2020

AFSOC Strategic Guidance

The AFSOC We Will Need

Air Force Special Operations Command evolved from a specialized crisis and contingency response force, optimized for episodic theater engagement, to the force of today, driven by the need to counter global violent extremist threats in the aftermath of September 11th, 2001. AFSOC answered the call and adapted where necessary, resulting in a force largely optimized to continually rotate—at high operational tempo—into combat for years at a time to counter and defeat non-state threats while remaining prepared for crisis response. However, the price for adopting this model was paid in full-spectrum readiness. Now the strategic, fiscal, technological, and policy landscapes are shifting and the 'AFSOC We Needed' is no longer the 'AFSOC We Will Need.' Like the rest of the Department of Defense, Air Force Special Operations Command stands at a strategic inflection point. The reemergence of great power competition, tightening fiscal constraints, and the accelerating rate of technological change demand significant adjustments to transform AFSOC to ensure we are ready to successfully operate in this new environment.

The Nation, the Air Force, and U.S. Special Operations Command all recognize the changing security landscape and have called for change. For most of its history, SOF has served as a key element of the joint force; often *supporting*, occasionally *supported*. Over the past two decades, SOF became largely a supported force. However, AFSOC cannot assume the historical anomaly of being a supported force with a near-singular focus on countering violent extremist organizations (C-VEO) will persist. Accordingly, we must develop and provide unique capabilities valuable to the broader joint force while remaining an integral part of the joint SOF team.

Problem Statement: How will AFSOC transform to conduct competitive activities and prepare for combat against peer and near-peer adversaries while remaining decisively engaged in the C-VEO fight?

AFSOC must orient to great power competition and—if necessary—conflict while finding efficiencies to optimize the C-VEO effort. Meanwhile, we will divest of capabilities with uncertain value propositions or high cost-to-benefit ratios while focusing investment in capabilities only AFSOC can provide the joint force. The 'AFSOC We Will Need' will organize, train, equip, validate, and deploy forces ready to:

- Generate advantage in competition short of armed conflict
- Enable the joint force to win in armed conflict
- Execute efficient operations to counter violent extremist organizations
- Respond to crisis

AFSOC will continue to deploy forces executing prioritized global C-VEO operations and posture for crisis response with our joint partners and allies. However, AFSOC will also provide unique value to the broader joint force in competition and conflict. We will adapt many of the skills our



Airmen honed in the C-VEO fight to competitive activities in areas where our adversaries act through proxies and employ unconventional tactics.

Air Force Special Operations Forces (AFSOF) will be active in competition below the threshold of armed conflict to create dilemmas for our Nation's adversaries. SOF's ability to operate with low visibility and scalable attribution means AFSOF can create uncertainty and induce friction into our adversaries' decision-making cycles with lowered risk of escalation. Likewise, with unique access and placement, SOF can provide information vital to our policy makers by revealing an adversary's malign actions in areas where traditional access is unavailable. This capability will strengthen relationships with our partners as well as expand the joint force's competitive advantage and freedom of action. AFSOF will also prepare the environment and illuminate threats to develop understanding for the joint force should competition escalate to armed conflict.

In armed conflict, we will generate specialized combat power to produce advantages for the joint force as well as our allies and partners. First, AFSOC will employ low-visibility capabilities to identify high-value targets in denied areas and contribute to the joint force's ability to link those targets with desired effects. Second, AFSOC will leverage its access and placement to provide organic all-domain fires to open windows of opportunity the joint force can then exploit with mass. Finally, AFSOC will provide the joint force unique options to impose costs and hold adversaries at risk outside immediate conflict zones with a comparatively low risk of horizontal escalation.

The purpose of this document is to articulate the commander's strategic guidance to transform the enterprise. The guiding principle is *AFSOC's human capital is our competitive advantage*. This approach will have effects across the active duty, reserve, and National Guard elements of our command. This guidance proceeds by presenting three focus areas to empower and enable AFSOC's human capital—officers, enlisted, and civil servants alike—to meet the needs of the Nation. These areas are then presented across three strategic time horizons to lay out how we will move from the 'AFSOC We Needed' to the 'AFSOC We Will Need.' Fundamentally, this is a call for change which will challenge the assumptions cemented by nearly 20 years of C-VEO operations, drive difficult decisions, and induce short-term turbulence to ensure long-term success.



Commander's Focus Areas

1) **Develop our *human capital* to enable our Airmen to maximize their potential.**

Leadership & Accountability. The culture of AFSOC is healthy. We are Airmen first and foremost, with expertise in special operations and firmly grounded in the Air Force core values of Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in All We Do. As a command, we are most effective in both our roles—as an Air Force major command and a SOCOM service component—when we are closest to our parent service.

AFSOC's Airmen must be disciplined professionals, biased for independent initiative, with deep technical expertise in their specialties. These qualities will allow us to operate across a spectrum, ranging from intense, but routinized, armed conflict to great power competition, where operating as small teams in ambiguous environments with potential for great diplomatic and political consequences may be the norm. Our initiative must include the wherewithal to demonstrate strategic patience and—when necessary—restraint, ensuring the unique capabilities we provide are effective while also preserving the command's credibility.

Pervasive professionalism will enable risk tolerance, while relentless decentralization and empowerment will allow our teams to move fast while executing mission command. Our value proposition to the joint force will be embodied in small, decentralized units of action led by empowered mid-grade NCOs and officers. Ultimately, AFSOC will fully realize its potential as an inherently multi-domain force of aviation, special tactics, and support elements with capabilities or expertise extending from sub-surface to space, habitually integrated with SOF partners and the larger joint force.

These characteristics will serve us well in the future operating environment where our teams will face contested connectivity to higher echelons and will be expected to operate with minimal guidance and great latitude. To prepare them for this environment, AFSOF unit leaders will benefit from expanded force-wide leadership development. These unit leaders will drive a command culture reinforced by empowered, trained, and accountable NCOs and junior officers.

Deliberate Development. While our Airmen will benefit from these advantageous characteristics, the potential of our human capital is currently constrained by the lack of existing mechanisms to deliberately develop the force across the enterprise. Current development practices are ad-hoc in nature, uneven in application, and often come in a "one size fits all" approach. The command will build pathways for core AFSOC officers and NCOs to develop along deliberate tracks ranging from joint leadership to technical system expertise. These pathways will have built-in education and training opportunities prior to deliberate placement in developmental positions or roles. AFSOC will leverage our organic education capabilities and supplement with expanded Air Force, joint, and civilian education opportunities. Just as important is developing our civil servants, who provide AFSOC with an adaptive workforce and continuity through their experience and knowledge. We will provide tailored education and training opportunities that will keep our workforce skilled and prepared to meet the demands of the future.



In addition to core AFSOC Airmen, combat support and services personnel are critical to all facets of the command. Although many of these Airmen spend only a portion of their careers in SOF, we will develop tailored education and training to deepen their SOF expertise and work with our service to capitalize on their unique experiences throughout their careers.

Cohesion & Resiliency. In this digital age, a refocus on human connectedness is vital to forging resiliency across our formation. Our Airmen's comprehensive mental, physical, social, and spiritual fitness does not thrive in a vacuum—it must be fostered through healthy unit cohesion at the tactical level, in right-sized squadrons. We will continue to care for our force and their families throughout their careers, acknowledging that behavioral, financial, and relationship health are vital to our readiness as a force. Unit leaders will be resourced with integrated unit-level resiliency care, leveraging existing Air Force and SOCOM programs to tailor care and appropriately allocate resources based on the mission of the unit. As a command, we are dedicated to the prevention and treatment of invisible wounds such as the neurocognitive, psychological, and moral injuries many in our force have experienced over the past two decades of conflict.

Finally, a new enterprise-wide force generation model—described below—will reinforce the squadron's place as the beating heart of the Air Force. Squadrons will be led through a deliberate force generation cycle by caring, inspiring, courageous officers and NCOs at every echelon. These leaders will focus on the common needs of the unit during each phase of the cycle, from combat to redeployment and reintegration with family and friends. Through this restructure, we will provide combat capability to the joint force in a way that maximizes the opportunity for predictability and stability for our Airmen and their families.

2) **Organize to ensure our *human capital* is ready for full-spectrum operations from the lowest tactical level to the theater-wide operational level.**

Optimized Force Generation. AFSOC will organize to create a sustainable and tailorable unit-based force generation cycle for our CONUS operating forces. This cycle will optimize our force structure to predictably generate both forces and SOF command and control (C2) elements. AFSOC force optimization will unburden our Airmen by fully resourcing our foundational training architecture and fielding four CONUS operational squadrons of virtually every capability area, in addition to our forward-stationed forces. These four operational squadrons will rotate through a four-phase force generation cycle, with one unit operationally tasked on a steady-state basis and a surge capacity to two units. Operationally tasked units may present their capability to operational commanders as a single entity or they may disaggregate to meet validated requirements while geographically distributed across the globe.

While this restructuring may lower force offerings to the combatant commands in the short term, in time, it will provide a more competitive and lethal force. First, it will enable AFSOC to more accurately articulate its capacity to the joint force while allowing commanders to evaluate and manage risk more deliberately. Second, optimization will increase squadron readiness by empowering leaders, reducing complexity, and increasing the cohesiveness and resilience of our squadrons. Third, an increased dwell ratio of between 1:2.5 and 1:3 will enable Airmen and leaders to concentrate their efforts beyond resourcing the C-VEO mission. Instead, this model will build



space for developing all-domain mission command, readiness for great power competition, and experimentation for the future fight. Finally, this sustainable cycle will create predictability for our Airmen, while its tailored generation will create uncertainty for our adversaries.

Command & Control. AFSOC will more closely integrate its deployed C2 elements into joint warfighting structures. A model in which our human capital investment in C2 is limited to managing airpower often restricts our thinking to providing air-only solutions to joint problems. However, there will be no air-only problems in the future fight—only complex problems requiring all-domain solutions. AFSOC must deliberately develop personnel prepared to integrate domains at the operational level, master the seven joint functions, and coordinate with joint and interagency teammates, national allies, and regional partners to quickly envision and execute all-domain solutions. Further integrating C2 of SOF air into joint structures is imperative to bringing an Airman’s perspective to special operations forces while also expanding the contributions of AFSOC Airmen to the joint force.

Institutional Training Investments. AFSOC must appropriately structure and resource its training enterprise to ensure full-spectrum readiness across the total force. Because of the demands of the environment after 9/11, AFSOC prioritized operations at the expense of a fully resourced training enterprise. This prioritization created endemically undermanned operational units. In turn, this normalized risk to force, which has been masked by distributing that risk across the force through shared shortages. It also increased future risk to mission by constraining our capacity to experiment, slowing our institutional agility, and inhibiting our ability to pivot towards new and emerging threats. Going forward, AFSOC will appropriately structure and resource training, enabling us to fully man our units and clearly articulate the risk associated with any shortfalls.

3) **Equip our *human capital* with the concepts and technology to compete and win.**

Divestment. AFSOC will modernize our force to empower our Airmen with concepts and technology to outpace our adversaries. AFSOC’s Airmen deserve the opportunity to serve where they can be most valuable, doing important things others cannot do. Accordingly, we will divest of platforms, systems, and missions least relevant to the 'AFSOC We Will Need.' We will divest in accordance with the following guidance. First, we will divest capabilities with uncertain value propositions or high cost-to-benefit ratios. This includes capabilities that incur high operating and sustainment costs to accomplish a niche mission set. Second, we will divest legacy force structure with missions which can be accomplished more efficiently or be executed by other elements of the joint force with greater capacity or more closely aligned missions. As we divest of platforms, systems, and missions, we will *retain* our most precious resource—our human capital—and reinvest this force structure in high-value capability areas. Any investments in C-VEO must increase efficiencies and reduce cost or manpower requirements. As technology matures, automation, artificial intelligence, and other emerging technologies will help us realize such efficiencies.



Modernization. The trade space created with divestments and efficiencies will be invested in three priority modernization areas. First, AFSOC will pursue survivable air and ground platforms and systems which can operate in permissive and contested environments with reduced risk to mission and force.

Second, we will increase our capacity to operate across the spectrum of visibility and attribution and develop new methods for low-signature operations, including aligning niche, sensitive capabilities with National Defense Strategy (NDS) priorities. In many cases, our capabilities are unique in the Air Force and can be leveraged to create uncertainty and dilemmas for adversaries in competition, reveal information on adversary actions when traditional means are unable, and generate windows of strategic advantage for the joint force in active conflict.

Third, AFSOC will expand our expertise in domain integration to meet emerging requirements by developing organic cyber delivery, growing our investment in information operations, and strengthening our operational integration with space assets. These effects will connect to the joint force with resilient networking to ensure AFSOC forces are fully integrated with joint all-domain command and control (JADC2), both inside and outside the areas contested by our adversaries.

Pathfinding & Experimentation. AFSOC will continue to 'pathfind' new operational concepts and technologies for the Air Force while aligning experimentation efforts with the SOF enterprise. We will leverage the agility afforded by our small size, SOCOM's unique requirements and resourcing systems, and the prudent tolerance for risk inherent in SOF while also taking advantage of the scale of Air Force research and development activities. Successful concepts and technologies will be integrated into AFSOC for specialized SOF missions and scaled up by the Air Force to provide the requisite mass to the joint force where applicable. The advantages of such a partnership will naturally accrue to SOCOM as the capabilities of AFSOC and the conventional Air Force evolve.

Additionally, AFSOC will accelerate our efforts in experimentation. We will accept prudent levels of risk in doing so to enable our Airmen to experiment and learn, acknowledging that valuable advancement may endure significant initial failures or setbacks. The headquarters will break down administrative barriers to expedite winning concepts from the squadrons and quickly deliver the latest technology to Airmen. Our Airmen are natural problem solvers, and rapidly fielding the technologies they demand is vital headquarters work to ensure we move faster than our adversaries.



Strategic Approach

The following arrays the commander's focus areas across the National Military Strategy's strategic time horizons. This strategic approach illustrates how AFSOC will transform through time to achieve the commander's vision outlined above.

Force Employment. In the 0-3 year time horizon, AFSOC will optimize our C-VEO efforts in alignment with the NDS and in conjunction with SOCOM and combatant commands. We will organize, train, and equip with the force we have today to begin the transformation to the 'AFSOC We Will Need.' Force employment establishes the initial conditions for success and introduces initiatives that will improve the long-term health of the command.

Develop our human capital

- Empower and hold accountable NCOs and junior officers to lead in garrison and in combat through organizational constructs which push authority and responsibility down inside the squadrons.
- Implement a deliberate process to educate, train and validate AFSOC-generated C2 elements at echelon.
- Generate squadron mission-oriented training plans, approved by group commanders, and validated by wing commanders.
- Incorporate realistic ethical dilemmas into all aspects of leadership training and education as well as all exercise scenarios.
- Implement leadership crossflow between aviation and special tactics.
- Increase investment in and realign organic education institutions to prepare our officer, enlisted, and civil service force for the future operating environment.
- Implement deliberate unit-level leadership pipelines.
- Deliver unit-level resiliency resources across the enterprise.
- Institutionalize ways for commanders and supervisors to receive multi-source feedback regarding their performance. This feedback will focus not only on self-improvement, but also on a leader's ability to conduct deliberate coaching, teaching, and mentoring of their subordinates.

Organize for full-spectrum operations

- Implement the structural changes necessary to generate the force between a 1:2.5 and 1:3 deploy-to-dwell ratio.
- Tailor and simplify force generation by standardizing unit type codes (UTCs) across the command.
- Align formal training units through the appropriate organizational structure.
- Recode aircraft inventory to optimize our readiness, training, and test capacity.
- Integrate multi-domain operations into unit-level training and validation exercises.
- Reduce the complexity and specialization of aircrew complements.
- Increase aircrew crossflow opportunities and streamline training syllabi.



Equip to compete & win

- Pathfind concepts and technology for the Air Force through rapid development and experimentation.
- Organize the headquarters to deliver technology to the squadrons and place emerging capabilities in the hands of our Airmen as quickly as possible.
- Fully resource select units with information operations and cyber capabilities to discover the best practices of employing and integrating information operations and cyber operations in competitive activities.
- Analyze programs, systems, and capabilities to identify those with high cost-to-benefit ratios.
- Implement a comprehensive data strategy and educate Airmen with a baseline knowledge of data science and artificial intelligence.
- Prepare systems and architecture to capitalize on artificial intelligence.
- Leverage high fidelity simulations to aid training and experimentation efforts.

Force Development. In the 2-7 year time horizon, AFSOC will improve the current force as a bridge between the present state of our force and the future. The improvements in the force development horizon will empower AFSOC Airmen and lay the foundation for transformational change.

Develop our human capital

- Create sub-developmental pathways for our core SOF officer and enlisted corps to manage, develop, and retain the human capital needed for the future operating environment.
- Implement deliberate education and training plans in accordance with the sub-developmental pathways.
- Place and track core SOF officers and NCOs across the Air Force and joint force to deliberately develop them according to their sub-developmental pathways.

Organize for full-spectrum operations

- Provide organic, unit-sourced joint task force (JTF) headquarters capable of commanding and controlling all seven joint functions.
- Integrate into a SOCOM-wide Joint Operational Readiness and Training System (JORTS). Realize the goal of a supply-based force allocation model that enables units to train, validate, deploy, employ, and re-deploy as a team.
- Establish a third CONUS power-projection aviation wing and operationalize the CONUS generating base.
- Establish and fully resource four CONUS squadrons of virtually every capability type.
- Integrate AFSOC Airmen into SOCOM's global C2 architecture.
- Reduce aircraft crew complements through technological modernization, advancements in training, and aircraft modification.



Equip to compete & win

- Institutionalize and sustain efficiencies in the C-VEO effort across all domains.
- Divest programs, systems, and capabilities with uncertain value propositions or high cost-to-benefit ratios.
- Connect and integrate AFSOC systems with JADC2 networks, and have the technical capability and culture of mission command to continue operations when isolated.
- Capitalize on structured data to iterate and scale artificial intelligence of all types across the command.
- Invest in survivable strike, mobility, high-speed vertical lift, and ISR.
- Field a cost-effective multi-role armed overwatch platform.
- Modernize and scale information operations and cyberspace best practices throughout the enterprise.
- Increase our capacity to operate across the spectrum of visibility and attribution in permissive, contested, austere, and denied environments to enable the joint force.
- Field airborne cyber capacity and integrate cyber defense at the unit level.

Force Design. In the 5-15 year time horizon, AFSOC will complete fundamental changes to our organization, human capital development, and equipment to transform the force and operate in novel and disruptive ways.

Develop our human capital

- Place AFSOC leaders in key joint, combined, and interagency roles with the right training, education, experience, and institutional fluency necessary to lead at the O-6 echelon in the future operating environment.
- Integrate and sustain care for the force and family across the entirety of an Airman's experience in AFSOC—from their arrival through their transition.
- Create an enduring core SOF human capital career management enterprise.
- Complete the alignment of aviation and special tactics communities at the appropriate echelons.

Organize for full-spectrum operations

- Field experimental units, devoid of Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSCs), organized to solve high-priority problems for the joint force.

Equip to compete & win

- Employ automation, artificial intelligence, and other emerging technologies to realize efficiencies, maximize the return on our human capital, and gain the advantage over our adversaries.



- Lead all-domain SOF integration with the Air Force and industry partners. Prototype, test, employ, scale at speed, and transition successful experiments to the Air Force, joint force, and interagency partners for scale and mass.
- Explore opportunities for low-cost, expendable systems where there is clear value in creating complex dilemmas for the adversary.
- Sustain global operations in permissive and contested environments, despite both anti-access and area denial measures of the adversary.
- Field survivable systems with reduced or eliminated crew complements to minimize risk to force.

Conclusion

The strategic guidance above charts a course to transform the command from the 'AFSOC We Needed' for today to the 'AFSOC We Will Need' for tomorrow. The Nation, the Air Force, and U.S. Special Operations Command all face a strategic inflection point, and AFSOC's role is clear. Our command will provide forces ready to generate advantage in competition, enable the joint force in conflict, and respond to crisis while remaining engaged in countering violent extremist organizations. The focus areas outlined in this guidance will unleash AFSOC's competitive advantage—our people—on this challenge.

Commanders and senior enlisted leaders will ensure their formations understand this guidance and will work diligently to reinforce a culture of disciplined professionalism, develop their human capital, and encourage cohesiveness across their formations. The headquarters staff has the vital work of serving those units and developing the detailed planning that will enable the enterprise's transformation in line with this guidance.

We are AFSOC—together, we can do this.



AIR FORCE SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND | STRATEGIC GUIDANCE

Lines of Effort

Force Employment
(0-3 years)

Force Development
(2-7 years)

Force Design
(5-15 years)

Objectives

DEVELOP

our *human capital* to enable our Airmen to maximize their potential

Leadership & Accountability

Deliberate Development

Cohesion & Resiliency

Joint problem solvers & leaders organized into decentralized units of action tackling complex challenges

Airmen with independent initiative empowered by a culture of disciplined professionalism

Sustainable and tailorable presentation of AFSOF & SOF C2 to the joint force

ORGANIZE

our *human capital* for full-spectrum special operations

Optimized Force Generation

Command & Control

Institutional Training Investments

The AFSOC We Will Need

Deep technical expertise at the nexus of air power & all-domain special operations

EQUIP

our *human capital* with the concepts & tech to compete & win

Divestment

Modernization

Innovation & Experimentation

Airmen and systems ready for full spectrum operations, crisis response, & cost-effective C-VEO

Pathfinders for the Air Force & rapid fielding of technology to our Airmen



A force of ready, relevant, & resilient Airmen conducting all-domain special operations across the spectrum of conflict

