

## SOF Armed Overwatch

**Issue:** Armed Overwatch (AO) is a mission essential requirement for Special Operations Forces (SOF) in austere environments. Without sufficient AO, SOF are forced to assume unnecessary risk or to abandon efforts altogether to counter-terrorism.

**Background:** Armed Overwatch is Special Operations Command's (SOCOM) extension of the Light Attack Program, which incorporates minor requirements changes to meet SOF-peculiar aspects of special operations missions. Many of the capabilities within the Armed Overwatch program address Armed Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), need for precision strike, and austere operations not only for special operations forces but for Geographic Combatant Commands. When AO requirements are not met, SOF are unable to pursue operations.

In October 2018, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) signed a Rapid Fielding and Requirements Document (RFRD) for Light Attack Aircraft/Observation Aircraft. From the Executive Summary of the RFRD, "The U.S. Air Force has a requirement to rapidly field a light attack aircraft. The program, titled OA-X, will deliver an affordable aircraft requiring minimal to no development and is intended to operate globally in the types of Irregular Warfare environments that have characterized much of our combat operations over the past 25 years." The Rapid Fielding and Requirements Document goes on to state, "For joint operations, SOF lacks an organic close air support capability in austere environments worldwide."

In December of 2019, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force and Commander of United States Special Operations Command, General Clarke, sent an official memorandum to the Secretary of Defense addressing Light Attack and Armed Overwatch. In this memo they state, "We agree that the Joint SOF-Armed Overwatch requirement is a separate, yet complimentary, requirement to the USAF Light Attack experiment...SOF-Armed Overwatch must be capable of providing persistent overwatch while operating from austere runways."

A Special Operations Rapid Requirements Document (SORRD) was signed by the Deputy Commander of Special Operations Command in May 2020. The premise of the SORRD was to emphasize that SOCOM requires an aircraft capable of performing Armed Overwatch in support of special operations forces. The SORRD is in-line with other requirements documents by highlighting that the Armed Overwatch aircraft "will be more austere, possess longer endurance, be more modular, and be less expensive to operate than traditional CAS aircraft."

**Recommendation:** It is imperative that Congress support SOCOM's effort to field an AO program. Based upon detailed study of the requirements and a broad look at the future across all areas of competition, SOCOM requires a program of record to rapidly field the required AO capabilities in support of the National Defense Strategy.

The Special Operations Association of America recommends, therefore, that the Committee:

1. Ensure \$100M Procurement Line and all Research, Development, Test, and Evaluation Lines for Armed Overwatch remain in the budget as requested by SOCOM;
2. Codify Armed Overwatch requirements across DoD in FY22 NDAA; and
3. Create a program of record under MFP-11 to fulfill the Armed Overwatch role.