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TANK TALK

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LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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TANK TALK

(5:15 p.m.)

MR. ERVIN: Good evening, everyone. If we could take your seats. Well, good evening, everyone. I think you know now that I'm Clark Ervin, the chairman of the Aspen Institute's Homeland Security Program and the organizer of the Aspen Security Forum. What a forum this one has been.

(Applause)

MR. ERVIN: Over the course of the last few days, we have heard from most of the nation's senior national security officials and many of the foreign officials on the many issues of the day bedeviling policymakers right here at home and all around the globe - - terrorism, counterterrorism, cyber security, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and as our president might put it, China.

We hope to see all of you next summer. Please mark your calendars to be with us again July 18 to 21. I want to again express our sincere thanks to our principal sponsors Ayasdi, Deloitte, Lockheed Martin, Symantec and Target; our new media partners, NBC and MSNBC; and our additional supporters this year, the Association of the U.S. Army, Capgemini and MITRE Corporation. And in his final year as the chairman and CEO of the Aspen Institute, let us all express our profound admiration of and gratitude to the inimitable Walter Isaacson.

(Applause)

MR. ERVIN: And now to moderate our final session with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I'm so pleased to introduce our moderator, my friend, the incomparable NBC News chief foreign affairs correspondent, Andrea Mitchell.

(Applause)

MR. ERVIN: As *Women's Wear Daily* put it just

this week: "With 50 years of political reporting under her belt and still going strong, Andrea is as fired up as ever." Please join me in welcoming Andrea Mitchell.

(Applause)

MS. MITCHELL: Thank you all so much. Clark, this has been an extraordinary, extraordinary conference. I want to thank everyone for inviting me to be here. It is such a privilege. Thanks to The Aspen Institute, to the Security Forum. And what can I say about Walter that has not been said this week or that he has not already said about himself? But --

(Laughter)

MS. MITCHELL: -- he is just indomitable and irreplaceable and we know how much you love him. It is my great privilege without any further ado to introduce the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and former marine commandant, one of the great military soldiers of our generation and someone who has been serving our country for decades, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Joseph Dunford.

(Applause)

MS. MITCHELL: General, thank you so much for being here. There is no lack of crises around the world, so this opportunity to talk about them in a thoughtful way and get your views on what the strategic imperatives are and what the strategic environment is is so valuable, so we're really very grateful to you for coming here and spending your time today.

I wanted to start with Russia and ask whether you --

(Laughter)

MR. DUNFORD: That's a surprise.

MS. MITCHELL: It's an easy question.

MR. DUNFORD: So one thing I wasn't prepared for

--

(Laughter)

MS. MITCHELL: And as we know, marines are always prepared for everything, so -- in fact you said at your confirmation hearing to be the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs that Russia was the greatest single threat. Do you still believe that Russia is the greatest strategic threat that we face?

MR. DUNFORD: Sure. Now, Andrea, when I answered that question in my confirmation hearing -- someone asked what is the greatest threat we face, and I said at the time, you know, from a state actor perspective it's Russia. And I said that because of their nuclear capability, their cyber capabilities, what they had done in Georgia, what they had done in Crimea and what was ongoing in Ukraine at the time and remains ongoing.

But I would quickly add that we don't actually have the luxury today of singling out one challenge. So I think from an aggregate capacity and capability perspective Russia is the most capable state actor that we face. But we have challenges. Obviously, North Korea today from a sense of urgency perspective would be our number one challenge. And we're certainly dealing with malign influence from Iran on a daily basis. Clearly, the fight against violent extremism is one that we're completely engaged with. And we have some security challenges in the Pacific with a rising China as well.

So again, we don't have -- if I were to say -- I just want to put it in context, if I would say Russia is the greatest threat, it is one of the threats that we face right now and the one that is the most militarily capable.

MS. MITCHELL: And your confirmation hearing, I should point out, was two years ago, because by deliberate thought Congress has staggered the terms of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs --

MR. DUNFORD: That's right.

MS. MITCHELL: -- so that it's not coterminous with our presidents. So we have the luxury of your experience and so does the incoming president.

So that was two years ago. Since you testified, Russia has become a major force over Syria in the air, has buzzed our planes, has raised serious questions about deconfliction zones, which you have been navigating --

MR. DUNFORD: Right.

MS. MITCHELL: -- with the help of Russia and Turkey --

MR. DUNFORD: Sure.

MS. MITCHELL: -- in various meetings over the months. And it has been continuously challenging NATO with its actions in Ukraine. What are we going to do about it? How do we push back?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, there's a couple of things. I mean when I look at Russia, first and foremost, we have to be able to deter a nuclear war and so we have a nuclear deterrent. Secondly, we have to be able to deter a conventional war and that requires two things. It requires the capability development that we've articulated when we go up to Congress and we talk about what capabilities do we need to have to make sure that Russia is deterred conventionally. And we also need allies and partners and so maintaining the effectiveness and the strength of the NATO relationship is also critically important in deterring Russia's actions.

And then on the other side, Russia competes, what I call adversarial competition. It has a military dimension, but it really falls short of armed conflict. And that's where Russia integrates cyber capabilities, information operations, unconventional operations to advance their interests on a routine basis. So we need to be able to compete in that environment as well. And I think Mike Rogers spoke to you all this morning about cyber, which is one dimension of that adversarial competition.

MS. MITCHELL: My colleague Lester Holt here last night was interviewing Dan Coats and he affirmed as did other intelligence officials here at the Forum that he has no doubt and does not disagree with the conclusion of the intelligence agencies that it was Russia that was meddling in the cyber attacks on our election. Do you have any problem with that intelligence as you --

MR. DUNFORD: I don't. I mean that's what the Intelligence Committee -- the assessment is and I have no reason to question that.

MS. MITCHELL: Does Russia still have the greatest influence over the Assad regime or is Iran now the primary influencer?

MR. DUNFORD: Yeah, I think that's a fair question. In my judgment, Iran and Russia have divergent long-term political objectives inside of Syria and the longer the campaign goes on the more exposed those divergent political objectives are in my assessment. And I think it's fair to say that Russia and Iran are competing for influence on the regime at this point.

I'm not sure I'd call whether Iran or Russia is the most influential, but I think that marriage of the Syrian regime, the Russian Federation and Iran is not one that will endure.

MS. MITCHELL: What will break it up?

MR. DUNFORD: Divergent political objectives. In other words, what Iran wants at the end of the day in the region is different than what Russia wants at the end of the day. I think they can agree on stabilization in Syria -- of course that's why Russia intervened in the fall of 2015. But when you look at what Russia wants in the long-term, which is a presence inside of Syria, an effective naval base and air base to be able to project influence in the region, and what Iran wants, it's going to -- it's hard for me to see how you reconcile those two perspectives.

MS. MITCHELL: Do you see a political solution? We know -- I know from personal experience how long and hard John Kerry tried with Russia to come up with some kind of formula in Geneva and failed. Do you see some kind of political solution to end the civil war?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, I guess first I'd say there has to be a political solution to end the civil war. And I know Secretary Tillerson is working quite hard to reinvigorate the Geneva process, tireless actually over the last couple months to be able to do that. What we're trying to do in support of that is to establish facts on the ground that are going to give Secretary Tillerson leverage as he goes into the Geneva process.

MS. MITCHELL: Do you believe that Russia knew that Assad was going to deploy chemical weapons back in April?

MR. DUNFORD: Andrea, I really can't comment on that.

MS. MITCHELL: Because we don't know or because it's --

MR. DUNFORD: Well, I'd be -- it would be a --

(Laughter)

MR. DUNFORD: No, it would be something I wouldn't want to comment on.

(Laughter)

MS. MITCHELL: How has --

MR. DUNFORD: Do I have to?

MS. MITCHELL: No. You think I can make you answer a question? No.

MR. DUNFORD: You've done it before actually.

(Laughter)

MS. MITCHELL: How do you think Syria's behavior has changed, if at all, as a result of our sending 59 missiles on that empty airfield back in April?

MR. DUNFORD: You know, Andrea, I don't know whether this will be the case long-term. I like to think that Assad has received the message loud and clear that the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable and that there will be consequences for the use of chemical weapons against his own people. Time will tell. He hasn't used them since that day. But that certainly was intended in part to deter any further use of chemical weapons.

MS. MITCHELL: Do you think that we have seen -- there was a recent statement from the White House some weeks back warning against reuse of chemical weapons. Did we have good intel that he was about to use chemical weapons again?

MR. DUNFORD: You know, almost every day in the intel community -- I know you've had Director Pompeo here and Mike Rogers has been here this week, Director Coates. There's noise in the intel community; there's all kinds of information that comes in. Some of it's more credible than other information. But certainly there was noise at that time that there might have been the use of chemical weapons -- and that was exposed.

MS. MITCHELL: Were we considering a preemptive strike?

MR. DUNFORD: Andrea, you'd have to ask the president of that. And I don't mean to be flippant. But, you know, what we are clearly required to do is make sure we have military options for the president in the event that that's how he decides to respond, as we did the last time. But from a policy perspective, since it didn't happen, that conversation never took place.

MS. MITCHELL: Back in June, Moscow warned that it would treat our jets if they ventured west of the Euphrates as hostile targets after a Navy F/A-18 Super Hornet shot down a Syrian fighter jet. Has that been

deconflicted or is --

MR. DUNFORD: Sure. You know, maybe I'll talk about this for a minute --

MS. MITCHELL: Please.

MR. DUNFORD: -- because this is a complicated issue. So we have been doing what we call deconfliction with the Russians now for really over a year and our air operation center, which is in Qatar, has a direct link on a day to day basis with the Russian operation center that's in Syria. And we do that to make sure that we have safety for our crews and our people on the ground and thousands and thousands of sorties, missions by our aircraft have been flown and been deconflicted through that process.

We also have a three star level process which handles more operational issues to talk about deconfliction lines on the ground and so forth again to make sure that we can prosecute the campaign as well as keep our people safe. And then I have met with my counterpart twice this year and then communicated by phone probably four or five other times to make sure that we can deconflict our operations inside of Syria.

There have been a couple of incidents where the deconfliction channels didn't reduce the violence that took place. We shot down one aircraft and two UAVs as a result of them violating the deconfliction -- this is the regime violating the deconfliction measures that were in place.

But by and large, I'm pretty satisfied with the deconfliction measures that we have in place right now with the Russian Federation and the Russian Federation's then communications with Iran and the Syrian regime.

To be clear, we're not coordinating operations. But we have -- by using key terrain features and so forth, we have been able to deconflict our operations so that we can stay singly focused on ISIS and al-Qaeda, where it resides, as well as keep our people safe.

MS. MITCHELL: Now, in describing that -- and thank you, because that's a perfect segue. I wanted to ask you about -- I think that three star is based in Qatar.

MR. DUNFORD: No, the three star is actually the J5 on the joint staff.

MS. MITCHELL: Okay.

MR. DUNFORD: And so they routinely conduct video teleconferences with his counterpart in Moscow. So the three star channel and the policy channel -- so there's really four levels -- not to be too complicated. But there's a policy level that has State Department and secretary defense of staff is there, we're represented. There is a purely military to military three star level. Those two channels are by secure video teleconference.

Then there's the on the ground direct communications link between Qatar and Syria. And then there's the face to face communication that I have with my counterpart, Secretary Tillerson has with Foreign Minister Lavrov and so forth.

MS. MITCHELL: Well, how important in the war against ISIS and our operations in the region, in Syria in particular is that base in Qatar?

MR. DUNFORD: The base in Qatar is critical. I mean it's the headquarters of the United States Central Command. That's the four star headquarters that has responsibility for U.S. military operations from Egypt to Pakistan. It's also what we call our combined air operations center, which really is the nerve center of all of our aviation operations again that extend from Egypt all the way over to Pakistan. So it's a very critical base.

MS. MITCHELL: Which of course brings us to this ongoing dispute which has been escalating between the Saudis, the U.A.E. and others in the Gulf region against Qatar. And Secretary Mattis and Secretary Tillerson have

been trying to disentangle this at various points. The president has taken an opposite point of view, which has made it more difficult for them.

MR. DUNFORD: Sure.

MS. MITCHELL: How does this get resolved?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, first, we've managed to date where it has not had an impact on our operations. And I've spoken to my counterpart in Qatar and Secretary Tillerson has made a trip. He was there last week for about four or five days trying to work through this. So clearly, it's going to be resolved diplomatically to answer the question briefly.

But in the meantime, we have been able to work through the issues associated with continuity in military operations. And so that's our primary focus right now.

MS. MITCHELL: I mean is Qatar a reliable ally or do you think that they are too aligned with Iran and Hezbollah?

MR. DUNFORD: Yeah. Look, I think all of the nations in the region could do more in the fight against extremism and I think that's been a point that has been made at the political level. But our facility in Qatar has been there for some years and it has been a -- they have been reliable in that regard.

MS. MITCHELL: Getting back to Syria for a moment and the whole question of how you handle the fight against ISIS and Raqqa. How important are the Syrian Kurds in this operation?

MR. DUNFORD: Yeah. So two years ago when we were having conversations about Syria and ISIS in Syria, it was a lot of hand-wringing. And if you just go home tonight and you just get on Google and you look up the headlines in October or November of 2015 and the comments that were made about the strategy at that time, I think you'll find that an interesting exercise. We had probably about 200 personnel that we could identify as partners on

the ground inside of Syria. Tonight we have over 50,000 partners on the ground. These are Syrians that are taking the fight to ISIS and about half of them are Arabs and half of them are Kurds.

The leadership is provided by an organization called the Syrian Democratic Forces. That's a Kurdish individual by the name of General Musloon (phonetic) who has organized this force. But they are the ones who have taken back the wide swath of ground in Northeast Syria and really put us in a position where ISIS inside of Syria will no longer be in possession of ground.

So the idea of a physical caliphate in Iraq has been eliminated as we finish up operations in Mosul, with some other operation to take place in Raqqa, which is in Syria, and then in the Euphrates River Valley. So in my judgment the reason why we have had success against ISIS in Syria has been the courage, the competence and the focus of the Syrian Democratic Forces. So they have been very, very important.

MS. MITCHELL: Can you make Turkey comfortable with this?

MR. DUNFORD: No. We've --

(Laughter)

MR. DUNFORD: Look, first of all, I would say that Turkey is an important NATO ally and we have very -- many more interests that converge and diverge. This has been a source of friction with Turkey and we're doing all we can to mitigate their concerns not only about how we're going after ISIS in Iraq in the Euphrates River Valley, but the long-term relationship that we have with Turkey.

And I would tell you that any political solution and any military solution in Syria is going to be completed with full recognition of what Turkey's long-term interests and concerns are from a security perspective. I have -- you know, to tell you how much emphasis we place on it, I think in the last 12 months I have been to Turkey 12 times and I've met with my counterpart another six or

seven times -- and that's in a 12 or 13 month period.

So the relationship with Turkey is critical. They are an ally in NATO. We just did not agree on how we're going to prosecute the campaign in Syria. And as I mentioned before, we had 200 partners on the ground in Syria and the only force that we could raise and the only force that we could support that could take the fight to ISIS was the Syrian Democratic Force. So we're going to mitigate Turkey's concerns even as we take the fight to ISIS with this Kurdish-led force.

MS. MITCHELL: And Turkey has been buying advanced Russian anti-air defenses. Do have a problem with that?

MR. DUNFORD: There is a media report that was incorrect. They have not bought the S-400 air defense system from Russia. And that would be a concern were they to do that, but they have not done that.

MS. MITCHELL: Thanks for clarifying that.

(Laughter)

MS. MITCHELL: At the forum -- at this forum earlier this week Iraq's ambassador to the U.S. warmly thanked Iran for his (sic) help in stabilizing security for Iraq. What does Iran's role in Iraq mean for the U.S. and --

MR. DUNFORD: Sure. You know --

MS. MITCHELL: -- for our forces there?

MR. DUNFORD: -- there are many people -- and many of you might have seen the *New York Times* article this week that basically said it's a foregone conclusion that there will be undue Iranian influence in Iraq and they almost characterized Iraq as a proxy state of Iran.

I've been in Iraq for a couple of years. It's not been my experience that that's a foregone conclusion. I think there's a pretty solid strain of Iraqi nationalism

that is in Iraq. I think it's obvious that they share a border, they share economic interests, they share social interests, there's a shared religion between a large population in Iraq and Iran -- so there's obviously going to be connections.

But I think what's critical is: do you believe that Iraq can be sovereign, can be independent? And in my judgment our continued support for Iraq to have a solid political arrangement inside of Iraq that allows it to be independent and have Iraqi security forces be independent and capable of providing security inside of Iraq is critical.

MS. MITCHELL: And we've just seen in Mosul an almost textbook case of how U.S. support, weapons, equipment, training helped the Iraqi forces do what they did not do in previous --

MR. DUNFORD: Sure.

MS. MITCHELL: -- fights against ISIS. So now that Mosul has been regained, where have these ISIS fighters gone? Have they fled into the desert? What is the concern about --

MR. DUNFORD: Sure.

MS. MITCHELL: -- whether they are more dangerous in some context as a guerrilla fighting force?

MR. DUNFORD: Sure. Well, two separate questions: one, you know, kind of where are they? And I don't have a map here, but if you had imagined -- if you just had Mosul in your mind, to the west is a place called Tal Afar, it's up by the Syrian border. That's one of the major concentrations remaining of ISIS and that will be the next operation. The Iraqi security forces are already isolating that area right now and that will be the next major operation. And there's almost 2,000 ISIS fighters there, so that will be a pretty good fight.

There's an area called Hawija, which is southeast of Mosul, and that's still a large concentration

of ISIS. And then the final is up the Euphrates River Valley out to the border area in an area called Al-Qa'im, which marines are certainly familiar with in the Anbar Province and many soldiers over the years in the Anbar Province. So those are the three remaining areas. I would just say that Mosul is significant. Again, I think it has undermined the credibility of a narrative of a physical caliphate in Iraq, but there's a lot of fighting that remains to be done inside of Iraq.

And to your other question, Andrea, in addition to those concentrations, we would expect them to continue to conduct guerrilla type operations, high profile attacks to create a large number of casualties in Baghdad and so forth as they try to struggle for relevance even after they no longer hold ground.

MS. MITCHELL: I saw that Interpol today released warrants for 173 members of a suspected ISIS suicide squad that might be heading towards Europe maybe via Libya -- one doesn't know.

MR. DUNFORD: Right.

MS. MITCHELL: What is your level of concern about this proliferation of --

MR. DUNFORD: Sure.

MS. MITCHELL: -- ISIS fighters?

MR. DUNFORD: I think one of the things that concerns all of us is that we think somewhere between 30 and 45,000 foreign fighters have come to Syria and Iraq over the last couple of years and so one of the concerns we have is not allowing those foreign fighters to go back from where they came. That's a critical piece.

The recent arrest I think is a success story from the perspective of: we have established a location in the Middle East where right now over 20 nations have come together -- military, law enforcement, homeland security -- to share information both public and then in some cases with our allies with whom we have intel sharing

arrangements classified information so that we can actually get that information to organizations like Interpol and to homeland security and police organizations in their home countries.

And one of the critical things that has to be done as we think about fighting the Islamic State is they no longer have ground in Syria and Iraq. You say, "Well, what's the next phase of the campaign? What's the strategy?" The strategy is to do what I call cut the connecting file that allows groups in Europe, West Africa all the way to Southeast Asia to be connected. And there's three things that actually connect these groups. One is the foreign fighters that Andrea asked about. The other is the floor resources and money. And the third is the message or the narrative.

And so the focus strategically is to try to cut the connections between those groups in those areas. And the way you get after the foreign fighter piece is a very robust group of nations that come together with shared interests. We have 69 nations in the coalition in Syria and Iraq to share information with. But to share information, to share intelligence and stay one step ahead of those foreign fighters.

As an example, 800 of them came from Indonesia. The worst thing in the world would be to go back to an Islamic nation the size of Indonesia with 800 foreign fighters that have returned from Syria and Iraq. And so preventing that from happening is a key element of our strategy.

And if you've heard Secretary Mattis talk about annihilation, what he's really talking about in these final phases of the campaign in Syria and Iraq is making sure we surround the enemy as we conduct operations in places like Raqqa and Mosul and we don't allow them to go back across the border in Turkey and emigrate back up into Europe.

And the last point I'd make is, to highlight our success in that area, we estimate that about a year ago, 15 months ago as many as 1,500 foreign fighters were going

back and forth across the Turkish border every month and now we estimate it's something less and we think far less than 100.

MS. MITCHELL: That's pretty dramatic progress.

(Applause)

MS. MITCHELL: I'd say your 12 visits to Turkey in the last year have had some big impact.

MR. DUNFORD: Well, working -- the Turkish-Iraq border and the Turkish-Syrian border is obviously critical in the fight.

MS. MITCHELL: I want to ask you about America's longest war, obviously Afghanistan. Do you agree with General Nicholson that we should send more troops?

MR. DUNFORD: So we're in the midst -- I think it has been referred to this week -- we're in the midst of a review, and it's not an Afghan review, it's a South Asia review. And what I would -- the short answer to your question, Andrea, is that we should only provide more capability on the ground if it's in the context of a broader strategy that has a chance of being successful. And so I do believe that additional forces for the Afghan security forces would make them more competitive.

You know, I was there -- I think John Campbell is here somewhere as well and he came in behind me. But when I was in Afghanistan in 2013, we had 140,000 U.S. forces and coalition forces on the ground and we were actually fighting the fight -- this is in 2013. When I left and turned it over to General Campbell, we had 28,000 U.S. forces on the ground. And today we have 8,700 forces on the ground.

And so over the last two years as the Afghans have truly been in a fight and leading the security of their country, they have suffered a significant number of casualties and there are some areas where they are not quite where they need to be: the Afghan air force, their ability to integrate, combine arms, level of training, all

those areas need more work.

And so what General Nicholson has identified is: what are the areas that we can do to allow the Afghans to be more competitive on a day to day basis? But the reason why Secretary Mattis has not made a decision on General Nicholson's request is because we're not going to do that until after the president has decided on the strategic framework within which our support to the Afghan security forces takes place.

And I think some of you might have seen the newspaper this morning: Secretary Mattis was asked about that yesterday and he said it's coming very soon. We've had two very long meetings this week, National Security Council meetings, to talk about Afghanistan. So I agree with Secretary Mattis -- I think it will be the near future.

But I just want to put in context that additional forces -- the purpose of those additional forces would be to train Afghan security forces who are actually the ones responsible for security and the ones fighting every day. And Secretary Mattis' decision to do that will be if we have a strategy that supports that. And I believe we will. But that's going to come in the coming months.

MS. MITCHELL: I mean is part of the delay deciding how to handle Pakistan?

MR. DUNFORD: Absolutely. I mean this is from New Delhi to Tehran when we talk about South Asia and a critical element of our strategy in the region has to be Pakistan. And we cannot be successful in Afghanistan -- we've seen that over the last several years -- unless we have a higher degree of cooperation from Pakistan. So Pakistan is absolutely an integral part of the strategic review that's ongoing.

MS. MITCHELL: Some say that we are relying so heavily on special forces that we're putting an undue strain on our special forces. Do you have any concerns about that?

MR. DUNFORD: I do, I do. And I think that's a fair statement. And in fact Secretary Mattis and I have spoken about it. And there's no major review going on, but we are absolutely attentive to: each and every time we look at a requirement for capability anywhere, we see does that capability have to be met by special operations forces or can conventional forces meet that requirement?

And the United States Army is standing up -- and it will be -- the first ones that will be capable this fall is standing up organizations called security forces systems brigades, and those units are specifically trained, organized and equipped to do the kind of advising that many of our special operations forces do now and frankly that conventional forces have done since 9/11.

But we do want to reduce some of the stress and strain on our special operations forces. And for some of you who don't follow this very closely, when I go around and I meet with some of our folks, I'll will say, "Hey, how long is your deployment right now?" And they'll say could be anywhere between four months and a year. And I'll say how long were you home before that. And it will typically be exactly how long they are deployed. And I'll say how long were you deployed before that. It will be the same amount of time. And so we call that a one to one deployment to dwell ratio, which means they are gone in the equal amount of time that they are home.

And over time, one, we want to make sure that our special operators are trained for the full range of missions that they may accomplish, not just those against violent extremism; and secondly, there is on a human factors perspective family considerations and other considerations, that you want to make sure that we don't take some of our best and brightest and run them too hard.

MS. MITCHELL: And this affects the entire volunteer army, the multiple deployments, affects all of them.

MR. DUNFORD: No, Andrea, our -- look, our men and women in uniform -- and I'm, you know, needless to

say, extraordinarily proud of them and they don't ask for much. But we are -- we have been running them pretty hard. I mean most of us made an assumption in 2010, 2011 that the level of operational tempo, that is the commitments that we have on a day to day basis, would be reduced over time. And if anything, our commitments have increased over time. And we're mindful -- as we resource these commitments, we're mindful of the need to look at this, you know, with a very long horizon.

MS. MITCHELL: Can the U.S. envision a future where the Taliban rules in certain parts of Afghanistan?

MR. DUNFORD: You know, Andrea, the political solution in Afghanistan has to be an Afghan-led solution for it to be successful. And so how the Taliban are accommodated politically in Afghanistan is in my view an Afghan decision to make.

MS. MITCHELL: Fair enough. Has the president given his commanders a timeframe for an exit strategy? Does he when you talk about Afghanistan talk about whether he hopes the war could end in his first term or the amount of years --

MR. DUNFORD: You know, I think there's a lot of lessons learned I think from our experience over the last decade and a half and I think one of the things is that when you put artificial timelines on things they seldom obtain. And so the major conversation we have now are: what are the conditions under which we can transition our mission?

Here's what I would tell you. Any place that we have national interests or vital national interests, we're going to have an enduring diplomatic and enduring economic and enduring military presence. What's going to change over time is the form of that diplomatic, economic and military presence.

So certainly the president wants to know what are the conditions where you start to change the form of your military presence. But I think we've all argued very strongly that putting artificial timelines on it is not

good. If you talk in Afghanistan, it's not good for the confidence of the Afghan people. And it actually causes hedging behavior in the region as well.

It actually undermines our cooperation with Pakistan. If they don't believe that we're going to be there long enough to establish stability and security inside of Afghanistan, then their behavior and their level of cooperation is going to be affected by that hedging.

MS. MITCHELL: In our recent NBC News/Survey Monkey Poll, a national security poll this week, a plurality of 41 percent said that North Korea is gravest threat that we face. So let me ask you a couple of questions about North Korea. Can you put to rest their concerns about the immediacy of the North Korean threat?

MR. DUNFORD: Sure. I mean, look, when we look at the path of capability development that North Korea has been on, they conducted 16 missile tests last year, two nuclear tests in 2016 and I think it's 75 percent more that Kim Jong-un has conducted than his father, his predecessor.

So they are clearly on a path to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile that can reach the United States and to match that with a nuclear weapon. So am I concerned? Absolutely. Do we need to deal with that? Absolutely.

What I can tell the American people today is that, you know, what the North Koreans are capable of today is a limited missile attack and we are capable of defending against a limited missile attack for our forces in South Korea, our South Korean allies, our Japanese allies, our forces in Okinawa, our forces in Guam and the American homeland and Hawaii -- to include Hawaii.

So we can deal with a limited attack. Our concern is growth in capacity -- that is increase in the numbers of missiles over time -- and the combination of an intercontinental ballistic missile with a nuclear weapon is obviously a concern.

And so do the American people need to be concerned long-term? Yes. And that's why this is, you know, probably at the top of everyone's inbox and the national security today is dealing with the North Korea crisis. But we can protect the American people today, of that I am sure.

MS. MITCHELL: I know that many --

(Applause)

MS. MITCHELL: -- people would be certainly relieved by that. But the sources whom I've spoken with were surprised at the time with the successful launch of that intercontinental ballistic missile. Do we have a clear window into how far long they are of miniaturization of a warhead?

MR. DUNFORD: Yeah. You know, much of the information about the details is obviously classified and I know it has been talked about, this week several people have speculated. In the business I'm in, I get paid to assume that they have that capability now. And so I have a sense of urgency to assume that they are going to have it.

Whether it's going to -- you know, in my judgment it's academic whether it's 6 months, 12 months, 18 months or 24 months from now. They are on a path and it seems an irreversible path to develop that capability. And so we need to have a sense of urgency to denuclearize the North Korean Peninsula, which is our U.S. policy right now.

MS. MITCHELL: At the same time, this is an almost unique challenge, intelligence challenge because of the tunnels, the underground nuclear facilities, mobile launchers now, underground tunnels. We frankly are positive -- you don't have to confirm it.

MR. DUNFORD: Sure.

MS. MITCHELL: But from all of our sourcing, we don't know where all their stuff is. And so how do you do

a preemptive strike that won't leave them with enough to retaliate? They have their artillery trained on 20 to 25 million people in South Korea in the immediate vicinity, including 28,000 American troops, 100,000 American civilians, our allies in Japan. So what are the military options?

MR. DUNFORD: Sure. First of all -- and I -- you know, again for people who don't follow this routinely, we're involved right now in what's called the pressurization campaign, primarily using diplomatic and economic pressure to denuclearize North Korea, the Korean Peninsula.

And what Secretary Tillerson is attempting to do is get the entire international community to tighten the noose, if you will, for trade and economically cause North Korea to at least initially freeze and cap their capability and then eventually to denuclearize.

We're all, you know, trying to support Secretary Tillerson in that regard and the U.S. military is completely supportive with the military dimension of deterring North Korea today and making sure that everything we do is consistent with his effort to diplomatically and economically resolve the issue.

Many people -- and this is an important point. Many people have talked about military options as -- with words like "unimaginable." And I would probably shift that slightly and say it would be horrific and it would be a loss of life unlike any we have experienced in our lifetimes -- and I mean anyone who has been alive since World War II has never seen the loss of life that could occur if there's a conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

But as I've told my counterparts, both friend and foe, it is not unimaginable to have military options to respond to North Korean nuclear capability. What's unimaginable to me is allowing a capability that will allow a nuclear weapon to land in Denver, Colorado. That's unimaginable to me. And so my job will be to develop military options to make sure that doesn't happen.

Again, the primary task is to support Secretary Tillerson right now and ideally we will denuclearize the North Korean -- the Korean Peninsula with economic and political means. But in the meantime, I can assure the American people that our job is to develop military options in the event that that fails and be prepared to mitigate some of the consequences that have been well covered in the media.

MS. MITCHELL: James Clapper said here the other day that having been there in 2014 he's convinced that Kim Jong-un would never give up his nukes. It's the lesson of Gaddafi.

MR. DUNFORD: No. Look, I think that that has certainly been conventional wisdom. When Secretary Tillerson came in -- and in the intelligence communities, you know, the general assessment was -- and it has been public -- that Kim Jong-un views his existence as inextricably linked to nuclear weapons and China will never cooperate. So those are the two things that everybody has basically said. That's conventional wisdom of North Korea.

So where does that leave us? Leaves us, what, to a military option. We've already talked about the consequences of that. Secretary Tillerson said he didn't believe, number one, that economic sanctions had ever been fully implemented with the full support of China and so he was going to do that. And I think he also believed that over time North Korea was becoming more of a liability to China than an asset. And we've seen that. We've seen blatant disrespect by North Korea. For example, last year when China hosted the G20, North Korea conducted a missile test amidst the G20, which was an insult to the Chinese regime.

So I think for all of us we should give Secretary Tillerson full support in attempting to resolve this diplomatically and economically even as we recognize that it may not happen and there may have to be a follow-up option, which is the military option.

But we can wring our hands and say it will never

happen or we can roll up our sleeves and make an effort to have a concerted economic and diplomatic plan that does cause KJU, Kim Jong-un, to come to the table and begin to have a conversation, at least stop the path that he's on right now, which is further development of the intercontinental ballistic missiles, the nuclear capability. And to me it makes all the sense in the world to prove the theory of the case and to work this for a few more months.

MS. MITCHELL: The CIA director, Pompeo, said -- or he seemed to suggest or hint at this forum the other day that regime change, taking Kim Jong-un out, was an option.

MR. DUNFORD: Yeah. At the end of the day, you know, that's a policy option, right, so that wouldn't be something I would comment on as a military leader. What we will do is we'll go to Present Trump when the time comes -- and we're obviously in conversations now about what's in the art of possible and we have spoken to him a couple of times. But we'll go to him at some point with a range of military options. And at the same time, I'd expect Secretary Tillerson would talk about other diplomatic options that might be available should the path we're on not succeed. But I think to say anything about regime change or anything else at this point would be speculative.

MS. MITCHELL: The president says he loves his generals. You were with him in the tank this week. How does he interact with you? Is he a good listener? Can you take us --

MR. DUNFORD: He loves me.

MS. MITCHELL: He loves you.

(Laughter)

(Applause)

MR. DUNFORD: At least I think so.

(Laughter)

MR. DUNFORD: Look, I'm not surprised you asked me the question, but you'd be surprised if I answered it.

(Laughter)

MS. MITCHELL: No, I would --

MR. DUNFORD: We have a --

MS. MITCHELL: I mean just if you could describe the kind of interactions?

MR. DUNFORD: Sure. He's a very curious individual. He asks a lot of questions. He asked a lot of hard questions. And the one thing he does is he questions some fundamental assumptions that we make as military leaders -- and he will come in and question those. So it's a pretty energetic and an interactive dialogue.

MS. MITCHELL: I was -- I can only imagine.

(Laughter)

MS. MITCHELL: I was watching the commissioning of the Gerald R. Ford, the newest -- our newest and largest aircraft carrier today. And we were talking off stage. It was very meaningful to me having known the president and know what this meant -- this naming meant to him and to watch that and to watch a ship come to life.

But it occurred to me that in recent decades we have not had commanders in chief who have served in the military. We had Jerry Ford, Jimmy Carter and to a lesser extent Ronald Reagan in the cavalry. But --

(Laughter)

MS. MITCHELL: I am not making that up. That is not a joke. That is actually the way he described the

horse cavalry and --

MR. DUNFORD: You know, they asked me who I wanted to interview me and I actually said Andrea Mitchell. And I just --

(Laughter)

MS. MITCHELL: To late to change that now.

MR. DUNFORD: Yeah.

MS. MITCHELL: But he actually was -- he was in the military service.

MR. DUNFORD: He was, he was.

MS. MITCHELL: He was the military service, so I'm just correcting myself.

MR. DUNFORD: He was a very good public affairs officer.

MS. MITCHELL: Exactly. But --

(Laughter)

MS. MITCHELL: But knowing Carter and Ford who were on active duty and all the rest and the fact that we don't have so many members no more now because of Iraq and Afghanistan, thankfully, but we don't have that many political leaders at the federal level who have served. Has that taken something away from their experience level?

MR. DUNFORD: Yeah. I don't -- you know, at the end of the day you'd expect me to say I'm concerned about it, but I think what's really important -- and we have tried to do this with President Trump. We've tried to do it with many members of Congress, some of them may be here. I think what's important is that our political leaders get to know our men and women in uniform, get to see what they are doing around the world, visit them in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, visit them in places like Africa and the Middle East. And I think that's how

you close the gap.

I think what's most important is, one, they learn to appreciate the extraordinary quality that we have and they also understand the impact of the decisions that we make in Washington and how those decisions are affected in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. That's what's most important. So I think for political leadership knowing the men and women in uniform is important. And I think, you know, certainly -- maybe it takes a little bit more initially if you haven't served.

MS. MITCHELL: And I want to open it up to questions for the audience, but I also -- like most Americans, I've been thinking a lot about John McCain, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee. And despite the battle that he's now waging, he has been weighing in from Arizona on all sorts of issues, sending out blasts. And in this past six months, he has gone on more overseas trips to visit with the troops, to reassure leaders about issues near and far. I mean he has been working at an incredible pace.

If you could speak a bit about John McCain and his continuing contributions and what he has meant to the U.S. military?

MR. DUNFORD: No -- I mean I've had the good fortune now -- I mean I think the first time I testified before Chairman McCain was 2005, 2006, so it has been 10 or 11 years. And certainly when I've deployed, a routine visitor. In fact every Fourth of July if you're in Afghanistan or Iraq, you know, Chairman McCain is out there.

Obviously, a -- you know, in a time when the phrase Great American might be an overused phrase, I don't think anyone would argue that, you know, Senator John McCain is a great American. But he has such status around the world that he speaks on behalf of our nation when he engages and there's not a world leader that wouldn't drop what they are doing to see Senator McCain when he goes over in a congressional delegation.

And I think in our system -- in many countries it takes a while to figure it out. But in our system, where the funds, the resources necessary for our foreign policy or military operations are provided by the Congress, Chairman McCain provides a very stabilizing influence when he talks to leaders in Afghanistan and Syria and Iraq and Asia and so forth about U.S. foreign policy. And I think it would be hard to argue that over the last decade he has been one of the principal architects of the American approach in foreign policy.

MS. MITCHELL: And I know you've thought about this a lot, because General Mattis and you have worked so closely with Secretary Tillerson and you've worked with previous secretaries of state, the importance of diplomacy and foreign policy, to work with the military, with the Pentagon. If you can speak to that as you travel around world.

MR. DUNFORD: I think if I've learned anything -- you know, I think when you're a young marine or a young soldier or airman, you might not be as appreciative of what your foreign policy or State Department Foreign Service officers are doing. I sit here now with a great degree of humility because there's not actually one challenge that we confront in the U.S. military that can be solved militarily. It can only be solved with a good framework of foreign policy, whether it's Afghanistan -- and that's the conversation we had a minute ago -- whether it's what's going on in the Middle East.

We can have the greatest military in the world -- and we have the greatest military operations in the world -- if we don't have clarity in our political objectives, if we haven't properly resourced the State Department, if our foreign policy and our allies aren't strong, we will never be successful.

So, you know, I view the Department of Defense clearly in support of the State Department. There's a reason why the secretary of state has historically been the greater among equals in the cabinet, because he's the architect of our foreign policy. And that actually is what is going to determine our success or failure as a

nation.

MS. MITCHELL: And as we wind down these wars, one hopes, we need to have policies and diplomats and economic policies to sustain the peace.

MR. DUNFORD: There's no question about it. In fact, you know, we spoke briefly before coming in here. When I look at our relationships around the world -- if you want to have healthy relationships, you've got to be balanced in at least four areas: there's the diplomatic relationship you have, there's the economic relationship you have, there's the military relationship and the intelligence relationship. The most important of those four is the political relationship because that's the framework within which all of the economic, military and intelligence activity takes place.

So again, strong policies and strong relationships at the political level, that's the critical enabler for all of that other activity to take place -- to include the strength of our economy, not just our endeavors in security.

MS. MITCHELL: I want to give these good people a chance to ask questions. So we have floating microphones. Why don't we start there and we'll move across. Thank you.

SPEAKER: Good evening, sir, and welcome. My name is Drew Donsad (phonetic). I am an Aspen Security Forum scholar. The Department of State faces significant aid and development cuts. Do you expect Department of Defense to do some part in absorbing that?

MR. DUNFORD: Yeah. You know, I don't know yet where those cuts will fall. You know, they have announced the budget, but Secretary Tillerson is still working through the details of what he is going to do with that money. So it's very difficult for me -- I'm not going to avoid the question, but it will be hard for me to speculate where the impact is going to be felt inside the State Department and what the implications are for the Department of Defense.

But I would tell you that in almost everything we do -- I mean just today -- and I won't mention the location, but just today one of our commanders came in and said, "Hey, look, in order to do stabilization operations we're looking for an authority to cut \$12 million to \$15 million from the Defense Department over to the State Department."

That kind of activity happens routinely, particularly in stabilization operations. And we clearly provide security; for example, when political leaders want to meet particularly in places like Libya, we provide security for that. We work very collaboratively with our USAID counterparts.

And so this is -- in all seriousness it's not right -- this is one team between the State Department and the Department of Defense. And so what's going to be important is that we get the job done and we're going to leverage whatever capabilities and capacities reside in the State Department and Defense Department to bring that together in order to get the job done.

MS. MITCHELL: Thank you. Yes, Julie?

MS. IOFFE: Hi. Julia Ioffe from *The Atlantic*. General, thank you so much for coming to talk to us today. I wanted to ask you about Iraq. Mosul has been recently liberated. It seems like Raqqa is next, which is of course good news. But then we also have pretty well documented reports of revenge killings by the Iraqi troops with an administration that doesn't -- that hasn't prioritized, let's say, human rights and this kind of stuff.

How do we -- how do you plan to deal with making sure that this doesn't happen or at least to this extent given that we need to win over the Sunni population? Thank you.

MR. DUNFORD: Okay. First, let me talk about -- I'll talk about U.S. military and what we do and then I'll talk about Iraqis and how they deal with these issues.

Number one, all of our interactions with foreign counterparts are informed by a legislation called the Leahy Law and we're not --- we do not provide support, material training or otherwise to people who violate human rights and we're required to vet the partners that we work with to make sure they don't do that before we provide support.

The other thing I would tell you is that -- you know, you made a comment about prioritization. The U.S. military -- and I'm quite proud to say this -- takes our values with, your values more properly with us when we deploy. And whenever we see an incident where the law of armed conflict is violated, we're going to report that and take appropriate action.

In the case of Iraqi security forces, we have seen some incidents. Prime Minister Abadi has acknowledged those. Those incidents have been investigated and he has committed to making sure that doesn't happen.

I think that we certainly have seen -- there is strong tension between people whose mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters have been killed by the enemy and so it's going to require a very strong command climate and a very strong leadership from Prime Minister Abadi and the Iraqi security forces to prevent those kinds of things from happening.

I was there as recently -- I guess over the last few weeks and I can tell you that, number one, our leaders understand their responsibilities and I'm pretty clear on what the U.S. military's responsibility are in this regard -- our responsibilities are in this regarded as do our commanders. And I believe that the Iraqis understand not only that our support is contingent upon them complying with the law of armed conflict, but they also recognize that stability and peace in Iraq is never going to come with those kind of actions being condoned.

MS. MITCHELL: Do we -- well, we have a question right here and then we'll move over to the other side.

SPEAKER: General, thank you for this insightful discussion. Adam Azel (phonetic), U.S. Army. Forgive the lack of screening standard.

(Laughter)

MR. DUNFORD: What's your name again?

SPEAKER: Adam --

(Laughter)

SPEAKER: S-m-i-t-h.

MR. DUNFORD: Yeah, yeah. S-m-i-t-h, right?

SPEAKER: I was wondering if you could comment more about the advising efforts not just in Afghanistan, but more broadly. So from personal experience being an advisor in Afghanistan, I saw the good and the not so good with policies. And I'm wondering with this new contract that the Army is spearheading from a joint perspective, how do we get the people in place to be, you know, effective advisors, not hamstringing them policy-wise, and then retain them to continue that fight globally?

MR. DUNFORD: Sure, sure. You know, you said something really important. You said "the people." And I think you would agree we haven't done it. In my experience the single most important element of the advisory effort is picking the right people to do it and not everybody can do it, not everybody can do it. But you have to pick people that not only have professional competence and skills to deliver to our partners, but also understand the nuances of the culture, the language and the environment within which that training is taking place.

So picking the right people. In some cases we haven't always done that, right. So picking the right people is number one. We have had conversations about at what level do our advisors accompany our partners, particularly in a combat environment. Of course we do a lot of advising. Some of it is in a combat environment,

some of it is not.

And if you look at what we did recently in Mosul, we made an adjustment. We realized that unless our advisors -- and particularly in a very complex urban environment -- were right there with their partners in the fight, they weren't going to be able to deliver both our fire support, which we were providing, as well as being able to provide advice in the context of the fight that our partners were engaged in.

So, you know, I think we're making some adjustments right now. And I think one of the things that when we talk about the Army's effort, every single one of the advisors that's in command will be in command for the second time. So these will all be people who have commanded a conventional or a special operations battalion in the Army and then they will go off and be part of the security force assistance brigades to be advisors.

So we recognized that mature leadership is critical, experienced leadership is critical. And that's a pretty good vetting process. When someone has already gone through the crucible of command for a couple of years and you have a chance to see whether they have been successful in that environment, then and only then putting them in the security force assistance brigade.

So we have 16 years of lessons learned and we had a lot of lessons from Vietnam as well and I think as we look forward those would be among the probably top two or three that I would zero in on, if that resonates with you.

SPEAKER: Yes, sir. Thank you.

MS. MITCHELL: Yes?

SPEAKER: Jerman Alaskvos (phonetic) from Deloitte. First, thank you for the great service you've rendered the nation and the tough jobs over the last number of years. Could you address the impact of what I'll call the budget drama over the last six years and the impact on our capabilities and future capabilities through

modernization and what your prognosis is for the future?

MR. DUNFORD: Alan (phonetic) is an old friend, at least he used to be.

(Laughter)

MR. DUNFORD: I thought -- and that was close. I thought, "Yeah" --

MS. MITCHELL: It almost got ugly.

MR. DUNFORD: I almost -- I'm like, "Get out of here without having to talk about the" -- I mean I'm in Colorado. I'm feeling pretty good with the weather down here --

(Laughter)

MR. DUNFORD: -- and you just dragged me right back down. On a more serious note and this is a serious note, in about 2000, 2001, you know, I could have looked at you and said that we have a decisive competitive advantage in the U.S. military over any potential adversary and I could have said that with full confidence.

I'm equally confident in telling you today that that competitive advantage has eroded over time and that's the biggest -- that's the most insidious effect of the budget challenge, is that our competitive advantage has eroded.

Now, you say, "Well, you're spending \$600 billion. How could our competitive advantage erode?" We have each year prioritized current operations in all the things that we're dealing with and because we had to make tough choices in the year of execution where there is very little flexibility -- for those of you who are in business, it's very little flexibility when you're in a year of execution -- where do we go continuously, future capability development, innovation, science and technology?

So here we are now seven years into a very

myopic, shortsighted view and our competitive advantage has eroded. And as a result in, you know, Pentagon terms -- we try not to use the words we use back there, but we call it a bow wave. There is a bow wave of modernization requirements. In other words, we typically modernize the force over the course of decades. There's now major programs that have all come together into obsolescence at the same time and so it has exacerbated the challenge we already have. Not only did we go seven years without proper focus on the future, we are now at a point where the modernization that we should have been doing over the course of 20 years will now come due over the next five to seven years at a time when our operational tempo and commitments around the world are very high.

So this is serious, this is serious. And for me, I'm going to be in my job either two more months or two more years and -- or two more weeks.

(Laughter)

MR. DUNFORD: But it's not going to be long. But on a serious note, by 2021, 2022, 2023 if we don't reverse this trend, whoever is sitting in my seat will not be able to say that the United States of America has a competitive advantage. What does that mean? We don't have an effective nuclear deterrent. We don't have an effective conventional deterrent. The prospects of conflict increase. We aren't able to on a day to day basis assure our allies and partners that have made us so strong since World War II that the United States of America can meet its alliance commitments.

So it's not only about the physical, but it's also about the psychological effect of that degradation of capability over time.

So, Alan, this last seven years I could not overestimate the impact that it has had, nor could I overestimate the need for us now to recognize that "the world we're in right now -- you know, to quote Kissinger for those of you heard him say it -- is as complex and as volatile as any period since World War II. This is not the time for a period of weakness.

MS. MITCHELL: Is --

(Applause)

MS. MITCHELL: Has it gotten dramatically worse because of the sequester?

MR. DUNFORD: Here's -- yes. And here's -- when I talk about a comparative advantage, what I probably ought to tell you is that there are two things that make the United States' military unique and make us able to say we have a competitive advantage. The first is at the strategic level and it's the network of allies and partners that we have around the world and we've built up since World War II.

Just think about it for a minute. Who are Russia's allies? Who are China's allies? Who are North Korea's allies? Well, I could put 50, 60 names up here of American allies and partners. And so that's what gives us strength.

Also, our ability to project power when and where necessary to advance our national interest, it has had a deterrent effect because people know we can respond and it has also allowed us to respond in the event that deterrence has failed.

The area that we're most challenged in is our ability to project power when and where necessary, because our adversaries have looked at our competitive advantage, they have looked at things like our power projection for the Navy. We commissioned the Ford today. What are our adversaries doing? They are busily working on anti ship cruise missiles, anti ship ballistic missiles. They are working on cyber and electronic capabilities. They are working on denying access to space, which gives us our position and it gives us our command and control capability, it gives us our intelligence enterprise.

So these are all of the things that the Chinas and the Russias and to a lesser extent Irans and North Korea are doing. And we need to make investments in those

areas to assure that in 2021 or 2022 when China looks at the United States like they look at us today, they say we would never have a conventional war with the United States because we know how that would end.

When Russia looks at the United States today, they not only see our capabilities, but they see the economic, the military and political weight of NATO. And they are not going to fight us conventionally. And if they do, they know how it's going to end. That's a pretty important tool to have.

And Andrea mentioned Ronald Reagan before, you know, the great communicator. He was able to put this in pretty simple terms, peace through strength. When you are strong, people don't have a tendency to take you on. When you are weak or you are perceived as weak, you are typically challenged. And what we need to make sure is that we don't get to the point where people believe they can challenge us. That will not be in our interest.

(Applause)

MS. MITCHELL: We have time for --

MR. DUNFORD: Sure.

MS. MITCHELL: Kimberly, one more quick question. Thank you.

MS. DOZIER: Thanks, General Dunford.

MR. DUNFORD: Hi, Kim.

MS. DOZIER: I'm Kim Dozier. What has the delegation of additional authorities to Secretary Mattis by the president done for the ISIS fight? And in addition to that, General Thomas mentioned that he thinks we could be one bad day away from getting kicked out of the sovereign territory of Syria by Russia. He said our pilots are getting painted by both Russian and Syrian aircraft and have to make these split second decisions to avoid a strategic conflict like that. So how bad is it?

MR. DUNFORD: Sure. The first question was about authorities, and let me answer that. Secretary Mattis has not received anything that I would describe as strategic authorities. In other words, the strategy and the decisions that are made at the strategic level are still being made by the president. That hasn't changed. What Secretary Mattis has been afforded the opportunity to do is make decisions about resourcing the fight.

So the troop levels that are in Iraq and Syria and Afghanistan, the level at which we advise and assist, the rules of engagement, those are all delegated down to Secretary Mattis. So he has the authority to make those changes, but they are very clearly within a strategic framework that is agreed upon at the National Security Council and decided by the president. So that's probably an important point.

With regard to one bad day away from being out of Syria, I'm not sure I'd characterize it exactly that way. We'll only leave if there's a policy decision to leave. We certainly have the capability from a military perspective to defend ourselves and we would do that. And that's why there's F-22s and other aircraft in the region to make sure our people are safe.

So I think what General Thomas is saying -- and I wouldn't disagree with this -- is that the situation is becoming more complex as time goes on. Our forces are becoming closer together as time goes on. And the imperative to have a political solution to deconflict operations on the ground is much greater as time goes on.

"But one bad day," I just would ask you to consider that as a figure of speech and I'm fairly certain my friend General Thomas meant it as such.

MS. MITCHELL: Well, I just want to speak for everyone here. And thank you for the generosity of your time and your intelligence and your forbearance with the questions and the questioner and thank you so much for your service to all of us.

(Applause)

MR. DUNFORD: Yeah, thanks.

\* \* \* \* \*