

TRANSCRIPT | GEN. MCKENZIE, GEN. TOWNSEND AND ACTING ASD FOR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS WHEELBARGER AT HASC

10 MARCH 2020

REP. ADAM SMITH (D-WASH.), CHAIRMAN:

Good morning. We'll call the meeting to order. This morning we are hearing from--about national security challenges in U.S. military activities in the great Middle East and Africa as part of our ongoing posture hearings as we prepare for the FY 21 budget. This is basically the presentation of the president's budget for these regions and we have witnesses this morning. Ms. Kathryn Wheelbarger, acting assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs. I think this is the first time we've seen you since the job change, so congratulations and welcome back.

General Kenneth McKenzie who is the commander of the U.S. Central command and General Stephen Townsend who is the commander of the U.S. Africa command. Welcome to all of you. Look forward to hearing from your testimony about the very important regions that you are responsible for.

And I think that big challenge as we are going through this posture hearing is that the sheer number of challenges. And, you know, AFRICOM sort of got a lot of attention here recently because as we focused on the pivot to Asia, the focus on great power competition, there was the notion that, well, what can we sort of not new anymore and Africa popped up mainly because I guess you are first in the Africa aft alphabet for the blank slate review there. I don't think they did it that way, but you came up first anyway.

But it did prompt a very interesting discussion about how the world is interconnected and having just returned from a CODEL to Africa a few weeks ago, the great power competition is alive and well on the continent of Africa. So when we're looking at how we meet the national security challenges we have, we have to look at them in a broad--broad, geographical way.

Russia and China are certainly very active in Africa as we are as well. So how--how do we meet our interests there? And I know there's been a lot of interest in that subject and will look forward to those comments from the members who ask questions about that.

And obviously central command has been the central focus for going on 20 years now between Afghanistan and Iraq and various activities in the Middle East. It continues to be a challenge. And while we are focused on great power competition, that great power competition, of course, is present in the central command as well, but we also have to continue to be worried about the threat from violent--violent extremist organizations and, you know, the lessons learned right back to 9/11 started in Afghanistan, an ungoverned space became fertile ground for a dangerous terrorist organization to found find safe haven and plot and plan attacks against us in our interests. And that risk is still there.

If we do not find partners in the regions like the central command represents to deter those groups from forming, they--they will form and they are still there. ISIS, Al Qaeda, and various other offshoots. So we have to have a plan to meet all of our challenges in a reasonable way within our budget, and I think these two regions are particularly ripe for a discussion of how we do that because you can sort of look at the needs there and he can very quickly overwhelm you in terms of resources we have available.

Let me say I'm 100 percent confident that we're the you best U.S. military that the world has ever seen with the number of partners that we have and the capabilities that we can bring to bear that we can absolutely meet those challenges if we're smart. If we make the right resource decisions, if we manage risks in an appropriate way,

and if we, you know, get our troops the support they need. I'm 100 percent confident that we--we can meet the challenges even in complex parts of the world like that to that you gentlemen represent.

Lastly, given what's going on in the world, we will need to hear from you about how the coronavirus is impacting your regions. Obviously, Iran is one of the most impacted countries and how that affects things and how it is affecting your operations as we've seen various cancellations, travel restrictions, difficulties. Your perspective on how that's going to impact your areas of responsibility will be very helpful to informing us how we can help you do that. And that is all I have. With that, I'll turn it over to ranking member Thornberry for his opening statement.

THORNBERRY:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And let me join in welcoming each of our witnesses here today. And General McKenzie, let me begin by expressing condolences at the loss of two Marines in Iraq within the past couple--couple of days. My understanding is they were working with the Iraqi forces to clear out ISIS from some tunnels and a complex there and have given the ultimate sacrifice to protect us here at home.

I support the national defense strategy. I completely agree and I think it makes sense to put greater emphasis on great power competition. I completely agree with the chairman that great power competition takes place all over the world and his recent trip as well as these two maps that are--have--are in front of us show Russia and Chinese activity in Africa as one example. It also takes place in the Middle East and South Asia. It occurs all over the world.

But the rest of the story is the job against terrorism is not done yet. They are certainly not finished with us and we cannot wish it away and just presume that if we say peace has broken out that they're going to leave us alone. And I think it's a, you know, we get focused on different issues as time goes on. I think it's an important reminder that every day there are men and women risking their lives to protect us here at home from terrorist threat.

And that's true in Afghanistan, it's true in Iraq and Syria and it's true in Africa, it's true in a variety of places around the world. And so as we talk about great power competition, I don't think we can forget the other issue, and--and we certainly can't afford to walk away from it. In y'all's two AORs, that's particularly true. I yield back.

SMITH:

Thank you. Before we begin, two quick programming announcements. We are, again, going in reverse order on our questions, so will start--will start with me and Mr. Thornberry and then will go in reverse order. Second, we have a classified hearing after the public hearing, so we will stop exactly at noon and head upstairs to 2212 for the classified portion of this hearing. And with that, I will turn it over to Ms. Wheelbarger for her opening statement.

WHEELBARGER:

Good morning. Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Thornberry, distinct members of this committee, we are grateful for the opportunity to testify today. I would like to start by thanking the men and women of the Department of Defense whose dedication and sacrifices enable us to achieve our objectives in the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere. I would also like to recognize the strong collaboration and bipartisan support provided by this committee.

As I said last year as a former professional staffer on multiple committees in Congress, I understand the vital--that this is a vital institution entering our military has the resources, oversight, and political legitimacy to succeed at the hard missions we give it. Congress has also helped ensure we have civilian control of the military as enshrined in the Constitution and required for the preservation of our democratic values. So thank you for all you do.

As you know, our approach to the Middle East and Africa policy is guided by our national security strategy and our NDS. Our goals--all of our goals are to protect the American people, defend the homeland, and promote prosperity and peace from a position of strength. As you have heard numerous times, our NDS directs that the

department to focus on near peer competition while remaining vigilant in countering threats from rogue states like Iran and North Korea and continuing to address violent extremist organizations like Al Qaeda and ISIS.

The need to address near peer competitors required us--requires us to make adjustments to our posture and operate avoid prioritizing near-term problems at the expense of building readiness and capacity for a high-end conflict in the future. As we do so though, we must also deter and confront current adversaries while avoiding miscalculation or escalation that would distract and undermine our national security interests.

In the Middle East, the United States strategy is to keep the region from being a safe haven for terrorists or dominated by any power hostile to the United States. The department is focused on ensuring continued success against ISIS and Al Qaeda, strengthening deterrence and our defenses against Iran, and competing with China and Russia. This requires investing and sustainable partnerships as a whole of government effort.

As to Afghanistan, our mission is guided by the president's South Asia strategy. As you are aware, on February 29, the president announced an agreement with the Taliban that is a major step toward political settlement but it is just a first step. We have insisted to the Taliban that they abide by their counterterrorism commitment, negotiate in good faith with all Afghan stakeholders, and not restart violence.

However, we are prepared for all eventualities. Our presence in Afghanistan is conditions based in future posture will be based on the facts on the ground. In Africa, the United States maintains a whole of government approach to advancing security and stability on the continent. Our efforts--our commitment to the Africa continent includes diplomatic military and economic efforts and persistent U.S. presence is not the only measure of DOD's commitment. Our commitment is demonstrated by our counterterrorism training and operations, our dynamic force employment, military training, exercises, foreign military sales, intelligence sharing, crisis responses, and emergency humanitarian assistance.

So I'll close by saying I think the department is well-positioned to address all the range of threats that we face. Our approach helps us meet a variety of present and future threats while enhancing the--

WHEELBARGER:

strength and agility of our forces. Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

SMITH:

General McKenzie.

MCKENZIE:

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Thornberry, distinguished members of the House Armed Services Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. I'm proud to testify alongside General Steve Townsend from Africom and Ms. Katie Wheelbarger from OSD Policy.

It's this partnership within DOD, across cocom and between the interagency tat ensure synchronized execution of the National Defense Strategy. My senior enlisted leader, fleet master Chief Jamie Herdel of the Navy, is also here with me today.

Before I begin, I would like to recognize the sacrifice of Captain Moses Nevos(PH) and Gunnery Sergeant Diego Pongo(PH) who were killed in action against ISIS last Sunday in the Corachok(PH) Mountains in Iraq as part of joint taskforce OIR. They will be remembered. Today, there are nearly 90,000 men and women servicing within the 20 nations comprising central command as well as the headquarters in Tampa. I am proud of their remarkable dedication and humbled by their personal sacrifice. And it's my honor to serve with them. They are young Americans in the line of fire working to prevent attacks on the homeland, counter destabilizing regional influence, prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and assure the freedom of navigation through international waterways.

Your annual and timely passage of both the National Defense Authorization Act and the Defense appropriation bills honors their courage and sacrifice. I encourage you to maintain this tradition.

Keeping a pledge from my conformation hearing in December 2018, I appeared before you and offer my best military advice.

My written statement highlights several nations, areas of interest within the Central Command. But my opening statement today will focus on Iran. The National Defense Strategy directs us to work with partners to deny the Iranian Regime all passed to a nuclear weapon and to neutralize Iranian malign influence this is no easy task. Iran is persistent and is growing its arsenal of ballistic missiles despite international condemnation.

Iran remains the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism. Since May of 2019, Iranian proxies and Shiite militia groups in Iraq have increased attacks on U.S. interest and conducted scores of unmanned aerial system reconnaissance flights near U.S. and Iraqi security force bases. The Iranian regime has attacked or seized foreign vessels in the Gulf, sponsored attacks by Houthi forces from Yemen into Saudi Arabia, continued the export of lethal aid to destabilizing groups across the region and carried out an unprecedented cruise missile and UAS attack in September against all facilities in Saudi Arabia.

In early January, Iran launched more than a dozen ballistic missiles in a deliberate attack against U.S. and coalition forces at two bases in Iraq. This state sponsored missile strike crossed the threshold compared to previous attacks and has probably set a lower bar for future actions by the regime.

While periods of decreased tension may provide the illusion of a return to normalcy, ample intelligence indicates the regime's desire to continue malign activities that threaten lives, destabilize sovereign nations, and threaten freedom of navigation, regional commerce, global energy supplies and the global economy itself.

At CentCOM we recognize that so long as the U.S. supplies diplomatic and economic pressure the joint force must be postured to deter Iran from deploying the military element of power to counter our actions.

Our presence, sends a clear signal about our capabilities and our will to defend partners and U.S. National interest.

Going forward it is CentCOM's objective to posture forces in the region with the operational depth to achieve a consistent state of deterrence against Iran and be adaptable to future Iranian threats.

The FY2021 DOD budget supports CenCOM's ability to keep our forces agile, lethal and adaptable. As we work with our partners to safeguard our national interests we do so with the knowledge that we are stronger together. Key to building and maintaining regional partnerships is the authorization, the funding and the employment of security assistance programs.

Additionally, the National Guard state partnership program currently cultivates relationships and improves interoperability with six nations across the CentCOM AOR with more considering entry. Again, the FY2021 budget supports building new partnerships and forming an enduring Middle East coalition. As CentCOM continues ongoing operations, we appreciate the efforts of our DOD civilian leadership, we acknowledge the teamwork of the interagency and thank the members of congress and your staffs without whose consistent backing we would be unable to accomplish our mission.

In order for America's armed forces to sustain all domain dominance the Department requires your support as well as predictable, adequate and timely funding. Mr. Chairman, ranking member, and committee members-- thanks again for all you do for our troops and our families and I look forward to your questions.

SMITH:

Thank you. General Townsend.

TOWNSEND:

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Thornberry and members of the committee--good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear today. It's a privilege to be a part of and lead America's exceptional men and women of U.S. Africa Command who are dedicated to protecting American and advancing her interests on the African continent.

This morning, I'm accompanied by my state department foreign policy advisor Mr. Rashiple (PH) and AfriCOM's new command senior enlisted leader, Marine Sergeant Major Richard Thresher.

I'd like to take a moment to honor the memories of three Americans--U.S. Army Specialist Henry J. Mayfield, Jr., Mr. Bruce Triplet(PH) and Mr. Dustin Harrison, who lost their lives in the service of our nation on January 5th at Mandobay(PH) Kenya.

To their families, our thoughts and prayers are with you. Your loved ones died while protecting the American people from the very real threat of the Al Qaida and Al Shabaab terrorist groups.

I'm here this morning with my battle buddies and friends, Ms. Wheelbarger, and General McKenzie, to discuss shared challenges and opportunities in our areas of responsibility while furthering joint force readiness. Africa over watches the global crossroads with strategic choke points and sea lines of communication that are essential to global commerce and critical to U.S. operations in the world. Our future security and prosperity rest on our strategic access and influence in Africa in times of crisis.

U.S. Africa Command is engaged in an ongoing blank slate now CoCOM review in concert with the Department of Defense, we have developed a prioritized objectives and actions to protect the homeland and secure our strategic interests in African while focusing the American taxpayers investments in the right areas.

Africa is key terrain for competition to China and Russia, who are aggressively using economic and military means to expand their access and influence. I believe Africa offers America a competitive edge over China and Russia and we should take advantage of it. We will grow more efficient to contribute to higher defense priorities and refocus resources to global power competition. But we cannot take pressure off major terrorist groups like ISIS and Al Qaida.

These groups and many others remain in convenient reality in Africa. While we should not try to confront each one we should remain resolute in confronting those who threaten American interests in the region and the American homeland. Today, Africom does that using a very light and relatively low cost footprint by supporting African and international partners who are leading these efforts.

In my first eight months on the job I have learned that small investments, a few troops and a few bucks can go a long way and make a real difference in Africa. Our whole of government and partner centric approach acts as a force multiplier to address Africa's many complex challenges. What Africom accomplishes with just a few people and a few dollars on a continent three and a half times the size of the continental United States is a bargain for the American taxpayer and low cost insurance for America.

A secure and stable Africa remains an enduring American interest. U.S. Africa command remains ready to protect and advance American interests and respond to crisis in Africa. Mr. Chairman and the committee, thanks for your continued support to our armed forces. I look forward to your questions.

SMITH:

Thank you, General McKenzie and actually, Ms. Wheelbarger as well if you could answer a question about the-the Taliban peace treaty. I understand the negotiations that we've had with the Taliban. But the key part now is the Taliban negotiating with the Afghan government. That seems problematic. And I--and I support the effort to try to find a peaceful solution here to enable us to reduce our--our footprint and rely more on partners. But, how do you see that negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government going? What needs to happen in order for this peace agreement to go forward?

WHEELBARGER:

I'll begin recognizing this is largely a State Department lead and my colleagues in IPSA as well. But from our perspective, from the Secretary's perspective as we have--as he said, the peace agreement is not perfect but it is a good first step and the inter Afghan dialogue is a key component of that.

We do have suggestions as late as or this morning before I left that there might be somewhat an offer from President Ghani to provide some prisoner releases that is a basic part of the initial agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban that was not part--the Afghans were not part of--the Afghan government were not a part of the piece of that--that part of the agreement.

But I do think we might have actual successful, good faith efforts as maybe even today we'll get the intraAfghan conversation started.

SMITH:

OK. And General McKenzie, how is it affecting operations at the moment?

MCKENZIE:

Sir, thank you. The Taliban need to keep their part of the bargain and they are continuing attacks. Those attacks are relatively low in scale. They are not directed against coalition forces. They are not occurring in city centers. They are occurring at isolated checkpoints, but those attacks are occurring and they are not consistent with a movement toward negotiated settlement and they are not consistent with the undertaking they made.

SMITH:

Thank you. General Townsend, focusing on West Africa in particular, I was alarmed when I was there at the growing threat from the violent extremists organizations in the region. Bracanfasha Mali (PH) and Eshare (PH) to varying degrees. Their governments are all under pressure. There are portions of their country on their increasingly outside of their control. How do you see that fight going in those three particular countries? And what do we need to do to stop the spread of those groups? And I guess the other question would be, where do you see the risk that those groups will use those safe havens to plan larger operations?

TOWNSEND:

Chairman, West Africa and the Sahel region, I think that the western and international and African efforts there are not getting the job done. ISIS and Al Qaeda are on the march in West Africa. They're having success and the international efforts are not. So, why is that?

I think that there's, you know, the--the African partners there don't have a lot of capacity or capability. There's a lot of western assistance going in there, European led, French led and European led with U.S. in support. I think it's insufficient and it's uncoordinated. I think the French and the Europeans have recognized this and they are taking steps to make it better coordinated. And those efforts might actually be sufficient if they were better coordinated.

If we don't turn this around in West Africa I think it becomes a growing threat in the region. I think that the threat will begin to impact on the littoral states. It's already started to reach the northern fringes of the littoral states. I think that Europe can and should do more before American should do more in this part of the world. I think the problems that manifest from West Africa will manifest into Europe before they manifest in America. But, I do believe that if ISIS can carve out a new caliphate or al Qaeda can, they will do it and they will attempt to do it in West Africa.

SMITH:

Thank you. Mr. Thornberry?

THORNBERRY:

Let me just, excuse me, follow up on the chairman really and General McKenzie and General Townsend, would each of you give us a thumbnail sketch of the terrorist threat in your AORs? I know we'll have more detail when we go to a classified setting, but I think it's important for all members and the American people to know is this threat still there, kind of what's it look like, how's it evolving, that sort of thing.

MCKENZIE:

Thank you, sir. I'll begin and go from east to west. So, in Afghanistan the principle threat that could threaten our homeland or the homelands of our allies and partners is either ISIS K (PH) or elements of al Qaeda. Those--both of those forces are under considerable pressure now from us. They're pushed up into the east of Afghanistan. If unrelenting CT pressure is maintained it is likely they will find it very hard to achieve a degree of coordination necessary to attack us.

We believe that if that pressure is relieved at some point in those ungoverned spaces, they would regain that capability. So, that's--that's--that's one thing. The next thing I would note is the Taliban actually does not entertain attack plans against the United States. They're a regional entity. There are good reasons why we're conducting or have been conducting operations against them because the fact they host two other organizations that actually are sworn to destroy us. But, the Taliban themselves are not poised or have any background to attacking, you know, certainly not attacking our homeland.

I would tell you in the far west end of the sphere in the inland pocket there are remnants of al Qaeda and remnants of ISIS that do entertain attack plans against us. They are under--they're being compressed right now. It's hard for them to generate those attacks at the moment because the conflict that's going on out there. And that conflict, while it does have the effect of limiting their ability to operate against us, is also gonna have profoundly horrific humanitarian outcomes in the western part of Syria. So, we watch that--we watch that carefully.

In the south, in the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP, still has visions of attacking the United States. They are under pressure and we find it hard to realize that. But, if left unconstrained, undoubtedly, they would regenerate and present a threat to us as well.

Last, I would--I need to mention the largest state sponsored terror organization in the theater, the Iranian threat network whether it is Shia (PH) militia groups in Iraq, Lebanese Hezbollah, or Catide (PH) Hezbollah, all of those entities entertain to some degree a desire to attack Americans generally in the theater but Iran's reach is not only regional, it is global and, in fact, as you know, has been manifested a few miles from where we stand right now.

TOWNSEND:

I'll go from west to east. In West Africa and the Sahel, as I was just discussing a moment ago, the threat there is both ISIS and al Qaeda. Al Qaeda has an arm, a branch there, called JNAM (PH), Jamant Nushia al Islam (PH). That group is as part of al Qaeda as any group is on the planet. And they are a growing threat there. And what's the interesting dynamic that we see in West Africa that we don't see in other parts of the world there al Qaeda and ISIS cooperate with one another. I can't really explain that. And I've been asked before if I thought that might be something new that we would see growing. I don't think so. I think it's a local phenomenon that these folks have grown up with each other and known each other all their lives, one joined one gang and one joined the other. And so, they cooperate with one another.

This threat if it grows and continues to grow at the pace it has and we're seeing a fivefold increase since last year just in the Sahel alone, we're gonna see that threat emerge and manifest in the littoral states of West Africa. I think unchecked this threat becomes a threat beyond the region.

Moving to the north we have ISIS there and Libya that threat has been significantly reduced. And we are keeping close watch on that to ensure that it stays that way. And we've been able to do that with work with both sides of the Libyan civil war. They have both supported our counterterrorism efforts there.

Moving to the east, there is a small presence of ISIS in Somalia and East Africa, but it's not a great operational concern. But, al-Shabaab is. Al-Shabaab is the largest and most connectedly violent arm of al Qaeda. And they are a serious threat to not only the Somali people, but the entire region. As--and one example is a recent attack in Kenya. Another example is there are threats to embassies in the region outside of Somalia.

I can discuss more about the threat of al-Shabaab in a closed hearing. I would just say that I'm--I'm of the belief that al-Shabaab today poses a significant threat to American interests in the region and that threat will continue whether we were in Somalia or we were not in Somalia. And I also believe that if left unchecked and we've putting a fair amount of pressure on al-Shabaab, if left unchecked I believe that would manifest into an international threat.

SMITH:
Ms. Luria?

LURIA:
Well, thank you. And it's great to go at the beginning so we can talk about aircraft carriers up front. So, I wanted to start with General McKenzie, recently the Abraham Lincoln completed the longest deployment for a carrier since the Vietnam War and that was due to a casualty on the Harry S. Truman, which made it unable to deploy on time. I was just giving that background to focus on how vital is it to your completing your mission to have a continuous carrier presence in the Gulf?

MCKENZIE:
So, the aircraft carrier brings McGully (PH). It brings offensive fire power. It brings defensive fire power. We can position it. We can move it around. It complicates an adversary's targeting. So, it's a uniquely American piece of capability. Additionally, the virtue of the aircraft there are access basing and overstrike restrictions that operate on forces that launch from that carrier. So, that gives me great flexibility.

Having said all of that, it also has a profound deterring affect principally upon Iran. They know what the carrier is. They track the presence of the carrier. And I view a carrier is a critical part of a deterrent posture affective against Iran.

LURIA:
So, that actually leads into what the next part of my question would be is if you were to deploy Air Force assets to the region would you feel that you could have an equivalent deterrent effect by Air Force and a combination of other assets in the region if you were not to have a continuous carrier presence? And then secondly has the carrier presence or any of our presence actually deterred any of the recent Iranian aggressive because they continue to harass, aggress, even though we are putting more forces there. So, I was wondering what your assessment of that was.

MCKENZIE:
Sure, so I tend to think a land based air power is complimentary to sea based air power. Again, we can use them both. They both bring unique capabilities. Again, the particular and unique advantage of sea based air power is

its launches from a piece of United States sovereignty. So, there are no restrictions that can be--that'll be placed on where those airplanes go or what they do, which gives the commander in chief significant flexibility as we look at what we might want to do. So, that's a--that's a--the military component of it.

It is my--it is my best judgment that we have reestablished a form of rough deterrence, what I would call contested deterrence with Iran in the--in the wake of the striking of Quasem Soleimani and the attack on our bases. And part of that is based, and part of that deterrence is obtained by our obvious force presence in the theater. Force presence that was not there in the spring of 2019 that led them to undertake the cycle of violence that culminated in January.

LURIA:

Well, thank you. And pivoting more on that continuous presence, and I'd switch to Ms. Wheelbarger. Recently in your statement here, you discussed dynamic force employment and in January as that Lincoln was heading home, a spokesman for Naval Air Force San Diego said the new Navy deployment model of dynamic force employment means less editable up appointment--deployments will become more routine. So less predictable will be the routine.

And the statement went on to say the length of this deployment is not ideal or something that's going to become a regular thing, but they're not going to be as predictable as they were in the past. Our crews and families should, prior to deployment, discuss the possibility of something like this, i.e., and extended deployment happening. Do you think that the extension of the Lincoln was an example of--of what you really mean by dynamic force employment, and should be expect deployments to be of longer duration, eight months, such as the Lincoln in order to satisfy these requirements and these AORs?

WHEELBARGER:

Thanks for the question. I don't think we saw that particular example as a key--a key example of dynamic force employment. We want to be--

LURIA:

--So you think that was a misstatement by the spokesman for--

WHEELBARGER:

--No, I think--I think what we are--what we want to see is that dynamic force employment allows us to be as, I think the spokesman was trying to say, strategically predictable but operational operationally unpredictable. But we have to have the kind of forces that can respond to current events, both, you know, based on the adversary but also based on the situation within our forces. So it's--

LURIA:

--So would you say that--

WHEELBARGER:

--Extension is--- that's common, but it's best that something were going to need to be prepared for.

LURIA:

So would you say that we have been able to respond adequately when we had that delay in the Harry S Truman and the extension of the Lincoln? For the combatant commanders specifically and specifically for CENTCOM, have you felt that the Navy and the carrier fleet has been able to respond adequately to meet your needs for deterrence within the region?

MCKENZIE:

Through heroic efforts and just--just tremendous flexibility, yes, they have been able to do that. I am keenly aware of the total burden that places on the Navy in particular and that joint force in general when they meet these requirements.

LURIA:

Thank you. And I yield back.

SMITH:

Thank you. Mr. Waltz.

WALTZ:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and--and I certainly share the condolences for--for the two Marines that--that we just lost fighting ISIS. And I think that dynamic fighting ISIS right now, or resurgent ISIS in Iraq and what we just went through in Syria is exactly what we want to prevent happening in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

General McKenzie, you just mentioned a moment ago, you just testified that we have sufficient pressure on Isis and Al Qaeda to keep them on their back foot, but if we relieve that pressure, they could be and would likely be resurgent. So let's just fast-forward a bit. Let's presume that Taliban is sincere about peace, they enter into a process with the Afghan government, they meet all of our conditions for a full withdrawal in 14 months, although I have a lot of questions about what those conditions are, which I'll hold for the classified setting, but let's presume all of that happens.

I'm struggling to wrap my mind around how the Taliban has a military capability even partnered with the art Afghan army, which I think we would agree is not independently operable at this point to keep that sufficient pressure on half the war worlds terrorist organizations and one of the most difficult places in the world. So how does that--help me understand, help all of us understand how that happens in the absence of U.S. forces. Does the telegram have the military capability along with the Afghan army to keep sufficient pressure?

MCKENZIE:

So over the last several months in eastern Afghanistan, we watched the Taliban compress and crush ISIS presence on the ground in southern Nangarhar province, and they been very effective doing that. That's some of the worst terrain in the world. They paid a very steep price in their own fighters and--

WALTZ:

--Was that independent of our support?

MCKENZIE:

There was very limited support from us, and I would characterize that as very limited support from us. So they demonstrated capability to do it. It's very--it was a blood he must, but they did it. In fact, they--they don't--Isis really now no longer holds ground in Nangarhar province. They're trying to reestablish themselves up to the north and other provinces and it remains yet to be seen if they're going to be successful doing that and will know over time if they are.

But they've demonstrated capability to do that. Frankly, sir, it--it is more a question of will than capability and that will have to be developed in the fullness of time. I defer to no one in my distrust to the Taliban, but we--we will have the opportunity to defer--

WALTZ:

--So just--just to be clear. Sorry, I have limited time. You believe in the absence of all U.S. forces your military advice, the Taliban and the Afghan army have sufficient military capability to--to keep all of those not just ISIS, Al Qaeda, everything that exists in Pakistan to keep them at bay to keep the homeland safe--

MCKENZIE:

--True--

WALTZ:

--And--and I would just remarked that if we all know that if we have to fight our way back and that we will be attending, I think, many more funerals than a current sustained pressure campaign with limited forces.

MCKENZIE:

First of all, I shared those concerns. I think those are very reasonable concerns. It is less a capability that it is a question of will and it's less a question of will against ISIS than it is against Al Qaeda. And those--those are things that were just going to have to see in order to believe as we go forward as conditions are set or they of either meet those conditions or they don't meet those conditions.

WALTZ:

If we shut down Bagram airbase, I think there's--I think it's important to have on the record here in Syria, and Yemen, and other places we have basing capabilities around those countries whether it's Incirlic (SP), Idlib, Djibouti, what do we have around Afghanistan? Should those presumptions, should they not have the capability of the Taliban and--and ANA, what other bases do we have in terms of a Plan B to be able to conduct operations into Afghanistan in the Fatah (SP) or the western Pakistan?

MCKENZIE:

Well sir, so right now, we're executing withdrawal--

WALTZ:

--In the absence of Bagram, I mean, assuming playing this all out we withdraw all forces.

MCKENZIE:

So we have no plans beyond going to 8600 right now. No one given the any guidance to go to a lower force--

WALTZ:

--There's a public statement of zero forces full withdrawal in 14 months.

MCKENZIE:

There is. However, we had not developed military plans to that end yet.

WALTZ:

Okay. I think it's also worth noting that we still have an American hostage held by the Taliban just taken in the last few months. So I would be extremely concerned to see Taliban prisoner releases while the Taliban and the Haqqani network are holding a U.S. citizen former Navy diver hostage.

And then the last piece in terms of great power competition, I can't think of another American military base or coalition military base now that Manasseh (SP) is gone besides Bagram on China's western flank. Can you talk to the western flank of China and what platforms we have there?

MCKENZIE:

So the platforms we have are intermittent platforms as we go into conduct joint training but we have no permanent platform open the--up in the stands, as you noted, sir.

WALTZ:

Thank you, everyone, for your service. I appreciate your testimony.

SMITH:

Ms. Escobar.

ESCOBAR:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and thanks--

SMITH:

--Sorry, I--I apologize. I'm sorry, I was right. Ms. Escobar, go ahead. Sorry. I'll start it over.

ESCOBAR:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And many thanks to our witnesses for your presence here today and for your service. And I--I just want to say at the outset, obviously we all want to see peace happen. We--we are hoping for successful conversations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, but I do have some serious concerns, General McKenzie.

Secretary Esper has authorized the drawdown of the--to the 8600 troops. That's happening. That's happening before the deal between the Taliban and the Afghan government is sealed and it worked out. Given recent events, especially our need to strike against Taliban fighters just days after we signed the peace deal, what confidence do you have in the Taliban honoring their commitments to us? You keep saying it's not a question of capacity but that it's more a question of will. What confidence do you have in that will?

MCKENZIE:

So I have no confidence because I'm going to be driven by the observed facts. Either they will draw down the current level of attacks or they won't. And if they are unable to drop down current levels of attacks, then political leadership will be able to make decisions based on that.

But it doesn't matter whether I'm optimistic or I'm pessimistic. We'll see what happens on the ground. To date, Taliban attacks are higher than we believe are consistent with an idea to actually carry out this plan. Now that--that may be because the Taliban has made a decision at the top to continue those attacks and presses. It may be because the Taliban's leadership is fractured and it takes a while to get all this down to the subordinate leaders. Their command and control is not as effective or as rapid as ours. We are--we will note very soon on that.

But I would say first of all right now attacks are higher than we want although they have not chosen to attack coalition forces, they have not chosen to attack inside the major urban areas although ISIS has conducted some of those attacks. So we will see what happens going forward. The last point is we are going to go to 8600 and we're going to achieve that here by--by the middle of the summer. It is my best judgment and the judgment of the commander on the grounds General Scott Miller that we can be very effective in our CT efforts at that force level.

ESCOBAR:

What is our plan specifically and who makes the determination about when that--that line is crossed when we had enough, when we are not seeing enough progress--are there specifics? I understand you may not be able to divulge those in an unclassified setting but are there very specific measures that--that we will be using? Is it somebody's sense?

MCKENZIE:

So, we report we--we have a very sophisticated system for tracking attacks, how many were initiated--how many casualties were caused as a result of those attacks? Where those attacks o--occur. We report that and I have a--I have a recommendation on that, General Miller has a recommendation on that. It goes to the chairman and the secretary.

The decision about what is tolerable and what is not tolerable is not a military decision. That is a political decision, a policy decision. I defer that to--to Ms. Wheelbarger to talk about.

WHEELBARGER:

I will just add what I've heard the secretary--and you've probably heard the secretary say in response to Mr. (INAUDIBLE) question as well--14 months of going to 0 is an aspirational benchmark based on the conditions being achieved.

The Secretary is well prepared to look at the--look at the terrain in a few months and see what the Afghans and the Taliban have come to. And he has prepared he has said to me and I think he has said to the committees to readjust our force posture up or down based on what the conditions require to achieve our objectives which are to continue to ensure Afghanistan is not a safe haven for terrorists who could--who could particularly hit the homeland.

So, he is prepared to hit the truth on the ground and make decisions accordingly.

ESCOBAR:

Thank you. And, Ms. Wheelbarger, we know that we're at the beginning of the process and--and understandably we've got to wait and see and have high hopes. But you know, obviously keep close watch. But the inter Afghan dialogue phase which was supposed to start today has been delayed. How do we know this is not just the Taliban trying to run out the clock?

WHEELBARGER:

Sure. Like I said, before I arrived this morning I did ask if there were any updates and it did seem like there might be sort of a fig leaf from Ghani(PH) coming down where we actually will start those conversations today. I think all of us are have to remain somewhat skeptical that this is going to work precisely as planned but remain open and flexible to the Afghans over time working this out with themselves.

But again, our interests are continuing to put political pressure on them to achieve that objective while continuing to have the military platforms and posture to allow us to achieve our--our national security requirements.

ESCOBAR:

Perhaps not beginning withdrawal so soon would have helped provide some leverage for the Afghan government? I yield back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

SMITH:

Thank you. Mr. Mitchell.

MITCHELL:

Thanks, Mr. Chair. First, let me start by thanking you all for your service--for those you command you are in a tough neighborhood some days--many days and I appreciate it. Let's stay on the subject of Afghanistan which seems to be a significant (INAUDIBLE) if I have time hop to Syria, just to keep us entertained here.

I think Mr. Waltz comment which I want to--I want to reinforce is that General McKenzie, correct me, but I think with the ability to manage or to keep ISIS under control in Afghanistan very much depends upon the Taliban working with the Afghan Army in some cooperative manner to manage that or to keep that under control. Yet, we haven't exactly seen that the Taliban seems interested in--in doing that. Am I--am I mistaken in my impression at this point in time?

MCKENZIE:

You--you are correct. They know--we have not seen any movement in that direction. I would agree that coming to some ability to operate together or at least in a complementary fashion is going to be critical to their--to their movement forward.

MITCHELL:

Well, in keeping with the Mr. Waltz' question the reality is is while the 0 may be an aspirational goal the point that he makes which with all due respect, sir you--you avoided was--was if we withdraw from Baghram(PH) if they run out the clock don't attack coalition or U.S. forces, continue the current mode they're at we then have--have to face going back in because it's my under--it's my impression we don't have an alternative kind of staging that-in that area. Is that incorrect? Leaving Baghram is a problem.

MCKENZIE:

If we were to pull out completely from Afghanistan you are correct over the--we've looked at all kinds of over the horizon options and none of them are particularly good. Back in 2001, 2002 it was very difficult to get into Afghanistan in the first place Those problems, which present themselves again so I acknowledge that.

The only point I would make is and--and again, I emphasize I'm not optimistic or pessimistic. I'm just going to be driven by the facts here as we see it. Over a 14 month period the Taliban are also going to be acted upon by the Afghans. So it's not strictly that the Taliban have a perfect secret plan to take over.

You know, there are a lot of people in Afghanistan that have a strong view of the Taliban and the Taliban consistently polls at about 12 percent popularity in Afghanistan. So, they face their challenges too and we should not assume that they will run to victory as we withdraw.

MITCHELL:

Mr. Wheelbarger--Ms. Wheelbarger if you could relay to Secretary Esper and maybe you can if you get a chance relay it to the Secretary of State, I'm not sure it's an adequate standard to say so long as we the Taliban dial back or stop attacks on coalition or U.S. forces that we're comfortable saying it's all good in Afghanistan.

I support we don't want to be there, we have been there far too long now. But the idea that so long as you don't bother us we will go away and hope you don't bother anything in the future is--is let me put it this way--I told my management staff when I ran a company hope is not a plan. It's a last step before desperation. And, we need to have more indication that the Taliban and Afghans can actually work somewhat cooperatively before we just walk away and say we are done with it because we do not have to go back in. That would be catastrophic.

WHEELBARGER:

Understood. I will relay that back. I do think part of the conditions that we expect the Taliban to live up to is ensuring that they are not renewing their counter terrorism activities that brings insecurity and lack of stability to entire country. I've heard the Secretary say numerous times that he is prepared to ensure that we will defend our interests and that is, again, going after the terrorist elements that will now in the future pose external operations threat to us which means--

MITCHELL:

(INAUDIBLE) also included the one U.S. Armed forces hostage that the Taliban hold.

WHEELBARGER:

Understood.

MITCHELL:

And, if I were in a different seat, I'm not. I'm in this seat. There is no way in God's green earth I would sign off any agreement until that hostage was put in front of me in good condition. The idea they are holding a member of our Armed Forces and we signed some agreement offends me and I think it frankly, if I asked privately the gentleman sitting to your left I'm sure they would be equally offended.

We want them back. We want them back now and we want them back in good shape.

WHEELBARGER:

There is one thing I would add--I think this administration has been very, very focused on hostage releases and rescues so it continues to be a priority but I--I take your point.

MITCHELL:

Well, focus is one thing. Someone needs to relay the message that it's not acceptable I--I'm offended by it. Quickly, if I can make a comment about Syria--I think someone needs to explain to--not sure our Commanders as well, but also to the forces on the ground and the American people where our objectives are in Syria.

They seem to have changed--keep changing dramatically and it's not helpful--it's not helpful to our allies, it's not helpful to our forces on the ground, I'm not sure we understand them here. I was pretty blunt about my assessment that these material changes simply do not allow for a--a effective command in Syria and leave us vulnerable.

So, someone needs to explain to Congress never mind the gentleman sitting to your left, what our objective is in Syria and when we find that we have met that objective we are prepared to leave. So, I ask simply someone, sometime please? Cause that would be helpful.

SMITH:

Thank you. The gentleman is out of time. Ms.--Ms. Trahan.

TRAHAN:

I thank you, Mr. Chairman. General McKenzie, thank you for being here. You recently indicated that your biggest concern in the near term was not necessarily a direct Iranian attack--it's their proxies in areas like Iraq and Syria where they could come against us. And--and in your written testimony you also indicated that ample intelligence points to Iran's desire to continue malign activities that threaten American's lives. So could you please describe the threat of Iranian retaliation as you understand it conventional or by proxy forces to us, our--our soldiers and to our allies?

MCKENZIE:

Certainly, so Iran has--we believe that Iran has a long term vision of ejecting the United States from the theater--from the central command region. And, specifically the place where they would like to see that first would be in Iraq, that's the place that they would like to start.

So, there is a--they--they would believe they can apply significant pressure on us, raise the level of pain high enough so that we would come out. They have a lot of tools to do that in Iraq. They have a large Shiite militia--militia group there, numbering in the 10s of thousands that is responsive in varying degrees to Iranian control. But nonetheless they hold everything from explosively foreign penetrators, which killed a lot of people in Iraq in the 2007/2010 period to large rockets and precise missies that they can employ.

The Iranian desire I believe would be to try to that in a manner that is completely attributable to Iran. They may be wrong in making that guess because we are pretty confident we can determine attribution. But you know, what we've--what we've seen are a number of attacks on the U.S. embassy--some as recent as less than two weeks ago. Rockets have fallen very close. Rockets have fallen inside of the embassy compound. We have a variety of things that we do to protect ourselves and we have been--we have been good so far in doing that. That luck is not going to hold out forever. And at some point the degree of Iranian command and control over those Shiite militia groups may be tested. I have always said that Iran can certainly direct attacks in Iraq. Iran may not be able to prevent attacks from occurring in Iraq. And frankly, the fact that Qassim Soleimani is no longer there to tie it all together makes it a little bit more difficult for them to effect command and control

MCKENZIE:

even--even though I think the threat is less with his death.

TRAHAN:

Sure. So thank you. So as we draw down troops in Afghanistan I am wondering are we expanding our military footprint in the region? Are we reshuffling troops and I ask because I am concerned with force protection but I would also like visibility into what our troop presence is going to look like or as you project it through the year?

MCKENZIE:

Certainly. So we are on a glide slope to draw down to 8600 in Afghanistan. We will reach that goal by the middle of the summer. We will have in my judgment adequate force protection for those forces that remain there. On the other end of the theater in Iraq we have got a little--around 5000 U.S. forces there, GOT a number in Syria and i will be happy to talk about that in the closed session in just a little bit later but we believe that in general we have adequate force protection measures there. We are also in the process of bringing air defense systems, ballistic missile defense systems into Iraq in particular to protect ourselves against another potential Iranian attacks so we will look at those--I balance those two active theaters all of the time.

Now there are other forces obviously in the theater as well. Over the last few months as you know we brought forces into the kingdom of Saudi Arabia both to assure them and to add operational depth to our force presentation against Iran in order to deter them. Our build up at Prince Sultan Airbase or PSAB is indicative of

that. The--the beauty of that base is it is out of short range ballistic missile range of Iran but yet it's close enough for our various types of fighter attack aircraft to operate out of there. It is well defended and provide significant additional depth in theater.

We talked a little bit earlier about naval presence in the theater. Naval presence is always the most effective and flexible form of presence because you can dial it up and down and you don't have to worry again as I have noted earlier about access basing and overflight as you bring those in. So we constantly balance forces in the theater and I would just close by saying I was the director of the joint staff when the NDS was written. I am very much aware of the larger priority we need to place against the China threat, the Russia thread and other threats so I know that I know the cost that we ask when we bring forces into the CENTCOM AOR.

TRAHAN:

Thank you. I appreciate that. In my remaining time and I know I don't have much but I am wondering if Secretary could just comment on the diplomatic efforts that are riding alongside our military presence.

WHEELBARGER:

With respect to Iran specifically?

TRAHAN:

Yes.

WHEELBARGER:

Well, our major policy continues to be in economic and diplomatic pressure campaign. I don't--none of us see that light (INAUDIBLE) decreasing any time soon and we think that pressure is going to gain over time. Economically we do think that--that Iran economy faces a lot of challenges. They are reasonable yet but we think that over time the goal is to bring them back to the negotiating table for a more comprehensive deal.

SMITH:

Thank you. Mr. Bacon?

BACON:

Thank you Mr. Chairman. Thank you for being here today. Americans want to see a positive peaceful outcome in Afghanistan especially after 8 1/2, 18 1/2 years of war. We also can't afford to have Afghanistan return to a pre-9/11 capability where the Taliban are providing safe haven for Al Qaeda. I think today we have a minimal presence there at--at a cost that is much less than what we have had in years past however if we withdraw and the Taliban find themselves dominant in Kabul provide safe haven again I think it will be a much higher cost later. So those are some of my concerns. So my question general Mackenzie is what evidence do you have that the tallow band have severed their close ties or alliance with Al Qaeda?

MCKENZIE:

So we think in terms of two groups that threaten the United States. We are confident of the tallow bands picture on ISIS K(PH) as an example.

BACON:

Right.

MCKENZIE:

We have talked a little bit about that. I am less--I am less optimistic about Al Qaeda. That is something they are going to have to demonstrate that has not yet been demonstrated. The--not the beauty of it but the fact of it is as we go forward we are going to have ample time to see if they actually do that and that will be before we become a remarkably committed to a force presence that would not allow us to have adequate leverage in Afghanistan. I--I--we don't need to trust them, we don't need to like them, we don't need to believe anything they say. We need to observe what they do and we have the capability to do that.

BACON:

That would be the chief concern is that alliance with Al Qaeda. Let's say in 2 1/2 years the Taliban are largely in control of Kabul and they are providing safe haven to Al Qaeda what is our options at that point? How do we--how do we respond? I think the cost would be much higher than what we have--what we are putting on now. Just curious for your I know it is a hypothetical but just curious for your response. Where do we come in from and how do we hold them at check?

MCKENZIE:

Sir, so without getting into a hypothetical I would tell you that we know how we got in in 2001 so we have an object lesson in how to enter Afghanistan. It is difficult, it is painful, it is very expensive to do that but we did it. Having said that again I come back to we talk about this a lot. I think we are going to have a lot of opportunity to see the way this goes forward and the dynamic between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan and I am just not prepared to assume that the Taliban have good intentions, no. But I am also not prepared to assume that the government of Afghanistan is defenseless and--and unable to assert themselves and come to a workable agreement with the Taliban. We don't know the answer to that question. We are going to have good opportunity to observe and get the answers to those questions.

BACON:

I would say the strength of this is that it is delayed, and the agreement where we can watch and monitor turned up the thermostat or lower the thermostat based on Taliban response so I--I do appreciate that. Ms. Wheelbarger, I want to ask your thoughts on missile defense coordination and integration. As we know Iran has approximately 1000 ballistic missiles in the lot of the countries in the region need to have some capability to respond. How are we doing at helping them integrate a capabilities so it's not every man or woman for themselves?

WHEELBARGER:

Right. One of our key priorities at the moment is helping Saudi Arabia in particular be more capable and integrated with their own missile-defense assets. They do have significant numbers of them but I do think over the last few decades we have been trying to get them to improve their integration to advance their capability.

With respect to integration within the region what I would say is aspirational at best. I mean you could see these countries eventually improving their defense is by working together but we have many inter agency efforts to try to get our Gulf partners in particular to work more simply across numerous lines of effort and it's a--it is a long-term project I will just put it that way. But the key and I would defer to General Mackenzie as well to talk about what the military has been able to achieve in advancing particularly Saudi Arabia's capabilities.

BACON:

When we look at Iranian capabilities this is probably their primary capability to hold us at threat and our allies.

MCKENZIE:

Sir, it is and I--I would say Iran actually has about 2500 to 3000 ballistic missiles.

BACON:

Okay. Thanks for the update.

MCKENZIE:

But--but the point that Ms. Wheelbarger made is integrated air defense, the ability to sit for example if I go and look at a console at one of my ballistic missile defense sites in the UAE or I go up into another location far west of the theater we are going to see the whole theater in a common operational picture. That is the strength of the United States approach to war and with our NATO and coalition partners. We would like to have that capability replicated in the Gulf. We are working hard to that end. We begin with small steps. It has taken us a long time. When I was the J5 at U.S. Central command in 2011 we said the same thing so I am very much aware this is-- this is something we have not been very good at however the fact that there is a clear obvious evident threat tends to focus people and I think in particular the kingdom of Saudi Arabia is now focused on this.

BACON:

And I had a question for general Townsend but I will just maybe close with a comment because I'm running out of time. I just want to commend you for starting task force Somalia especially after Mandel Bay I think it is needed and I think so I just applaud the effort of your command for--for doing that. Thank you. I yield back.

SMITH:

Thank you. Ms. Slotkin?

SLOTKIN:

Hi, everyone. Hello. General Mackenzie can you just ask--answer for me is the U.S. engaged in hostilities against Iran or Iranian forces?

MCKENZIE:

No, we are not.

SLOTKIN:

Does--do you believe as CENTCOM commander that you have authorization for military force against Iran?

MCKENZIE:

No, I do not.

SLOTKIN:

Does the 2000 one or 2002 authorization of military force give you authority to get into hostilities with Iran?

MCKENZIE:

With the caveat that you always have the authority to defend yourselves.

SLOTKIN:

Of course self-defense but from the authorization?

MCKENZIE:
No, no, it does not.

SLOTKIN:

According to the IAEA quarterly report that just came out on March 2 Tehran now has enough enriched uranium to produce a nuclear weapon. They reported 220 pounds of enriched uranium which is three times what they reported in November 2019. Today in addition to more uranium we have more spinning centrifuges. The UN has been kicked out of many facilities. In addition as you noted Iranian proxies has become more active. We have had as you say we crossed a critical I forget your term, a critical threshold with the attacks, the ballistic missile attacks on the (INAUDIBLE) airbase which is personally sensitive to me since my son-in-law's unit is on that base. Are we more or less safe as a country from Iran and are our allies more or less safe than a year ago?

MCKENZIE:

So I think I would go from the period of exchange in early January. I think since then we have established a rough deterrence.

SLOTKIN:

Just from a year ago though. I mean you--your best military--I respect your best military advice in terms of a force protection matter our allies in the region, ourselves, our--our partners when you look at Iran in totality particularly the nuclear file which we know is the existential threat are we more or less safe? Are your forces more or less safe in theater?

MCKENZIE:

So I would say we are more safe in theater now because last spring there weren't many forces in theater and the fact that the force density was so low was a major part of the Iranian calculus to act out in the kinetic sphere. I think that by the posture we have established in the theater really beginning since May of last year. They are far more constrained than they were a year before then. So yes, I believe we are safer.

SLOTKIN:

From the nuclear threat, are our allies and partners more or less safe from a year ago?

MCKENZIE:

I would defer to Ms. Wheelbarger on the nuclear threat.

SLOTKIN:

Well, I'll--I'll take that. I want to ask a couple of questions on Iraq and Syria. We did lose two Marine special operators. My understanding is it took six hours to get to these guys. Can you help me understand since I know many of us are concerned about the golden hour and making sure we get to forces what happened, do we have enough on the ground to actually protect the forces we have?

MCKENZIE:

Sure. The terrain was vertical. It's some of the worst terrain in the world. I monitored it hour by hour along with general Pat White. There's no way to do it any faster than we did it. It's a very tough, difficult tactical situation. The problems we encountered were not problems of resources.

Sometimes you fight in hard ground, sometimes you someone falls a long way and has to be recovered. What you don't want to do is get somebody else killed and that recovery or put yourself in a situation where you're going to put more lives at risk. I'm completely confident the commanders on the ground out as quickly as possible.

SLOTKIN:

So should we expect additional, I mean hopefully not, but killed in action because of the terrain?

MCKENZIE:

Well, that's--so there's different kinds of terrain in Iraq. As you know, this is northeastern Iraq. Terrain is particularly bad up there. That's partially why ISIS is up there. We'll continue to operate there. Any time something like this happens, we take a look at our tactics, techniques, and procedures to make sure we're going at it at the most effective way. But--but as you know, combat is a clash of human wills and sometimes the bad guys are going to have a good day.

SLOTKIN:

Can you tell me there are reports in Syria of drones dropping mortars and grenades on oil--on our troops near or around oil fields. Can you help me understand what's happening there and we had adequate force protection?

MCKENZIE:

Sure. So we have reports and I don't think as many as NPR report, but yes, people work group one UAS', which are the small UAS'. They'll try to find a way to carry an explosive and fly it over either not necessarily us alone, but the Russians had some significant casualties in this regard, as have other nations that are operating there. So yes, it is a problem. We look at it very hard. It's one of my highest priorities.

SLOTKIN:

Who's operating those drones?

MCKENZIE:

So I think probably in this case, ISIS, but--but we're still working that. But if I had to judge today, I would say it was possibly ISIS, but probably not a state entity operating the trends.

SLOTKIN:

Okay. I yield back. Thank you.

SMITH:

Mr. Gallagher.

GALLAGHER:

Just a quick follow-up, do we know are those commercial off-the-shelf DJI drones that they weaponize?

MCKENZIE:

That would be my guess. They're, you know, as you know they're universally available.

GALLAGHER:

And then another follow-up to Ms. Slotkin's questions, so we--I think we're getting ready later this week to vote on HJ-Res 68, which directs the president to terminate the use of Armed Forces--use of Armed Forces for hostilities against Iran, but you have just said we are not engaged in hostilities against Iran, so one could say this legislation is unnecessary, but in your professional military judgment, what do you assess would be the impact of this legislation, particularly when it comes to our deterrent posture with respect to Iran?

MCKENZIE:

So sir, I have to confess I am not familiar with--I know the legislation exists, I've not done a detailed study of it. I know that our ability to did deter Iran effectively comes from two things, our capability and our will. And so the ability to demonstrate those two things are what provides a cognitive effect in the mind of the person you want to deter that no, you don't actually want to do something now.

GALLAGHER:

I'll ask the same question to Ms. Wheelbarger.

WHEELBARGER:

I think I'd follow up similarly that a signal to any potential adversary that we don't have support of Congress to defend ourselves, if necessary, would send a signal that would not be helpful to deterrence.

GALLAGHER:

And just to reiterate, we are not engaged in hostilities with Iran, though we retain, as always, inherently under article 2, the right to defend ourselves if attacked.

WHEELBARGER:

Yes.

GALLAGHER:

Similarly, do--are you aware of anything you're doing today exclusively because of the 2002 AUMF? Not the 2001, the 2002 AUMF. Are you aware of anything you're doing that relies on the 2002 AUMF?

WHEELBARGER:

As you know, that 2002 AUMF revised buttressing authority for what we're doing in Syria because the threat of ISIS emanating from Syria has been a supplemental justification for our military activity there. Our coalition forces, for example, rely on--on the--the defense of Iraq for their justification, so it's a mutual sign that we see the threat from ISIS from Iraq. I will say that I think the notification you all received on that so the money strike did include an additional 2002 AUMF justification for domestic legal basis.

GALLAGHER:

At the time, we got the assessments about perhaps some detentions we have reliance to AUMF. For the record, I disagree with that. I'm with you on opposing an attempt to undermine our deterrent posture with Iran and I think that let's legislation was unnecessary. I think it's far past time for us to repeal the 2002 AUMF, I think it's doing no work at all and it would be a good matter of congressional hygiene when it comes to war powers. But that's a debate for another day.

Quickly, I know we had a lot of discussion about Afghanistan. General Mackenzie, in the PB 21 budget request, it looks like the request for operation Freedom Sentinel is 14 billion while the request for enduring OCO requirements is 28 billion. So to clarify, if all U.S. service members left Afghanistan, with that 14 billion go down

to zero while that 28 billion would stay roughly the same as other forces stationed within the CENTCOM AOR would continue to conduct CT operations?

MCKENZIE:

Sir, I'll have to come back to you on the details of that. I can tell you it's my understanding that that budget does reflect a proposed force level of 8.6 thousand NOFS going forward from, like, July of this next year. But I'll have to take that one the record and come back with you with the detailed question that you just asked.

GALLAGHER:

And then for those who are concerned about the rapidity of our withdrawal from Afghanistan, what--I guess, to put it--what vital interests are at stake, if any, in Afghanistan and what is the geopolitical importance of Afghanistan?

MCKENZIE:

So that vital national interest that--that threatens us from Afghanistan is the ability of Al Qaeda and ISIS-K to generate attacks against the homeland of the United States and against the homelands of our allies and partners. So that--they--we've seen that happen. We know that's not something that we're talking about as a conditional future possibility. We know that it has happened in the past.

The best intelligence estimates tell us that if we do not maintain pressure on those two entities that in a period of time, and you can--you can say a year, you could say two years, you could say somewhere in between, they're going to generate the ability to do external attacks again, and that will manifest itself here in the United States. That is a vital national interest.

GALLAGHER:

And then finally, and most broadly, and I only have 25 seconds, I know no theater commander is ever going to argue for less attention and resources, but you understand the basic premise of the NDS, which is that, because China is the pacing threat, INDOPACOM is the priority theater, not CENTCOM?

MCKENZIE:

I was the joint staff J5 director of strategic plans and policy and the director of the joint staff during the creation of that document. I was present at the creation. I'm intimately familiar with it.

GALLAGHER:

A great title for a memoir. Thank you.

MCKENZIE:

It is.

SMITH:

Thank you. Ms. Torres small.

TORRES SMALL:

Thank you, Ms. Chair. Thank you, ranking member and thank you all so much for your service. General McKenzie, I really appreciate your comments during your opening statement about how important it is that we be adaptable to future Iranian threats. And DOD has spent billions of dollars on kinetic and non-kinetic counter

drone systems to that effect. These systems are often tested at White Sands initial range, which is in the district that I represent.

However, they have yet to be fielded widely and I remain concerned that our operators are under significant threat from especially small drones and enemy--enemy drones swarms especially from Iran and its allies and proxies. Is it accurate that your command is experimenting with new and more effective counter drone capabilities that utilize artificial intelligence and autonomous systems?

MCKENZIE:

We aggressively pursue anything that will improve the capabilities, particularly against those group one and two UAS', as you mentioned. That is one of the things that worries me the most in the theater every day. It is the vulnerability of our forces to those small UAS'.

TORRES SMALL:

And specifically to the question about AI and autonomous systems?

MCKENZIE:

So I am aware of some experiment Tatian in that. I'll have to come back to you on a more details on that.

TORRES SMALL:

Okay, we'll take that for the record.

MCKENZIE:

I would tell you we have a very broad set of joint requirements to drive that, so it's possible there's something there.

TORRES SMALL:

We'll take that for the record as it's my understanding there's been specific testing (INAUDIBLE), so I'd love to-- to look into that further. And I will submit this question to the record as well but can you please provide us a plan for FY 21 that would enable us to accelerate the efforts that you are taking?

MCKENZIE:

Absolutely. I'd--I'd be delighted to do that.

TORRES SMALL:

Fantastic. And are your commands needs for effective counter drunk systems being met currently?

MCKENZIE:

I'm convinced that system is generating as much as it can. The secretary and I have talked about this. I own a lot of the systems that are available across the entire United States inventory. I am not satisfied with where we are and I believe we are at great risk because of this.

TORRES SMALL:

Fantastic. And so you're also exporting options that we do not currently own, correct?

MCKENZIE:

That is correct. We are open to anything and a lot of smart people are looking at this. We're not there yet, but I think the Army having executive agency for this will actually help in a lot of ways. It will provide a focus to these efforts. So we--this is a significant threat.

TORRES SMALL:

Thank you so much. Switching over to Africa briefly, it is estimated that over the next decade seven out of the 10--10 of the world's fastest-growing economies will be in Africa. Against the back--backdrop of tremendous--

TORRES SMALL:

opportunity on the continent, China has ramped up its engagement. And this--this was distributed to all of us; I think it's a pretty clear example of China's ramped up engagement. Not only surpassing the United States as Africa's largest trading partner, but also expanding its military presence through an overseas base in Djibouti and increased arms sales. And what's interesting is this also shows that Djibouti has one of the largest debts to China on the continent.

So, General Townsend, is it accurate that strategic investments in development and diplomacy support defense to demonstrate that the United States is a better partner for developing countries than China?

TOWNSEND:

Absolutely they do. We work at AFRICOM we work everyday hand in hand with our diplomatic partners and our development partners.

TORRES SMALL:

Thank you so much. And, likewise, what are the national security costs of seeding ground to our competitors like China, especially in continents like Africa?

TOWNSEND:

Well, as you can see from the diagrams, Russia and China are competing really hard on the African continent. I don't believe that we have to out compete them at all 53 countries of the AFRICOM AOR, 54 can include each on the continent. We don't have to out compete them everywhere. But, we have to pick and choose where we need U.S. access and influence in the future. And there's probably some places where maybe if they're--if they have the edge over us it's okay. It's not critical for our national security.

So, I think that it's very important that we look at the continent and decide where we're gonna prioritize our efforts.

TORRES SMALL:

Where do you think we're not investing now that we really should be?

TOWNSEND:

I think in global or a great power competition.

TORRES SMALL:

Within Africa.

TOWNSEND:

Yeah. I think we're appropriately focused right now. And the whole point of this blank slate or a COCOM review that the secretary is running with the entire department is to focus all of our efforts more at global power of competition than we have been in the past. So, I think we've got the right focus.

TORRES SMALL:

Okay. And I can take that for the record if you want to supplement any specific locations.

TOWNSEND:

Sure.

TORRES SMALL:

Thank you. I yield the remainder of my time.

SMITH:

Thank you. Mr. Byrne?

BYRNE:

Let me follow up on that last line of questions, General, that you said we need to prioritize, what would you say the priorities are?

TOWNSEND:

Well, the Secretary of Defense has given me clear guidance. First is to maintain our U.S. ability to implement our war plans in the world. And second is to compete with China and Russia. Third is to focus on the counter violent extremists, the violent extremists groups that threaten U.S. interests and the U.S. homeland. And, fourth, is to be prepared to respond to crisis on the African continent. So, those are my priorities from the Secretary of Defense. They're--they're clear and we're--we're working through how we actively ensure those are adequately resourced.

BYRNE:

Maybe I misunderstood what your answer was before; I thought you were talking about priorities with regard just to trying to measure up in the competition with Russia and China. Are there priorities that you have within that?

TOWNSEND:

There are. And they basically revolve around ensuring we have access and influence in selective parts of the continent and I'd prefer to take the rest of that in the classified session.

BYRNE:

Okay, fair enough. Let me follow up one more and if you need to say this is classified as well, that's fine. Do you feel like that you have the resources that you need to meet those priorities?

TOWNSEND:

Today I think AFRICOM is adequately resourced to do what we've been told to do.

BYRNE:

Let me ask you about--and maybe you're not the right person to ask, but I'll just ask it anyway. Where are we on Libya right now?

TOWNSEND:

I'll defer to my colleague from the Department of Defense.

BYRNE:

Okay.

WHEELBARGER:

Yes, if I could just respond to your previous line of questioning real quickly, I just want to highlight that our overall competition with Russia and China on the continent is a whole of government effort more than just the military tool. We are looking--we have prosper Africa, which is a White House-driven effort to increase economic activity from our private sector in Africa, find ways for the African economies to adjust better to--so the private sector entities in the western model and lest just these sort of predatory funding that the Chinese provide, as well as supplemented by diplomacy and development aid. So, we do have a very strong whole of government effort that prioritizes more than just the military component.

I lost your second question, I'm sorry. Libya, yes. We are very concerned with the events in Libya. Obviously, it's a location of numerous other powers competing with each other. You see Russia and you see Egypt. You see Turkey. We are overarching strategy is to continue to be able to address the terrorism threat that we see there. And I think we can effectively address that while bringing diplomacy to bear to bring both sides of that--of basically the civil war together, recognizing that the military tool in Libya needs to be part of a functional government and not actually running that government. So, we continue to work with sort of both competing factions and also try to call on other powers to not continue to destabilize and ignore arms embargos that are in place.

BYRNE:

Have things gotten worse or better in the last year in Libya?

WHEELBARGER:

I would access they've gotten worse.

BYRNE:

What are we doing about that?

WHEELBARGER:

Well, we are, again, our number one priority for us is the counter terrorism effort. Number two, with respect to the ongoing strike, that's a diplomatic led effort from our state department colleagues, trying to work with our European partners as well to bring the conflict to an end given--given, as I think General Townsend said earlier, the threat emanating from northern Africa is--is a most acutely a European challenge, but we are--we are very cognizant, especially from the Department of Defense's perspective of what we see as sort of Russia encirclement and eastern led and something that is complicating and a challenge.

BYRNE:

With a minute 10 seconds left, can you tell me where we are in Yemen?

WHEELBARGER:

Yemen, yes, once again, the U.S. is trying to support our diplomatic colleagues at the State Department and the UN led by Martin Griffit (PH) and his efforts to bring those competing forces together. We have seen some successes in the Sweden Deal (PH) agreement between the two sides and some efforts to have; I wouldn't call it a cease fire, but minimizing violence. The Houthis (PH) like the Taliban are not easily trusted. But, we do see that there's renewed interest I think from the Saudi led coalition to find an end to the conflict that we just continue to believe that there is no military solution to it. It has to be a diplomatic political solution. And I'll just also add and continue to support our Saudi and UA partners and how they need to defend themselves against the UAE (PH)--UAV and ballistic missile challenges coming out of Yemen.

BYRNE:

Thank you. I yield back.

SMITH:

Thank you. Mr. Crow?

CROW:

Thank you, Chairwoman. Thank you to all of you for your testimony and continued service. I'd like to start by clarifying the timeline issue that I've been struggling with a little bit. The administration directed General Miller to conduct an assessment of--of troop withdrawal in Afghanistan last year. Is that correct? And based on that assessment he came up with the 8,600 number is that correct? I'm sorry--

MCKENZIE:

--That's correct. That is correct.

CROW:

Okay. General Miller told a group of us when we were in Afghanistan in October and then again during testimony in December that that 8,600 drawdown was going to occur regardless of whether or not there was an agreement with the Taliban, is that your understanding as well?

MCKENZIE:

No, that is not my understanding. Our understanding is this was driven--this was a branch plan that we held. We could adopt it if directed to do so. But, we--but we didn't have clear guidance to do it until recently. So, we were not planning to do this until we received presidential direction. That may be seem like a very fine point, but it's actually a big deal. We have plans for a lot of things. We had a plan to go to 8,600.

CROW:

No, it is a big deal. But, so you're saying that the 8,600 drawdown was only going to occur if there was a peace agreement with the Taliban, is that what you're saying?

MCKENZIE:

What I'm saying from the military--from the military side, we were gonna go to 8,600 when directed to do so by national leadership of the United States. I defer the rest of that actually to Ms. Wheelbarger.

WHEELBARGER:

I'll just add I do think, based on General Milley's--I'm sorry, Miller's advice, we were prepared and planned to go to 8,600. And the secretary was prepared to adjust the force posture if in the absence of an agreement if that was in our national security interest. But, no decision had been made to do so.

CROW:

Okay, independent of an agreement with the Taliban?

WHEELBARGER:

Yes. He was prepared to do that if it looked like it was necessary or appropriate for us, given our desire to instill readiness in the force. And being able to achieve the mission--

CROW:

--Well, as of October of 2019 was it your understanding that that drawdown was to occur?

WHEELBARGER:

No.

CROW:

Okay, how about December of 2019?

MCKENZIE:

It was a contingency, but it was--we didn't have a date to start it. And no intent to execute it until directed. And we had no direction to do so.

CROW:

Well, then the folks in this committee are getting contradictory information. And I would recommend that you clear it up within the Department of Defense. Secondly, I had the opportunity to review the entire agreement, including the annexes, 2,400 Americans have given their lives in Afghanistan, over 20,000 had been wounded. This is America's war, not any one administration's war. Are there plans for the--within the administration to release the entire agreement so the American public can see under what terms we are gonna be withdrawing from Afghanistan?

WHEELBARGER:

My understanding is the two side agreements or annexes are not public for operational requirements and I will defer to my colleagues on why that is the case and that they're not intended to be secret from the committees but continue to be not public to the public.

MCKENZIE:

I would echo that.

CROW:

Okay. Well, I've read the entire agreement and I see no reason why they could not -- not being (INAUDIBLE) I just want to be very clear that I'm a leave as do many people on this committee that the American public deserve to know under what terms we are withdrawing from Afghanistan. Lastly in October when a group of us was in

Afghanistan it was very clear to us by everybody that we talked to that the Afghan national defense and security forces was incapable of standing up on its own any time in the next couple of years yet under the plan we will completely withdraw including support services and contractors within 14 months. If that occurs will the Afghan national defense and security forces be capable of standing up on its own?

MCKENZIE:

That is going to be another discovery-based process as we go forward so we are going to go to 8600 by the summer. Conditions on the ground will dictate if we go below that. If conditions on the ground are not permissive my advice would not be to continue that reduction. That would not be my decision, that would be my advice. So that will be based on performance of the Afghan military, their ability to incorporate the talent ban if the tallow band is going to be incorporated at all. I will have an opportunity to give advice on this. I have an opportunity to give advice on the decisions that have just been made. So these are not things that will happen in and of themselves.

CROW:

So 14 months from now the Afghan national defense and security forces are not capable of standing up on their own and defending Afghanistan and the government it will be your advice not to withdraw those support services?

MCKENZIE:

Absolutely that would be my advice but that is a future contingency and there are a lot of--it's far more complex than just that but yes, I will have a--and I will have an opportunity to give that advice.

CROW:

Okay. And what are we doing--pivoting to Iraq very briefly what are we doing now to protect the Syrian Kurds, stateless persons and Syrian nationals who fought with us to make sure that them and their families are secure against attacks in the region?

MCKENZIE:

So as you know the area that we control in Syria with our Kurdish partners is generally what we call the Eastern serious security area. We have trained and continue to train significant internal security forces to maintain local security. We can be answerable for that through our STF partners and through our other partners there. I am confident that we have measures in place to protect them now. I--I am obviously less confident if you go into Western Syria because we don't have the ability to reach out to there.

CROW:

Thank you. I yield back.

SMITH:

Thank you. Mr. Brooks?

BROOKS:

Thank you. I have got four quick points before I get to my questions. Point number one General McKenzie in your written testimony you state that quote all wars have a political end". I think that is very insightful. Number two, the United States has been in Afghanistan the time equivalent of a little bit more than five World War II's, five world war two's. That is a remarkable statistic. Number three in my judgment our military has performed superbly and we won in Afghanistan. We effectively destroyed Al Qaeda's operational capability in the early years of the war. We toppled the tallow band government and we killed Osama bin Laden. Number four, I am

skeptical that the Afghan people adequately appreciate America's sacrifice of American lives in treasury on their behalf. Perhaps you have a different view on that but that is my view is I don't think that we are properly appreciated for the sacrifices that we have engaged in in Afghanistan. With that kind of as a backdrop the question, the text of the Afghan peace agreement appears to commit the United States to withdrawing its forces within 14 months subject to conditions on the ground. General McKenzie Y was 14 months chosen?

MCKENZIE:

I would defer to the negotiator to arrive at that--to arrive at that point. I--I cannot answer the question why 14 versus 13 versus 22 months. I--I do not know the answer to that question, sir.

BROOKS:

Does 14 months allow America to withdraw its forces and equipment from Afghanistan safely?

MCKENZIE:

It does if conditions are applied to that withdrawal and we hold to the conditions.

BROOKS:

What is the least amount of time needed to safely withdraw American forces and equipment from Afghanistan?

MCKENZIE:

I would prefer to talk about that in a closed session and I would be happy to do that.

BROOKS:

Ms. Wheelbarger same three questions. First, why was 14 months chosen?

WHEELBARGER:

Unfortunately I do have to defer to the State Department negotiators as well. I don't have insight.

BROOKS:

Do you have a judgment as to whether that 14 months allows America adequate time to safely withdraw our forces and the?

WHEELBARGER:

I trust my military colleagues to do all they can to ensure in a removal or retrograde of our troops is done as with force protection being their number one priority.

BROOKS:

And do you also have no opinion that you are willing to express in this setting about the minimum amount of time required for us to safely withdraw our troops and our equipment, salvageable equipment from Afghanistan?

WHEELBARGER:

I would assess that 14 months is probably enough time to withdraw but safely I just want to second what we have said before which is 14 months is aspirational trying to set sort of a timeline suggestion that both eyes can see their objectives potentially being fulfilled and therefore giving us the conditions that we feel is in our national

security interest to actually withdraw. Again all of this is going to be based on whether they commitments are made and the security situation is such that we can continue to defend our own interests.

BROOKS:

General Townsend moving to Africa what in your judgment are the most important flashpoints or critical areas in Africa at this time that we should focus our primary efforts on?

TOWNSEND:

First, I would say Somalia and specifically Southern Somalia in the Kenya border region and southern part of Somalia. Secondly I would say in west Africa in the Sahel region, in the tri-border region that is formed by Mali(SP), Niger and Burkina Faso and where that descends down to the littoral states.

BROOKS:

Back to General McKenzie if the Afghan talks do not begin as scheduled will the United States withdrawal its troop withdrawal and if so for how long and perhaps Ms. Wheelbarger would be better to answer that but I will defer to each of you.

MCKENZIE:

Sir, I would defer to her but I would also point out to you that that withdrawal has begun.

BROOKS:

About 3000 troops more or less?

MCKENZIE:

It is a small number. It--it is not linear. It will go you know it won't be a certain number every week as units come and go but--but it has begun.

WHEELBARGER:

And again in my conversations with the Secretary his comfort level with that withdrawal decision was not just based on the agreement but based on the assessment that we can continue to achieve our missions with that force posture. If something on the ground changes in light of the tallow band not keeping its commitments not just on the inter-Afghan agreement but on their use of violence. It is a decision he is willing to readdress.

BROOKS:

Well, I pray that we will not be there indefinitely. Thank you for your service.

SMITH:

Thank you. Ms. Houlahan?

HOULAHAN:

Thank you and thank you all for being here today. My questions have to do with women and girls, the beginning parts of my question. The women, peace and security act reflects the growing body of evidence confirming that the inclusion of women in peace and in the peace process helps to reduce conflict and to advanced ability. Research shows that higher levels of gender equality are associated with lower propensity for conflict. Data from

countries around the world demonstrate that women's inclusion in peacekeeping units, police forces and in the security sector improves accountability and decreases the abuse against civilian--civilians.

So one of my first questions and this goes along with Mr. Crow's question is can you first comment on whether or not there was any aspect of the agreement with the Taliban that related to women and to girls?

WHEELBARGER:

Based on my conversations with my State Department colleagues the focus on this being an inclusive inter-Afghan agreement would include the necessities that women in particular are a part of the peace negotiations inter-Afghan peace negotiations.

HOULAHAN:

Gentlemen do you have any--

MCKENZIE:

I would associate my remarks with that. The only other point I would say is I particularly agree with the inclusion of women in policing activities send low-level tactical activities is extremely helpful. It is difficult to achieve in Afghanistan as you are aware but our inability to do better than we are having the results we are getting is not from a lack of trying. We are trying very hard on that.

HOULAHAN:

Sir, I know you can't really (INAUDIBLE) that area (INAUDIBLE)

TOWNSEND:

I can't speak to the Taliban issue.

HOULAHAN:

So my understanding is that there is no inclusion of women and girls in the agreement and any of the aspects of the agreement and so I find that really disappointing and I don't know who to aim my eye or advance so I would just like to understand that better and may be off-line if we have the opportunity to talk about that I would appreciate it because it certainly seems that everybody in--and I was on the trip with Mr. Crow. Everyone who we were with assured us that that was important you know we had opportunities to meet with a lot of folks about that particular issue and it would be really disappointing if that was the case.

Can you comment now on how AFRICOM and CENTCOM have engaged women in counterterrorism efforts in your regions? How are you working to make sure that we do continue to include this important part of our population?

TOWNSEND:

Sure. So women in peace and security is sort of part of our DNA at AFRICOM I actually have a full time gender advisor on our staff there we--this is an issue that is embedded in every training event we do on the continent or in Europe for example and so just three quick examples. We have had a recent communication symposium which I spoke at where we brought women armed--in the armed forces from African nations to Germany for a symposium. We conducted a female Intel officer course on the continent and we just had a fairly large scale exercise called Flintlock. It's a special operations forces exercise. It had a women's peace and security component to it. So we--we worked this hard to impress upon our African partners the importance of this.

HOULAHAN:
Thank you, sir.

MCKENZIE:
So I would echo what General Townsend said. You know, we have two tactical areas of operation where the ability of women to interact in a tactical level is critical to obtain cultural entry into locations. So on the U.S. and other coalition side, fully embedded, is a critical capability that we simply cannot do without. And I'm referring specifically to Afghanistan, Iraq, and parts of Syria as well.

Reach--outreach to our partners is--it's better in some areas than others. Afghanistan, there a there are profound cultural barriers to doing it. We work it across the entire theater. It is integral to all our training activities. And so I'm a very big supporter of it.

HOULAHAN:
Thank you. Ms. Wheelbarger?

WHEELBARGER:
Sure. I'll just add I myself have visited the female commandos at that work with Scotty Miller, and they're impressive and important. I will also add for my perspective from my position, I tried--one of the things I've tried to put a lot of energy to his meeting with parliamentarians, particularly female parliamentarians around the world because including female voices more than just security structures but actually in representational democracy is part of what we should be pushing forward. So that's a key point that I strive to do.

HOULAHAN:
And I--I couldn't obviously agree with you more and I did have the opportunity when I was over--over with the CRODEL (SP) is what we called it to have the opportunity to meet with our side who is leading the charge on women and girls issues. I only have 30 seconds left, so I'll just ask this question for the record.

General Votel, your predecessor, General McKenzie, stated that cyber will be integrated through all operations. However, since come continues to be challenged by constrained resources, including trained cyber security personnel. I was wondering if you could comment on whether or not you continue to feel the effects of constrained cyber resources and trained personnel and how you would propose to solve that issue. And the same for, you know, both--both theaters. And I only have four seconds, so if it's okay, I'll just take that for the record.

MCKENZIE:
We'll come back to you on the record.

HOULAHAN:
Thank you.

SMITH:
Thank you. Mr. Scott.

HOULAHAN:
I yield back.

SCOTT:

Thank--thank you, Madam chair. Ma'am, gentlemen, thank you for being here. I--one thing I do want to mention I'm a little taken back that we have left Sudan on the state sponsor of terrorism list along with countries like Iran. That country has come a long way since the incidence incidents with Darfur, and I'm disappointed that the State Department put additional conditions on them coming off of that list.

As we look to work by, with, and through countries in that region, if we leave them on the state sponsor of terrorism, there left with no choice but to move towards China and Russia. And so I hope that any assistance you can give us with helping resolve that, you--you will do. I'm--as we talk about China, I'm extremely concerned, especially about the natural resource extraction and--and as we met with you in peacekeeping mission in Mali, they expressed concerns that the effectively the theft of the natural resources of many of the countries would, in the end, lead to civil war in--and many of those countries, and I hope that we are attempting to make sure that the people of those countries get a square deal as much as possible.

General Townsend, thank you for your hospitality as some colleagues of mine visited AFRICOM. I've been in that area a couple of times. One of them was at--with General Fernez (SP) at Djibouti for approximately week when, went to Manda Bay (SP), spent some time in Somalia, Mogadishu. I'm a little taken back at the lack of assets at that base for it to be a--under the command of somebody, I believe he was a two star at the time. There are--there are just very few assets in Djibouti and I'm concerned about the lack of assets available to our teams in the region.

General Townsend, you're--you're very kind in providing resources to my colleagues and I to travel to see a couple of your ODA teams in Africa. The--we saw one ODA operating with 127 echo program, one--one team operating without. Could you speak to the members of the committee about the differences in the teams that operate with the 127 echo program and those that operate without it?

MCKENZIE:

Sure. Congressman, first, you know, you ask about

TOWNSEND:

Sure. Congressman, first, you know, you asked about let me kind of double back to something you said a moment ago about we hope that we are helping these countries get a square deal with the Chinese. The Department of State has an initiative--

MCKENZIE:

--That's right--

TOWNSEND:

--Where they review contracts with these countries. It's a free service. Bring your contracts in, we'll read the Chinese version, will read the version in your language, and will tell you where the traps are and if there's differences in the versions. I think this has gone a long way to help some of the countries on the continent avoid--avoid the debt trap diplomacy problem.

To your question about resources in Africa, you know, I've--I've served around the globe, a lot of time in CENTCOM. In AFRICOM, our troops and our efforts there are the most thinly resourced of any I have ever encountered or had to contend with. That said, we are not in the lead in any place on the African continent. We support our international partners. African partners, European partners, et cetera. Amazon (SP), UN, AU partners.

So I think if--if our troops are frustrated, could they do more if they had more? Absolutely they could, but it's not their place to do more. It's their place to support our partners. That's our role. And sometimes that's a little hard

to get our more junior leaders to understand because they know what they can do, especially veterans of other theaters know what they could do if they had more resources. So it's--we are constrained, but I think it's by deliberate choice.

Your specific question about 127 echo and trip, for example, 333--333 resourced force are significant. The 127 echo essentially has full resourcing because it's a force that's operating with U.S. oversight and control and the 333 program as a partner force. They're just different sections authorized by Congress as to what we can provide those forces.

SCOTT:

General, I'm very short on time. I again want to thank you, but I do want to mention this, and this is not a military mission, it would be more about State Department mission. But we're bringing men and, predominantly men in that area and--and were training them in military tactics and they had a--effectively a third grade education level and we have them 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. I do think that it would be a worth--worthwhile for the United States with other governments through some type of aid program to provide educational resources for--for those meant while there they are on those bases.

SMITH:

Thank you.

SCOTT:

Otherwise we are training somebody and then releasing them without an education.

SMITH:

Thank you. Mr. Brown.

BROWN:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Let me just preface by stating the obvious. Africa is a large continent. Three and a half times the size of the United States. 54 nations, very diverse in its challenges and opportunities. So as I asked my questions, I don't want anyone to think that I'm confused that it's, you know, one nation and homogenous or monolithic.

General Townsend, I think you're right, you know, that our soldiers may not be, you know, he said, according to you, "not their place to do more." But I will say that after meeting with you in Stuttgart with representative Scott, when we went to Africa, USAID said they could do more if there were more of you. The State Department mission said that they could do more if there were more of you, so there's a lot more that could be happening in Africa in terms of development and--and diplomacy with a larger military presence.

Let me ask you this question, you know, and I really appreciate this placemat that you provided. You provided a classified version when we were in Stuttgart. It's scary when you look at the trend line of China's presence both you know, the infrastructure, the business investments, the arms sales, African nations don't want to be caught in the middle between the United States and China or Russia. But my question is what will the DOD, AFRICOM do to assure and ultimately deliver on the desire to be the preferred partner for African nations? And while you're answering that, maybe you can, once again, just defined great power competition with--with China and Africa.

TOWNSEND:

Thanks, Congressman. So the first part of your question about great power or global power competition, as I like to refer to it, really, it's all about gaining and maintaining influence. That's what that competition is all about. So

in some future rainy day, we had the access and influence that we need. So we are in a struggle with China and Russia to gain and maintain that influence. What they want from us, so we're not--we can't compete

TOWNSEND:

with China we are not going to build stadiums and railroad San ports and--and palaces which are all things China builds on the continent. But what they do want from us says they want help building their capacity of their security forces and they would ever help with the counterterrorism problem that they have. So even though some people don't--may not necessarily agree with this I believe in Africa building partner capacity and counterterrorism efforts or counter VEO efforts are a way we do global or great power competition in Africa because that is what our partners are hungry for. They come to us because of our capacity to do that, they come to us because of our skill and they come to us because of our--how we treat them and our values.

BROWN:

Let me interject with another question. Can you briefly describe how you are going to deploy the first security forces assistant brigade that you now have in your AOR?

TOWNSEND:

Sure. So I can cover this in more detailed in the classified session but we had them they are already - make some of them are already on the continent doing the--they--they have been leaning forward since about October and they move very quickly once we got approval. We are going to deploy them in some countries with persistent presence and some of our highest priority countries we will have persistent presence with those partners and in other countries we will have a sort of an episodic or--or a scheduled presence and so in some places they--they will add, they will take up--they will elevate our game because they can advise and train at a higher level than some of our soft forces that are actually training you know at units of action at--at the small unit level.

BROWN:

Let me see if I can get this one in. I know it is an (INAUDIBLE) environment and when I was there in August I mean it takes weeks to get major end items in place. I mean it--it--if not months it takes weeks to get repair parts to the ODA teams. Now that you are--you are putting--bringing in the ASFAB(SP) coming what--what infrastructure needs--what are the unmet infrastructure needs or logistical support needs on the continent?

TOWNSEND:

I don't think that the ASFAB has any additional requirements that other elements of DOD have on the ground. Theirs--theirs are basically the same. We will make sure they have the right support, the right security wherever we send them in Africa they will be properly supported. I think they're going to probably if any of them are veterans of Afghanistan or Iraq they are going to be shocked when they first arrive by the level of resourcing that I was referring to earlier how thinly resourced Africa is. They're--it's going to be--it is very austere, very expeditionary as you have seen with your own eyes.

BROWN:

High-yield back Mr. Chairman.

SMITH:

Thank you and I just want to emphasize a point that General Townsend made and Mr. Brown elicited is you know what is the value add that we have to build relationships in Africa? China is throwing all kinds of money around but it really is steering my trip in Tunisia actually this was a huge point to me. They--they want us and need us as the most reliable partner on security. That is something that Russia and China literally can't offer.

They don't have sustainable equipment, they don't have the training, it is a skill set that we bring that helps us--helps us build that relationship. Obviously there are other things that we do with diplomacy and USAID and all of that but that security relationship is--is a way to build partnerships in Africa without a question. Mr. Rogers?

ROGERS:

First, let me thank all of you for your service to our country and for making yourself available today. General McKenzie and your unfunded priorities list U.S. address a need for more drones and surveillance to increase your ISR capability for base resilience and defense. Is that something--are you trying to fill a gap or is it you just don't have enough ISR capability at present?

MCKENZIE:

Every commander--every combatant commander wants more ISR capability. There--there are current plans to reduce the number particularly of MQ9(SP) drones that are unavailable. We would like to see if there is a way that we can keep those in the theater and continue to use them. I recognize that there is a pressing requirement for those drones worldwide and there are other places that they can be used. Nonetheless we believe we have a genuine requirement for them both in the VEO fight as well as positioned against Iran even though the MQ9 is a vulnerable platform against some Iranian capabilities none the less particularly in places like the Strait of Hormuz and other areas it gives us visibility in--in intelligence gathering capabilities that we might not otherwise have.

ROGERS:

Was this a request that you put in your base request list and was pushed to you for list or was it initially put into you for list?

MCKENZIE:

Sir I--I will have to come back to you on the details of that. I believe we were responding to a desire - Mac a very reasonable and understandable desire by the Air Force to divest of some legacy systems in their request so we were reacting to that. I will have to come back to you with a detailed answer to that and I will.

ROGERS:

Great and I very much appreciate your Birmingham, Alabama accent. I am glad you haven't lost it in all of your years of service around the world.

MCKENZIE:

Sir, thank you.

ROGERS:

I picked up on it real quick. General Townsend your recent completion of the exercise flintlock(SP) exercise 2020 with your African partners tell me about what if anything that did to increase your capability to combat violent extremist in the region.

TOWNSEND:

Thanks Congressman. I--I would like to also join General McKenzie in his comments about the ISR. We are in the same boat as CENTCOM so we--we understand that those resources could be used elsewhere in the world. We also know the Air Force would like to transition to a higher and more capable platforms and they are going to have to divest some of the lower end stuff but the lower end stuff works really well for us in AFRICOM and in CENTCOM.

On your question about flintlock so flintlock is an exercise for special operations forces and it is very much directly focused on counterterrorism it--it is about improving and building partner capacities so these countries come together and we operated this year in Mauritania(SP) and in Senegal were the two main areas of focus and I think that well, you could just read from some of the quotes from some of the press reports the participants how much they thought they got out of flintlock. I thought flintlock is one of our more successful exercises and I think it helps build capacity for counterterrorism operations in Africa writ large.

ROGERS:

And it is an annual exercise?

TOWNSEND:

It is.

ROGERS:

And how many years has it been taking place?

TOWNSEND:

I'm sorry. I didn't hear the question.

ROGERS:

How many years has it been taking place?

TOWNSEND:

(INAUDIBLE) I--I don't know. I will have to take that and get back to you on that. Thanks.

ROGERS:

Ms. Wheelbarger tell me about the department's objectives with Syria and how they comply with the overarching objectives of the CENTCOM AOR.

WHEELBARGER:

The military's objectives or departments objective in Syria remains the de-ISIS--defeat--enduring defeat of ISIS. The U.S. government has broader objectives in Syria which includes also a political settlement all along the lines of 2254 the UN process as well as having fewer Iranian forces in Syria. But the military component is the de-ISIS campaign and we are--we have you know never--we have continued that fight continuously even during--while we repositioned our forces based on presidential guidance over the years.

ROGERS:

Thank you. I yield back.

SMITH:

Okay. We are going to do Mr. Carbajal and Mr. Gallego and then we are going to go do the classified brief. So Mr. Carbajal?

CARBAJAL:

thank you Mr. Chair and welcome to all of the witnesses. China has steadily increased its influence in Africa through the--its Belt and Road Initiative BRI showing the effectiveness of soft power. China has pledged \$60 billion in new financing for African countries and is now the continents biggest trading partner with Sino African trade topping \$200 billion per year. While there is a bipartisan criticism for BRI the U.S. must be able to offer an alternative narrative. Secretary Wheelbarger what actions has DOD taken in conjunction with other federal agencies to offer an alternative to BRI in Africa? I know this was raised earlier but I am not sure the answers were as substantive as they can be.

WHEELBARGER:

Of course. So the administration does have a policy to increase trade and development within--on the continent. It is called prosper Africa. I think the efforts are primarily focused stake in other agencies but the idea is how can we make the economic models within Africa and our comport more with our industries standards or our--our economic way of business rather than just sort of the Chinese way of just sort of flowing in money. We do of course recognize that a lot of this has to do with how we speak to our partners and how we can highlight that there are short-term economic gains in the near term might result in long-term loss of sovereignty and we have seen this in other countries and I think many of our African partners are actually starting to see that that is affecting them that the economic benefits that they think they are going to get rapidly aren't necessarily accruing to--to them specifically. Many Chinese companies that are there they don't hire local work--local workforce. They are really just extracting the resources and not providing a lot of benefit to the countries themselves so it is not just what we can do in addition to bringing economic might in but also highlighting that they are actually setting themselves up for a long-term challenging relationship if they are going to rely on Chinese--Chinese monetary investment.

CARBAJAL:

Thank you. General Townsend has BRI undermined or threatened partnerships or security cooperation on the continent?

TOWNSEND:

I think the short answer is yes. I think that BRI is just part of a larger strategic approach that China has not only to Africa but the world. But in Africa, it's playing out. The--their approach is built on road initiative, bilateral engagement, multilateral engagement, it's very much a whole of government approach. It's easier for them to orchestrate their whole of government maybe that it is for us to do so. And they're putting a lot of money in. So it's without question there able to buy influence in Africa not only from partners maybe who--who are willing to take bribes, but they're willing to buy--they can buy influence from even pretty strong partners because they are partners in need.

CARBAJAL:

Thank you. I wanted to turn to climate change and its nexus with our national security. 9 of 10 most climate change vulnerable states are in sub-Saharan Africa and in a region whose total population is expected to double between now and 2050. General Townsend, I'm sure you have considered how the changing climate will impact security needs and operations. How are you managing the risk of regional instability due to the impacts of climate change such as increasingly dangerous natural disasters and food and water insecurity?

TOWNSEND:

Well Congressman, as you said, we see the effects of climate change all effort over Africa today. Desertification, that creeping southward of the Sahara desert is just one of those. Competition for water, which has a potential to erupt into the state on state conflict and a couple of places and we are dealing with locust swarms. Not only do we have coronavirus, we have locust swarms on the African continent and in in East Africa right now.

So these are all problems that we have to deal with and they don't really have military solutions. This is where we have to work with our partners not only in our own State Department in our own USAID, but also NGOs and international partners as well.

CARBAJAL:

Do you feel we are being effective taking a whole of government approach with all these different agencies addressing this issue?

TOWNSEND:

Well, I think some of these challenges defy solutions by any one nation. Desertification and the water competition, for example. With the smaller scale problem of Ebola and locust swarms, I think we are. There's an international effort to help and I know the United States is contributing to both of those and in fact in the case of Ebola, the countries that are dealing with that have developed a self-capacity to handle that problem without a lot of outside assistance. That's an example of where we have helped.

CARBAJAL:

Thank you, General. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

SMITH:

Thank you. Mr. Gallego.

GALLEGO:

Thank you. Ms. Wheelbarger, we heard a number of data points about our African partner AFRICOM itself getting less attention and funding. What is the risk that we are accepting and doing so?

WHEELBARGER:

I just want to take this opportunity to highlight that the secretary has not made any decisions other than moving the SFAB into--into the continent. He has continued to review all options weighing that against the risk. And I think from my perspective one of the primary ones is the long-term risk of the evolution and the maturation (SP) of terrorist organizations. They may look one-way today, but if you don't maintain the pressure where they exist, they may evolve in the future while they have both the capability and the will to attack us in the homeland. So our ability to maintain focus across the continent is really necessary and in this risk calculation.

GALLEGO:

Okay. General Townsend, what is your opinion in this increased risk that she identified?

TOWNSEND:

I think I agree with her assessment of the risk and I also agree with her characterization so far no national decisions have been made other than I have--we've gained in SFAB for Africa--AFRICOM.

GALLEGO:

To follow up, right--General Townsend, I noticed on the front page of your testimony you have a statement that says secure and stable Africa is an enduring American interest. So would you agree that scaling back our already modest Africa presence will mean that your command will do less--will be less resourced to fight for the national interest--our national interests on the African continent?

TOWNSEND:

Congressman, I agree that if we have less resources, we'll be able to do less.

GALLEGO:

So than just a follow-up, and this could be to anyone at the table here, if AFRICOM is realigning to deal with the great power competition, why is the security cooperation budget for the continent planning for a \$72 million cut? Where will your will these programs be cut? What parts of the continent will these be cut--will these be cut from because it seems it's contradicting everything that we are hearing if we're going to realign to, you know, focus on big power competition, then we should show that in the budget also. Ms.--Ms. Wheelbarger, do you want to start?

WHEELBARGER:

I'll start by just highlighting again the zero-based review that that secretary is doing looking at resources in Africa is--his intent is to see if there--the missions that we--we recognize our critical and need to achieve can be done in a more efficient or effective ways. That doesn't necessarily mean absorbing more risky, it could mean just is there a better way to do the mission that we are already done--already doing.

With respect to security cooperation writ large, I mean, we have a lot of global requirements on security cooperation. My perspective is particularly the theaters that have low posture or should--you need to look at other tools that you have at your disposal and therefore security cooperation assistance, 3--a 333 program for example are invaluable to maintaining the security partnerships we have. With respect to that specific program programmatic numbers that you brought up, unless General Townsend has specifics, I think we're probably going to have to take the specifics for the record.

GALLEGO:

Okay. General Townsend.

TOWNSEND:

I would just add I think that some of the most important programs that we have our programs like FMF, IMET, FMS, 333 programs, state partnership programs. A lot of those programs I'm advocating for are not even department of defense programs. Those are tremendously valuable for us especially in global power competition.

GALLEGO:

It just seems like \$75 million compared to how big our budget is seems like it'd be, you know, it would be very naive for us to just cut that funding considering, and I think it does do good work. And just last--last question because they're--they're probably our closest allies on the continent and had the most experience, have you had discussions with our French allies about their posture if we make decisions about our posture in Africa altogether, Ms. Wheelbarger?

WHEELBARGER:

Yes. That secretary has had several meetings with his counterpart, Minister Parly (SP). She understands the secretary's need to restore readiness to the force and to review all missions and all support to foreign partners. She--the French do highlight of course the importance of U.S. enabling support to their operations. They just do--some Abilities they simply do not have and what we have been doing is trying to encourage them to speed up their decision-making on having those capabilities for themselves so they no longer are reliant on United States support.

GALLEGO:

Thank you. I yield back.

SMITH:

Thank you. That will conclude, excuse me, this portion of the hearing. We'll give you a, like, 10 minute break and we'll reconvene at 12:10, 2212. Thank you. We are adjourned.