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A CONVERSATION WITH GENERAL LORI ROBINSON, THE FIRST WOMAN TO COMMAND USNORTHCOM

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to Brookings. I'm Mike O'Hanlon and I have the real honor and pleasure today of welcoming my friend, General Lori Robinson, back to Brookings, and I'm glad you're all here to join us.

Lori Robinson was a lieutenant colonel when she first came to Brookings in 2001. We had the great pleasure of spending a year with her in her mid-career military education, which is always more of an education for us here at Brookings to have the military fellows than for them, but created a friendship and sort of a fan club here at Brookings that continued over the years as she rose through the ranks. I think a lot of you know her story, and we're going to talk about her story a little bit this morning before we also get into some of her observations on strategic issues before the country, and then have time for your thoughts and questions as well.

And also I'm very happy that this is happening during Christmas season and holiday season where generally I feel like I've already gotten my Christmas wish in getting the chance to welcome Lori Robinson back. And I think her story of -- you know, since we're lucky enough to have C-SPAN coverage today, for those who want to watch "It's a Wonderful Life" and may not want the Jimmy Stewart version, you've got just as good of a version here with General Robinson's amazing story.

She was from an Air Force family but chose not to go the Air Force Academy herself, went to the University of New Hampshire, but Air Force ROTC. And then, this is by the way a couple of years ago, even though she looks about 35, she's actually a couple of years older than that, so this is back in the 1980s. And then was commissioned an officer, became what's called an air battle manager, which as I've heard it describe is the person who tells the F-15 pilots where they can go, so to speak. But it literally is the person who does that. And she moved up through the ranks, was the first woman ever at the Nellis Fighter Weapons School, which is the real Top Gun school, because it's the Air Force version of Top Gun. So if you're looking for the real sort of Tom Cruise and Demi Moore GI Jane, this is the real thing right here in terms of the first one who did that as well as many other accomplishments throughout her career.

I think all of you know that she was one of the very few, roughly half dozen, women ever in the U.S. military's history so far to attain the rank of four-star general, which happened around 2014, I

believe, when she pinned on four stars and had her first position with that rank as the air combatant commander at Pacific Command. She had previously been, by the way, vice wing commander for the 405th expeditionary wing and deployed to the Middle East and had a lot of combat experience therefore in the broader Iraq, Afghanistan, and CENTCOM theatre. So she's really seen a lot of the world in her various roles. And on top of that, as you all know, she finished her military career as the first woman in American history to lead a combatant command when she ran Northern Command and NORAD from 2016 to 2018. For those of you who are doing the math may recall that period is also when Kim Jong Un was launching his ICMB tests and when President Trump and Kim Jong Un had not yet become such good buddies. (Laughter) So there was quite a bit of tension in the relationship. And she was the one responsible for protecting the country in the event of a North Korean ICBM attack against North America.

On top of that, if that wasn't enough, she then had to manage the military assistance to broader civilian authority efforts as the three big hurricanes hit in the fall of 2017, or?

GENERAL ROBINSON: Yes, 2017.

MR. O'HANLON: And so, anyway, we're going to talk a lot more about her career, but without further ado, please join me in welcoming General Lori Robinson back to Brookings. (Applause)

GENERAL ROBINSON: Thank you, Mike. Thank you.

He's too generous; he's way too generous with his compliments.

MR. O'HANLON: I'm pretty sure everything I said was just a fact, not even trying to be complimentary. Although, again, I'm just thrilled.

So I guess what I'd like to if we could -- I'll try not to call you Lori too much because you deserve the title General Robinson and it's really a remarkable story that all of us can be inspired by. But it couldn't have been easy throughout any point in your career as a woman. And I want to bring you back to the early days especially and start there. Just describe a little bit of how it was first to decide to join the military as a woman and then in the early years of working your way up through the ranks in a very macho culture, which it still is today I think. How did you handle that and what were the big challenges and what were some of your sort of, you know, insights or personal methods of dealing with that culture?

GENERAL ROBINSON: So Michael is right, my dad was in the Air Force, so at 18 years I am the oldest of 5. From the oldest to the youngest is 6 years. And my dad's sitting there looking at the

fact that he's going to have to pay for college for five kids. And he's like, hey, Lori, why don't you go to the Air Force Academy, and I was like, absolutely not. I've been in the Air Force for 18 years and I'm ready to do something else.

And he goes, well where would you like to go to college and I said, well, the University of Texas -- Hook 'em Horns. And he said, mm-hmm, I'm paying -- you're going to the University of New Hampshire because it's our state of residence. So I was going to be a teacher, but the first year I was so happy to be out of home my grades might have suffered just a little bit. So I decided to become an English major and the teaching, you were going to have to take a fifth year. So I'm like what am I going to do with this. So I decided to join ROTC because I thought, well, four years and that will be good. When I got what my job was, air battle manager, the guy in charge of our detachment said, Lori, talk to your father, you need to get out of this. You'll never get promoted. And I thought, well, I'm not going to ask my dad to do anything, I'm in it by myself.

So luckily enough, as Michael mentioned, you know, I had the privilege to be part of an initial squadron at the fighter weapons school, the best institution. And I was the first female instructor there. But I will tell you, when you ask things -- somebody about what molds you, that was probably one of the places that really molded me. That's the place that taught me about being part of a team, that's the place -- because you would brief with the pilots, you would execute with the pilots, you would debrief with the pilots, you would hang around together. But more importantly, I think the biggest lesson I learned there, we had a boss and our boss was awesome. And he said to us, you realize you're a part of something bigger than yourself. And I thought, what is he talking about, you know. And it was over time that I realized that it wasn't about me, that it was about the institution.

And so that place, that time really molded me. And just for context sake, my husband is sitting up here, he was at Nellis Air Force Base at the same time and that's where we met. He flew for the Thunderbirds. And then a very dear friend of mine, Retired Lieutenant General -- my husband is a Retired Two Start -- a Retired Lieutenant General Dash Jamieson -- she was the second female instructor at the Fighter Weapons School. And she wrote the entire syllabus for her discipline of intelligence. And so I would tell you, as a woman there, I thrived because it wasn't about being a woman, it was about getting a task done, it was about being very competent at what I did and trying to be the best at what I

did.

When you walk into a room though, and you realize you're the only woman in the room, you become very self-aware of that. But what I realized in that community -- and it was all fighter pilots, was what they cared about was you being good at what you did. That's what was important. And so from that, you know, I would tell you if you went through my career and what we call the combat air forces, so it was fighter pilots, it was -- I flew on the back of AWACS, on JSTARS. It was understanding (1) that it isn't about you, it is about the institution, (2) the more that you can teach people that work with you and work for you to be better than you, when you leave the institution hopefully you've left it better than when you got there.

And so when I got to my first flying unit and I -- my career field at the time was one of those career fields that what we would say ate their young. And my goal was to make it -- everybody to realize that they were part of something bigger than themselves. And so over my career I've tried very hard to teach. I would always say, you know, to my subordinate commanders or other commanders, as long as it is not illegal, immoral, or unethical, let's learn from whatever experience it was.

And so I think that shaping at Nellis Air Force base as a young one in understanding about the team effort and understanding that you're part of something bigger than yourself was really -- really made me a different human being.

As I increased in rank, was a Two Star in Qatar, was a Three Star at Langley Air Force Base, and then a Four Star in the Pacific and out in Colorado. The notion that I was a woman -- and I am (laughter) -- that notion -- you know, that would be the headline that people would say. And my headline was this, my headline was I'm a commander, I'm a General, I'm an airman, and I just happen to be a woman. And if I make the woman more important than all those other things, then I've done disrespect to the institution. I do realize that I have done things that other women haven't, I do realize, as Michaels said, the first ever female combatant commander, and I recognize that and I realize that I have a lot of people watching what I do. And I take that on too. But I don't want the woman to be the headline, I want the commander to be the headline.

And so I've just tried all the time, Michael, to be a team player, to be the best at everything, any job anybody ever gave me, and to make those around me better than me.

MR. O'HANLON: Did it get easier or harder as you rose through the ranks being a woman? Did you reach a sort of atmosphere and ambience and a group of people where it became more natural for them to think of you as all the things you said, or did it in some ways become harder? I'm curious. I've never asked you this question before, but --

GENERAL ROBINSON: I said to Michael, be nice. (Laughter)

Anyway, so here's what I discovered. In my circle in the Air Force, and with the friends that I grew up with, it was a non-event. You know, it was, well, that's just Lori. Lori is doing what Lori does. And for them -- you know, in fact, I had very dear friends that I was a Four Star with and a Three Star with and a Two Star with, and so for them that was like that didn't matter. It was interesting -- and this isn't meant negatively -- but it was interesting with the other services because there aren't as many general officers, female general officers in the other services.

So I felt I tried harder because in my circle everybody knew me. So there wasn't -- they knew what I was capable of, they trust me, I trusted them. I put extra energy when I entered a new job that was joint. As an example, in Qatar, so going to Qatar for a year as the deputy air component commander. I didn't know General Mattis at all and now I'm working for General Goldfein, but when General Goldfein's not there, General Mattis is there. And I worked extra hard to quickly build the trust. I never ever felt that people didn't trust me, but I wanted to earn that very quickly, just because I was different, you know.

I'll tell you a story. I went to China and met the Chinese air chief. And I was a Four Star and, you know, again, it's a different culture. And so it's that how do you build that trust as quickly as you can and know, hey, I'm here as the commander of Pacific air forces. Again, I just happened to be a woman. So because I was different and because it wasn't the -- in different services and countries, I put a lot of pressure on myself to make sure that I kept everything on an even playing field and I'm here to do a job.

MR. O'HANLON: Now, as air battle manager, maybe just a little bit on that. I'd like to explore what that means for a crowd on television and here, watching and learning about the military. Can you tell us -- you were involved not only in the air to air element, but the air to ground -- the ground attack piece of that, right? So you essentially -- you and your colleagues were mapping the entire

orchestration, the entire choreography of a concerted effort that involved everything from electronic warfare aircraft, dog fighting aircraft, ground attack aircraft, the whole enchilada put together. Is that right?

GENERAL ROBINSON: That's right. So let me give -- this crowd looks kind of old enough to give you my first analogy. Top Gun -- okay, that's the second weapons school -- but Top Gun -- if you remember at the end of Top Gun with the round scope and the guy is talking to Maverick and he's telling him where the bogeys are, right? Everybody, can I get a couple of nods? Yeah? Okay, good. (Laughter) So that's what I did. So I was talking to everybody, the fighter pilots and the pilots out on the radio, one, to tell them where the bad guys are, two, to ensure that the guys that were going to help them drop the bombs to put on target, you know, they had a path to go do that. We also worried about the orchestration of tankers, you know, where they could get gas and all that stuff, worried about other orchestration to ensure that the joint force commanders objectives were met so that whatever was asked of us, that we knew what we had to do to ensure that those objectives were met. And often, because I deployed to Saudi as a young one, deployed to Oman, as you mentioned. You know, our missions would be anywhere from 12 to 20 hours long. And so you learned a battle rhythm there.

MR. O'HANLON: Now, again as recent as your session to the Air Force has been, as young as you still are, you've still seen a lot because when you joined the Air Force we were just operating our first stealth aircraft.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

MR. O'HANLON: And cruise missiles were a new thing.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

MR. O'HANLON: And we hadn't yet seen all the laser guided bomb accomplishments of Operation Desert Storm.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

MR. O'HANLON: And Desert Storm itself was only 10 percent smart bombs, 90 percent dumb bombs by total tonnage.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

MR. O'HANLON: Now we're at an Air Force where those percentages have reversed or

even more where we have a large number of stealth aircraft, where we have laser guided bombs, GPS guided bombs, where we also understand the limitations of these things, because you've got to know where the target is before you can aim even a beautiful weapon at it and a precise weapon. And so in counterinsurgency warfare we've seen the limitations as well. We've got all sorts of unmanned aerial systems out there.

I just wondered, from your point of view, what's been the most striking change in air combat over that period and in that career?

GENERAL ROBINSON: Yeah. That's a great question. I think the thing that I've been amazed about, if you go back and look at Desert Shield and Desert Storm, which the Air Force has been in the desert since 1991 -- we haven't left -- or in the Middle East -- and you look at the way that we fought in Desert Storm, you know, it was how do we deconflict everybody's forces to ensure they get to the target versus if you look at now, we work very hard on integration. You know, how do we complement each other, how do we try to make sure that whatever the capability we need we can integrate into the total force. And to include where do we use drones, how do we use non-kinetics, you know, all of that.

So I think the joint fight has grown tremendously and I think to me in a warfare scenario, it's the joint fight that has really taken shape. And I think that's been so beneficial. You know, when you can go overseas and you work with your joint brothers and sisters, and then you come back and you see them someplace else, you know, you know each other. It's not all the sudden you're walking into a building and you can't -- you know, who's that. But when it starts there, now you've been to the desert together, you've been to Afghanistan together, you've been to Iraq together, wherever, but you've got this common background. And I think as I've watched that over time, I think it's been a very positive thing for not just warfare, but for the Department of Defense.

MR. O'HANLON: And we'll come back to in a couple of minutes, talk about the application of these capabilities in today's security environment and some of what you've seen dealing with China in the Pacific and North Korea at Northern Command.

But first I did want to come back to the question of the state of the military today, and specifically the question of gender integration and diversity. And I guess I'm going to ask you two questions, one about whether the glass is half full or half empty, and then regardless, I'm sure there's a lot

more that you would suggest the military can do to improve. Because when I look at it, okay, you're one of roughly a half dozen women now who have reached the rank of Four Start, which is great, but I've also had it explained to me there aren't that many in the pipeline coming after you all and we may not have another woman Four Star after -- I think it's General Miller --

GENERAL ROBINSON: Yes, yeah.

MR. O'HANLON: -- who is still today in service. But this may be a blip, at least for a while. And then it's about 15 percent of all military personnel today who are women, which is a lot more than it used to be, but obviously nowhere near 50 percent. I'm not sure if 50 percent is even the correct goal. But I guess most of all what I wonder about is I still see a lot of reports of sexual mistreatment and abuse in the military. And that's true across our whole society, so I don't want to pick on the Armed Forces specifically. But I see those trends continue to get a lot of headlines and cause a lot of concern, rightly so.

So I guess, again, in light of your own story and of what you see in today's Armed Forces, is the glass half full or half empty? And then after we talk about that, you know, I'd love to hear a couple of your suggestions for how the military can do better by women.

GENERAL ROBINSON: So I think the glass is at half. Here's the positive things. You know, they've opened up all the jobs you can do in the military to women. You can ask for that. The military is a meritocracy. You know, I did a speech and I talked about a lieutenant is a lieutenant is a lieutenant when you raise your right hand. And I think from that perspective, that's why it's half. I think when you look at a session, if you go to the academies, I think we're doing a great job of assessing a good percentage of women. I think the hard part comes time when people are thinking about families. And I think the hard part is -- and I'll tell my story about that -- my husband, as I mentioned, was a Thunderbird pilot. We were leaving Nellis and we'd gone to Hawaii -- bummer (laughter) -- and it was time for us to move and they were going to send him to Korea and me to Okinawa, Japan. And of course he'd gotten promoted early, so he made rank early. He was a fighter pilot, he's a fighter pilot, you know, and I'm an air battle manager. I was never going to be more than a lieutenant colonel if I was lucky, you know. And he was going to be a general officer. And I said to David, I said, David, why don't I get out and you stay in and I'll follow you around and we'll do all that. Because we didn't want -- because of kids.

And he looked me as sweet as he could, and he said and what is it you would do if you got out. And I was like, well, I don't know. And he goes, okay, you stay in and I'll go fly for the airlines and go into the Reserves. And so when it comes time to make those decisions, you know, that's the hard part, is who -- and it doesn't even have to be military married to military, it can be two people that both have jobs and, you know, how do you orchestrate all that.

And so I would say it's at half. I would think we do a good job of assessing. The hard part is keeping the women in. I know I haven't touched base on this, I know that people are looking hard at that, how do we do that. One of the things I would always get, a lot of young ladies come and talk to me, how did you do it. And one of the things I would always tell them, the first was you have to have the hard conversation about whose career comes first whenever you don't have pressure on you, because the second you have pressure on you, then it becomes an emotional decision and not a rational decision. And have that constantly, you know, have it every now and then. And then decide how long can you be apart, how far are you willing to live apart, what it is the long-term goals are. But do that rationally when there's no pressure.

And so now, David and I didn't do that, but that was a lesson learned for me. And so I think, first of all, it has to be a family decision, it has to be something that is talked about because sometimes maybe it's the woman's career that has more potential than the man's. But just have that conversation.

And then I know that the services are working hard. I just saw in the NDAA they extended paternity leave. And so that's a good thing. So those services are working hard on how do we make it so that, you know, we can keep women in. And we talk about women, but I want to say it's about diversity. It's not just about women, it's about how do you keep different talent sitting around the table. How do you ensure you have people of different genders, different races, different backgrounds, different experiences, so that when you're the person sitting at the head of the table, that you've got a whole bunch of different voices sitting there. You know, we can talk about me as a woman, but I think the bigger story is how do we keep a diverse table, because I think that makes you a better commander, that makes you a better decision maker when you have all those different voices telling you things that you probably hadn't even thought of or didn't even know.

MR. O'HANLON: I was thinking about Dave's comment, what kind of civilian jobs could you do after being an air battle manager. I guess offensive coordinator for a football team maybe. (Laughter) But that would probably be even more of a breakthrough on the gender front than staying in the military.

So I wondered when you were talking about the difficulty that -- sort of child raising years, and should the military do more to let people leave for 5 or 10 years and then come back at rank and still even have a future? I know there have been some efforts, but I think it's in very specialized niches.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Well, I know there are efforts, and I know that there's a program out there. I don't know the particulars, so I don't want to speak and misspeak more importantly, but I know they're looking at that too. I mean I think they're trying to -- how do we ensure that we have, you know, senior leader diversity at the top? How do we make that path to do that? And so I know that there's programs that they have implemented a little at a very finite, but I don't know recently what other things that they've done.

MR. O'HANLON: And back to the point -- you know, it's a tough subject -- but back to the point about sexual abuse within the military. And I sometimes wondered, as the father of daughters, how would I feel about my daughters joining the military and I frankly can't decide. And it makes me nervous to still see these kinds of reports. On the one hand, the fact that there is more transparency is good, but the numbers don't seem to be moving in the right direction. Do you have a sense about how prevalent, you know, sexual mistreatment is in the military and whether the services are really getting focused enough on doing what they must to address the problem?

GENERAL ROBINSON: Yeah, I would say, you know, if you recall when General Welsh had his hearing to become the chief of staff and we had just had the big problem down at Lackland Air Force Base, he took a very focused effort on sexual assault, sexual harassment, mistreatment, you know, not treating people with dignity and respect in the workplace. We had a bright shining light on that. And we have a lot of programs that are out there. I think there's a couple of things that are important.

So in some ways I could tell you it's totally different than when I was in the '80s out at Nellis Air Force Base. I mean it's just totally different. I would tell you there's been a lot of progress made. I would also tell you that the commander sets the tone. The commander is the one that sets the

tone about, you know, will not tolerate. I can tell you day one on whenever I would have subordinate commanders and senior enlisted folks for their first briefing, I mean that was one of the topics I talked about.

I think it's gotten better, but I think we still have a ways to go. I know that we continue to deal with it and I know we've got some wonderful programs in place. I think that -- how do I want to say this -- but it's just -- it's a hard problem. And what you have to do is create the environment, one, that it's not tolerated and, two, the fact that then if something happens that somebody will come tell you and that you do create that transparency if something happens, and then, three, whatever happens after something happens, you know, make sure that it's done transparently too.

MR. O'HANLON: One last question on the people of the military and then I'm going to ask you a question on China and North Korea and then, finally, let others share the joy and privilege here of speaking with you. But I wanted to get your overall sense about the military and society today. Because we know that a lot is asked of a very small number of people. The active duty armed forces are less than one half of 1 percent of the population. Even if you add in the reservists and, again, your husband did a great deal there, and the reserve component is a huge party of our military -- but even if you add in the reserves and the civilian DoD employees, it's still less than 1 percent of the population. And I'm not suggesting it should be 5 or 10 percent, but because it's a small fraction that means fewer and fewer people have direct contact with the military, direct understanding of the military. Is that problem? And if so, do you have any ideas on what we can do about it? I mean are we seeing a greater distance between the military and the society that the military exists to protect?

GENERAL ROBINSON: So I don't consider it a problem, I just consider that we should understand that. You know, I just retired and my husband and I moved into a neighborhood that has no military. I mean we're in a place that we never lived before. So as I stumble upon things and people -- you know, we live near a military base, but we're further away from it. What I realized is when you tell somebody that you were in the military -- and between my husband and I we have 73 years of service -- when you tell somebody that you're in the military, the first thing they say is thank you for your service. And then they ask what you did. And so what I realized is that percentage is small, but I think that in the big scheme of things people are grateful for what the military does for this Nation.

I will tell you this, I've had the privilege in the last year and a half to speak to a few civilian corporations in their leadership venues and I always start out with for 37 years I supported and defended the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. And people sit there for a minute, because it's not that it doesn't resonate with them, it's just they haven't seen somebody stand up and do that. And then I talk whatever I'm going to talk, and then at the end I tell them I was honored to serve for 37 years, to defend the United States, to do what I did so that they could do what they do, because our Nation needs them to do what they do. And so, to me, all we have to do is continue to talk about it and not be shy.

But the other thing I've been really mesmerized by, Michael, is how cities and towns embrace our warriors that have come home. And to me that's awesome. To watch people be so proud. You know, I went to New Hampshire this fall, David and I did, and I did a Veteran's Day event. And it was amazing to watch that little town in New Hampshire embrace all those veterans and say thank you to them.

So I think there's obviously pockets, but just understand it and to me do outreach that you can and just do what we do, because the Nation needs us to do that.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, that's a great answer.

If I could ask you about China. I wanted to go back to your next to last job in the military, when you were the air component commander of Pacific Command, now Indo-Pacific Command. And, of course we talk a lot about the South China Sea and naval operations and boats and freedom of navigation operations, but you also had to think about air space and what China was doing by way of trying to keep people out of certain air, the air defense identification zone issue, you know, trying to declare these spaces where any other country would have to alert China and sort of indirectly ask for permission to use international air space. How do you see the overall situation there? Is it getting worse? Do you feel like we've stabilized the situation and that China now is not going to encroach further? Do you still feel like we're on a sort of potentially delicate place where potentially things could get worse? And what did you have to do to contend with this challenge?

GENERAL ROBINSON: I'll tell you my experience and just a couple of things about where we are now just because I only know what I've seen in the news.

So I took command in Hawaii and Admiral Locklear was the commander, then PACOM, and so he presided over the change of command. And in his speech he said this is a huge area of responsibility, 52 percent of the globe is the responsibility of that area. And he said 83 percent of that 52 percent is water, but 100 percent of that is air. And I remind everybody of that. (Laughter) And I always quote Admiral Locklear. I didn't say it, he did.

Here's what I realized, is that first of all, logistically, to move things around the area is very difficult. It's a long ways to -- I mean just to get off Hawaii to go anywhere it takes you six hours. If you want to go to the West Coast or if you want to go to Guam, you know, it's nine hours or so to go to Japan. But the area of concern, the way I thought about it, was very small. If you think about the relationship between China, Russia, North and South Korea, and Japan, and the contested islands and all that, it's small. But getting stuff there and moving stuff around is difficult.

One of the things I had to deal with was folks flying. We would fly around all of that stuff just as the ships did their freedom of navigation. And making sure that we didn't do anything silly or get inside of places that we shouldn't go. I mentioned to you before I met with the Chinese air chief and one of the things he talked about all the time was our surveillance work in places they shouldn't be and well, no, sir, they're actually in international waters, it's okay for them to be there.

One of the things we worked on really hard was, you know, how do you act in international air space when you're going to intercept somebody. As your intercepting somebody, who does what? And I had a whole bunch of folks working with the Chinese on that as well as people at the Pentagon and all that. And we worked our way through that a lot and I think that was very helpful.

I think the thing, as I watched my time there, I watched China going from being defensive in nature, worrying about the Mainland versus continuing to move out and do more stuff further out and then begin joint operations. And so I know they've continued to work on some of that stuff, I know they continue to defend those islands. And so it was different to watch.

I think the thing we have to think about is they're in this for the long game. They are in this for the long game. And we need to understand that, that this is something that they're going to just continue to work on over and over again.

MR. O'HANLON: Does your gut tell you that we can sort of probably work it out with

China? In other words, if we are smart and resolute -- and a lot of things that you're saying are going to be challenging over the long haul, that we should be able to reach a new modus vivendi where China gradually becomes another super power and wants to flex its muscle, but we can push back in the right ways with our allies in such a way that their greater ambitions, their more dangerous ambitions are curbed? Or do you feel that worsening rivalry and maybe even the potential for war is almost an inevitability?

GENERAL ROBINSON: Well, I don't want to get into the diplomat's role. As Secretary Mattis used to tell us, let the State Department do what the State Department does and let the diplomats do and make sure that we provide that military capability to them. So, you know, not being in those talks and not being on that, I'd be speculating, and I don't think that's fair. But I think what is important to understand is what we do as a military is to make sure whenever we are asked to do, we're ready to go.

MR. O'HANLON: So you're agnostic sort of essentially? (Laughter)

GENERAL ROBINSON: Very.

MR. O'HANLON: Well, it's interesting because a lot of people aren't including in the military.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Yeah, yeah.

MR. O'HANLON: And so I think it's really important we keep having this debate on China.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Yup.

MR. O'HANLON: So I appreciate your observations.

One last question from me on North Korea and then I will invite others to weigh in. This is going to be a question that you're not going to be able to completely answer, I'm sure, for two reasons. One, no one knows the answer and, two, some of what you know is classified. But I'm going to ask it anyway because it's about North Korea's potential missile threat to the United States. And that was your job to think about and worry about and potentially address back in 2016 to '18.

I'm just going to throw this out and see if you want to take pot shots at what I propose. My own view is that North Korea is probably not yet in a place where they can mount a confident ICBM threat to North America for the following reasons: they would presumably not do this out of the blue. And

if it's in a crisis or wartime situation, we're probably going to do our best to make sure the missile is not even launched, since we -- right now at least, given the current state of technology, their long range rockets are liquid fuel, they have to be fueled on the launch pad. We have a good chance of seeing that before the process is complete. Second, even if they launch it, they haven't done enough tests to really know how well their reentry technology is going to work. So the missile could either go to the wrong place or the warhead could essentially fail on descent. Three, we do have the midcourse interceptor system that you would have been responsible for operating along with the sensor network. I think you shared the responsibilities for some of that with Strategic Command, but the overall approach of defending the homeland was certainly ultimately yours. And those systems, while they're not perfect, have done better in testing over the years.

So North Korea would have to get through that multiple step process of getting the missile off the launch pad, having the reentry vehicle work, when they've only done three ICBM tests in their history and none of them have really tested a warhead on the way down, thank god. And then, finally, get through our midcourse interceptor system.

So I would tend to think the odds are with us and that the odds are pretty high that North Korea probably can't attack an American city today with any high confidence of success, but I would love to see if you have any comment on any of that to the extent you're willing.

GENERAL ROBINSON: No. (Laughter) Just kidding. So let me just say this, first of all, for about -- you know, this time that Kim Jong Un did 23 shots in '17, you know, every time we got indications and warnings that he was going to do something I had to make the assumption that it was going to hit the United States. I had to make that assumption every single time. I couldn't assume that he wasn't going to make it.

Secondly, I testified to this, that I had confidence in our capability to defend the United States.

Thirdly, what I would say in addressing all of that is that every time he tests, he's testing. And we get concerned about failure, and you can often learn more in failure than you can in success. And so as I've been watching in the news -- and in my time there, being a part of very elaborate capability, you know, we watched him get better. We watched him be able to do things.

I can tell you this, first of all, the training that happens to defend the homeland is awesome. The things that we did to make sure that the homeland was defended throughout the network of capabilities was constantly being looked at. And we all assumed that it was going to hit the homeland and we all think that every time he tests he's gaining capability.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Very helpful answer.

Well, please, if you can, wait for a microphone, identify yourself, and then pose a question go General Robinson.

We'll start here in the seventh row, the woman in the light tan jacket please.

MS. KIM: Thank you so much. Connie Kim from Voice of America.

I just want to follow up on the North Korea question that Michael just asked. So we are seeing threats that North Korea is going to give a Christmas present to the United States amid the escalating tensions right now. I was wondering what comments you had on that.

And I was wondering, since you were there in the military serving from 2016 to '18, are we going to return to the fire and fury again in the next year?

GENERAL ROBINSON: Well, first of all, I'm not going to comment because I'm not in there anymore, I'm not in the military.

But secondly, okay, I got lost in your fire and fury. Go to the first part again. I'm sorry.

MS. KIM: So what do you think (inaudible) possible Christmas present?

GENERAL ROBINSON: Yeah, I don't know. Again, I've read in the news a little bit. I know that the Pacific Air Force's commander was just here and he mentioned -- they were watching obviously -- we listened to the President say that they're watching. I think everybody is paying attention to what's happening. And, again, I have all faith and confidence that whatever happens, you know, we'll be able to defend the United States.

But I just know what we see in the news.

MR. O'HANLON: We'll go to the gentleman here in the black jacket in the fourth row. Right there, yeah. Thanks.

QUESTIONER: Thank you. Thank you, General, for very fascinating remarks.

My question is that earlier this year the U.S. Study Center of the University of Sydney

released a report and they concluded that China's capability, particularly anti access area denial capabilities, have developed to the extent that it has undermined U.S.'s ability to project power in the Indo-Pacific.

What is your view on that report?

GENERAL ROBINSON: So, I would say this, last I was in the Pacific and we practiced and we talked about this, so mu information is dated, so please forgive me for that. But I think that we continue to look at our ability to project power in the time and place of our choosing. And I think that as much as they're watching us, we're watching them and we're looking at capabilities that we can we do to continue to be able to do that.

MR. O'HANLON: Come here to the second row please, the gentleman in the greenish -- almost Christmas tie.

: They are candy canes.

MR. O'HANLON: Oh, very nice, candy canes.

GENERAL ROBINSON: I like the candy canes.

QUESTIONER: Hi, Carlo Gollivan, retired special agent, U.S. Customs. I was a 9/11 responder.

This is in a sense a follow up to a question I asked of General Dunford, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, here during the summer. You mentioned transparency. As a 9/11 responder I would point to the work of AE911truth.org, which has pointed out anomalies in the evidence of what happened, especially at the Trade Centers on 9/11, also the writings of Dr. Alan Sabrosky, formerly of the Army War College. Will Brookings, and you in your capacity, especially with your background from the Air Force -- can Brookings be a venue for exploring anomalies in what happened on 9/11 as we approach the 20th anniversary so we can really achieve transparency regarding what happened that day?

Thank you.

GENERAL ROBINSON: So I'm never going to speak for Brookings, but I think they have -- and I'd ask Michael to comment on this -- but the amount of capacity they have here in my experience when I was here, you know, I had the privilege to stop and think, which you don't get that privilege to do very often. But what I was mesmerized about my time here was the wide variety of capability that's here.

So I'd ask Michael to specifically go there. I don't -- you know, I -- but anyplace you can sit down and think and explore is awesome.

MR. O'HANLON: And I would just say briefly that the best people on terrorism at Brookings, and counterterrorism, include Bruce Riedel, Dan Byman, Susan Hennessey, a few other scholars. So those are some of the people that you might look for their writings in the future.

Tom in the far row.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Hi, Tom.

MR. BURKE: Hi, ma'am. Good morning, my name is Tom Burke and I'm an Army FEF here at Brookings.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Yay.

MR. BURKE: Yes, ma'am.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Are you having fun?

MR. BURKE: I'm loving it. It's pretty --

GENERAL ROBINSON: Excellent. Did you do --

MR. BURKE: Great colleagues.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Oh, great, excellent.

MR. BURKE: Ma'am, my question, kind of building off of an earlier comment that you made, last year the Joint Staff published the Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning, shattering that peace war binary in favor of a competition continuum, one of the central tenets of which is this idea of competition below the threshold of armed conflict. And the idea that makes this a departure from the past is this idea of joint and intra governmental cooperation.

And so my question really is what do you believe that either the Army or our interagency intergovernmental partners need to do to actually achieve the policy goals of the demands set forth to achieve our ends?

Thank you, ma'am.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Great, thank you.

So what I would say, first of all, obviously that's a policy question. But what I would say, you know, these are the kind of things that any military member that's going through Brookings should

take advantage of to build relationships. Because at the end of the day it is about relationships.

So to the extent that you know some of the courses that you have the privilege to take while you're here, and you have -- I'm sure you have brothers and sisters at State Department and at CSIS and at other place, build those relationships. And it's those relationships that when you need them, it will come out.

The thing that I recognize, we all think differently, right. I mean us military people, whatever the task, okay, here's the way we're going to accomplish it, here's the courses of action that you've got, make a decision. Well, not everybody thinks like that. And there's no judgment there, but it's relationships that help to be able to sit down and talk about it.

So what I would tell you as you work through that and then you work through the global integration things because you need the interagency as a part of all of that, that you will be able to reach out and build a relationship and have somebody to talk to help you think through the way somebody else might be thinking through it.

There are forums of course where we have all of us together when it comes time for big decision making, but I think it is as important that you reach out yourself. I can't tell you -- I had five tours in the building and what I realized early on was that the importance of not burning any bridges -- because if I come back to the fifth tour and I was working with the same people that I worked with the second and third tour, and I wasn't a team player -- doesn't mean that I acquiesce, but there's ways to talk about things, that it would have been a very difficult fifth tour.

And so to me that relationship -- so you're here at a place where you have time to go do that. Do that and take advantage of that and reach out to the other Fellows here at the places where they are. And you'll never know what you'll learn in five years.

MR. O'HANLON: A slightly broader point from me, I just want to give a shout out to the Armed Forces in general for the way they take professional military education seriously. It's something I continue to be astounded by. You could say it's a luxury in the sense that the military is big enough that people can literally take a year out of their normal progression of responsibilities. But whether you consider it a luxury or a necessity -- I think it's more the latter because what it does is it gives the Lori Robinsons and Jim Mattises and Tom Burkes and Eric Reids, and others, the ability to just learn about,

for example, where is China headed. And when I'm 10 years down the road in a position of command in a crisis and I want to figure out is this a crisis where we need to ratchet up or ratchet down or find a diplomatic way out, and the military advice is going to be crucial as a future president decides what to do, it's the ability to think back and reflect on history and on philosophy and on governmental dynamics and how decisions are made in a bureaucracy and all that kind of sophistication in addition to the technical military expertise that makes our military leadership so exceptional. And as I've gotten the privilege of getting to know some of these amazing Americans over the years, to see what the professional military education has done to complement their world view is something that we really have to sustain in the Armed Forces. And it's not just -- we're lucky when they come to Brookings, but of course this happens in general across the Armed Forces for people as they want to envision higher rank and joint service.

So let's go to another question if we could please. Start here in the front row and then over there to the third row.

QUESTIONER: Hi. If you want to look --

MR. O'HANLON: Identify yourself please.

QUESTIONER: Sorry, Chris McCray.

So if you were to look 10 years forward in terms of technology, is there one biggest thing that might go right or wrong in terms of technology? I mean we hear of all these things like the computers just being tested by Google that can do 10,000 years of analysis in 10 seconds. But it's hard to sort of understand exactly where all of this is going and it would be nice to have a positive scenario. (Laughter)

MR. O'HANLON: Well, hasn't everything been positive today? (Laughter) I'm teasing.

So what I would say one of the things that I know, and I can only speak really for the Air Force, but some of the joint -- again as I'm reading -- I think people are trying to look, you know, what do we think it's going to look like out in 2025, 2030, and what capabilities do we have today and what do we need to work on to do that, and how do we -- you've heard the talk about just the Capstone document on joint warfare -- how do we envision we're going to work together to defend the Nation or do what the national command authority asks us to do.

So I don't think there's one big thing, but I think there's a lot of things that people are working on to go, hey, this is the way it's going to be based on what we know out there. I think the thing

that we work on really hard is how do we make things faster, because if you look at the Googles or the Apples or the Microsofts, or those kind of folks, you know, I'm always impressed by how quick they have new capability. So how can we do that in the military to ensure that we can do the things that the Nation asks us to do.

MR. O'HANLON: Right here in the third row please.

MS. MACHI: Thank you, ma'am. Vivienne Machi with Defense Daily. Thank you for being here.

I wanted to ask you this space force question now that you're out of uniform and all but one of the bills essentially has been passed to allow it to happen next year. Can you talk a bit about how the space force -- you anticipate it benefitting NORAD, NORTHCOM, you know, the leadership roles that you have. And do you regret that you are not in the military right now to see it happen?

GENERAL ROBINSON: Can I answer the second question? No. (Laughter)

MS. MACHI: Both of them. But you can go (inaudible).

Thank you.

GENERAL ROBINSON: My pleasure. So not having been involved in the dialogue and not -- and, again, I don't want to say something that I don't know anything about. So I wasn't involved in all the dialogue because I was out in a joint job. You know, I know General J. Raymond, and when we've made him in charge, I would tell you that was the best pick our Nation could do. And so what I would tell you is watching him do his job, I know he's going to do the best he can as he tries to shape all of this and how does he integrate that and what do we do with that.

I don't know enough specifics to give you an intellectual answer.

And, no, I'm very happy to be retired. You know, 37 years is a long time. I tell people this though, I enjoyed every single second of it. I was so blessed with great mentors, great friends, great jobs, people that believed in me independent of what I did for a living and put me in places because they saw potential. I can't imagine anything better, but I'm happy to be retired. The one thing I miss is the people. I miss the people.

MR. O'HANLON: My friend here in the white sweater.

MR. HURWITZ: General Robinson, thank you very much for a very good presentation.

I grew up --

MR. O'HANLON: Please introduce yourself, even though I know you. Please introduce yourself.

MR. HURWITZ: Oh, I'm Eliot Hurwitz and I'm retired. I worked in the State Department during the prevalence of the dual use principle. And I would like to have your -- thank you for a very good presentation -- I would like to have your comments on the divergence of technology development from government sources to corporate sources and what the implications of that are internationally.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Wow. Let me make sure I understand your question. So because we have corporations -- and I'll use an Air Force example, like Lockheed Martin makes a lot of our airplanes.

MR. HURWITZ: Yes.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Okay. And so since they do that, what are the implications of that and then what does that do to us internationally.

MR. HURWITZ: Yes, that's correct. Formerly, technology development was the realm of governments.

GENERAL ROBINSON: So what I would say, one, we haven't finished. In the military we still do a lot of research and development. So we have a lot of that still going on. To have the corporations, if you recall when I was a young one in the military we had four airplane -- four or five different companies that made airplanes. And so that is not new news. What's interesting about it, especially if you look at the F-35 and you look at the consortium of countries that participated in the beginning of that and the ability of use to be interoperable around the world because we understand each other, it's the same with the F-16. We have F-16s around the world. Our ability to work together, it increases that capability. And we know the capability of all those other airplanes.

So I think in a positive vein, I think it's good, one, we've got somebody that's focused on building stuff and we have some R&D and we can work together with industry, and, two, the fact that we can deploy it around the world I think helps us in the long haul because if we ever have to go and defend the Nation or defend something else, we're not going to do it by ourselves, we're going to do it with other folks. And so to the extent that we can start with interoperability at the beginning with like capabilities I

think is very helpful.

MR. O'HANLON: We have time for one or two more questions. We'll go to my good friend from the Japanese air force here first and then maybe up to the --

QUESTIONER: Thank you, Mike. I'm (inaudible).

GENERAL ROBINSON: Yay.

QUESTIONER: So today talking in Japan in the last year we build up the female women fighter pilot.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Yah.

QUESTIONER: Yeah, (inaudible) talking today.

So my question is regarding the air battle management, regarding the emerging technologies, such as AI, (inaudible) ask you your comment regarding adapting the AI to the air battle management.

Thank you.

GENERAL ROBINSON: So first of all, when I was the commander in the Pacific, my good friend Sitosan, we had the opportunity to spend -- my husband and I had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with him and I just saw him a couple of months ago here in Washington, DC. He is a wonderful person and I enjoyed working with him.

So AI and air battle management. You'll have to show me about the capability of AI to make a decision. You know, one of things -- and obviously it's supposed to be a learning machine, right? So the more you work the more it learns. Because when you're sitting up there in an E3, as an example, there are times that the situation isn't exactly what we thought it was going to be. And so the human interface to that machine and the human voice to whatever is happening out there is very time critical, time sensitive. Do I ever think it's not going to happen? No. As we watch AI develop and progress, I think that the way we're moving forward I can see it. Do I think any time soon? Probably not. I think what's important is -- and one of the things our chief of staff of the Air Force is talking about and you probably see is this connectivity between the Force. And I think that's where we need to get to and then kind of work on that as we continue to develop and understand all the capabilities of AI.

MR. O'HANLON: By the way, a little advance advertisement for my good friend Tom

Stefanick's book. He's working on AI and warfare, a book that we hope will come out roughly in the next year or so. And he's going to try to I think put it in perspective and maybe slightly deflate the hyperbole around AI without poopooing the future at all, but nonetheless recognizing that it's not the be all and end all of everything.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Right.

MR. O'HANLON: Is that a fair summary?

The gentleman here in the fourth row please. Just time for one or two more and we'll wrap up.

QUESTIONER: Good morning, I'm Alexander with Senator Murkowski's office from Alaska.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Yay.

QUESTIONER: Something that we haven't talked -- yeah, exactly -- something we haven't talked much about today is the Arctic in Alaska. And obviously that was saying that was a big focus for you.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

QUESTIONER: Right now we're looking with General O'Shaughnessy and what the future of NORAD NORTHCOM is going to be, especially when we look at the DEW line and early warning.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

QUESTIONER: But I'm curious what your perspective is on how much we should be focusing on the Arctic, how much should we be focusing on integrating it with not just Canada and how much should we be really focusing on it being either a NORTHCOM issue, an INDO-PACOM issue or a EUCOM issue. Because that's something that we're dealing with right now.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Right. Well, please tell the Senator I said hello. I have huge respect for her.

So when I testified for my confirmation hearing I think it was Senator Sullivan that put the map down in front of General Scaparotti and I, remember, and said you have to fix this problem. I would tell you a couple of things. I know in my time, and I'm sure General O'Shaughnessy is taking it leaps and

bounds, we worked hard on that to make sure that there was not seams between us, and that the talking between all of us was consistent and the things that we thought needed to be done were consistent.

I think that when you look at -- I don't know how we can say it can be just a Canada problem, it's an Alaska and Canada problem, it's a North America problem really is the way I think about it. And when I think about the things that NORTHCOM was doing as we were getting ready to do more exercises to understand more in the Arctic, and we look -- I know my first summer there was the first time we had a cruise ship go through in the summer and that kind of opened everybody's eyes. And so I think we have to be very sensitive to it. And I think we have to understand what's going on. You know, what are the Russians doing, what are the Chinese doing, and what is our capability. And then what can we invest to ensure that we can detect and take care of things at ranges that we might need to. And that's kind of the DEW line and rebuilding some of that.

I'm sure General O'Shaughnessy has gone leaps and bounds in front of me. I know he's got the right sight picture about that, but I think we do have to pay attention and we do have to understand the environment.

One of the things I used to say all the time was we've had our feet in the sand for years and years and now we need to start thinking about putting our toe in the snow. And so I think (laughter) -- hey -- but I think that we started very -- we worked hard, but I know General O'Shaughnessy is really working hard at all of that too. And I know that the collaboration between EUCOM, INDO-PACOM is tight, just knowing the individuals that are involved.

Does that answer your question?

QUESTIONER: Yes.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Okay.

MR. O'HANLON: Let's see if we can do one last question and then we'll wrap up. And we just have one more, so the gentleman over here.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Yay.

MR. LI: I'm Kevin Li from the Elliott School of International Affairs. I have two questions.

First question is that --

GENERAL ROBINSON: He said just one. (Laughter)

MR. LI: Oh, sorry.

GENERAL ROBINSON: No, I'm teasing, I'm teasing.

MR. O'HANLON: See if you can combine it into one.

GENERAL ROBINSON: No, it's okay.

MR. LI: A few months ago Russia tested their new pioneer hypersonic weapon. And so as far as I know, the U.S. has no similar hypersonic weapon types -- similar capability with the pioneer missile. And Russia claimed that it is not deterrable and also not interceptable for NORAD. So you had commanded NORAD, an so I'd like to know if you have some comments on it, those things are not interceptable at all or our missile defense system and NORAD can have some capability to intercept it and also deter it.

GENERAL ROBINSON: So here's what I would say, as I was leaving the Department this was a very hot topic. And I know that they are working very hard on understanding what they saw in Russia and what they perceive the capabilities will be. And, as importantly, what can we do to defend the United States. I don't have fidelity data on that, but I know that that is something that people are paying attention to and making sure that we continue to work on defending the United States.

MR. O'HANLON: It is worth nothing by the way that a lot of hypersonic weaponry becomes maneuverable only in the terminal phase as it reenters the atmosphere. And so some kinds of hypersonics could be addressed through a midcourse system like the one we have now. But I think you're right, that's part of why the Missile Defense Agency has a $10 billion a year budget for developing new technology.

In closing, let me just say very briefly, it's the end of the year and so I'm a little nostalgic and I want to reflect on the amazing women that we've been blessed to know at Brookings and four stand out. Of course I'm going to finish with Lori and ask you to join me in thanking her. But first, Alice Rivlin, the maybe greatest of all at Brookings historically, who we lost this year after an amazing life and career at age 88. And she came back to Brookings at about age 72 after a long stint in government, and among other things, fixed DC's finances during that last 16 year stint with some help from others, but was just one of the greatest of all time. And then Janne Nolan, who also had been a pioneer in dealing with nuclear strategy and a lot of Air Force issues as well. And then of course a woman still very much with us

that we're all very proud of these days, Fiona Hill. You may have heard of her. I've just recently ordered my Fiona Hill t-shirts. There's not an action figure yet (laughter) that I'm aware of, but hopefully pretty soon.

And finally, you know, just an amazing friend and American, please join me in thanking General Lori Robinson.

GENERAL ROBINSON: Thank you, Michael. Thank you. (Applause) I hope everybody has a wonderful holiday season, and thank you for your thoughtfulness. I appreciate it an awful lot.

MR. O'HANLON: Well said.

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