THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

THE MARINE CORPS AND THE FUTURE OF WARFARE

Washington, D.C.

Tuesday, May 18, 2021

PARTICIPANTS:

**Introduction and Welcome:**

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**Discussion:**

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GENERAL DAVID H. BERGER
Commandant
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P R O C E E D I N G S

GENERAL ALLEN: Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. For those of you I've not had the honor of meeting yet, my name is John Allen, and I'm the president of The Brookings Institution. And it's a great pleasure to welcome you all today to -- year with our featured guest, our honored guest, the commandant of the Marine Corps, General David H. Berger. Gerald Berger assumed his duty as of 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps on 11th of July, 2019. A clear infantry officer. As we say in the Corp hoo-rah. He served on behalf of his country and in uniform for over 30 years.

On this commissioning in 1981, General Berger served across multiple theaters in Europe, the Indo Pacific region, and the Middle East. Notably serving in operations like Secure Tomorrow in Haiti, or Operation Iraqi Freedom in Falluja, or Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. General Berger draws on the wealth of tactical and strategic experience in his current position.

Before becoming commandant, he served as the commander of the Marine Corps combat development command and there he garnered a reputation for being one of the leading architects in preparing our Corps in the era of great power competition. Today General Berger continues this kind of innovative leadership in his role as commandant.

Already he's implemented an impatience modernization agenda and a new force design. It's an integrated approach. More than just about units and equipment, it's about the concepts and the doctrine and is about investing in modernization consistent with competing, deterring, and if necessary, fighting and winning in a multi-domain conflict, an environment that is profoundly affected by the dynamic changing character of war all at a time with the U.S. is challenged and competing with near, peer competitors with extraordinary and historic symmetric and asymmetric capabilities. It's a tall order and General Berger certainly has his work cut out for him.

Still, it's the kind of strategic thinking that we've come to expect from this great Marine general. But it's also the kind of strategic thinking we've come to expect from our Marines in their modern history, and will undoubtedly be essential if we are to ensure the safety and security of America and our Allies in the 21st century.

So, Commandant, it's good to see you again sir. And on behalf of all of us at Brookings, we are honored to host you today for this crucial online conversation. We certainly hope that this will not

be the last time you engage with us. And the next time we hope it is in person.

So now moving to the day's events. Once I've completed my remarks, I will turn the floor over to our Brookings Senior Fellow Michael O'Hanlon from the foreign-policy program who will moderate the conversation with General Berger. And after the dialogue, Mike will open the floor to questions and answers from the audience. Should audience members like to submit questions, they're welcome to do so via our address at Brookings.edu. Or sorry, events@Brookings.edu or via Twitter at #MarineCorps. And also, this is a very live and recorded, and streamed program today.

So with that, I would like to turn the floor over to Mike and General Berger. As always, semper fidelis, sir.

MR. O'HANLON: General Berger, thank you for joining us. As well let me also join John Allen for and we are privileged to work at Brookings and we get to benefit from a little bit of the Marine Corps style of leadership. Not too many 5:30 a.m. push-up sessions, but otherwise a lot of the same charisma, energy, and commitment to the country that you exemplify. And again, I wanted to thank you for joining us just as John Allen did.

And to begin by asking you, before we get into the discussion about the future, which of course I think is a lot of what your tenure as commandant has already focused on, I wanted to ask you about the state of the Marine Corps today and how you see the men and women, uniformed and civilian, who are doing so much for our country as Marines or part of the broader Marine community.

We've been through more than a year of COVID. You folks have done amazing things. But I wanted to hear not only your accomplishments and your sense of what's going well, but any concerns you have about readiness, about recruiting and retention, just about the state of the force. If we can please begin sir, with that. And again, welcome to Brookings. Thank you for joining us today. Over to you.

GENERAL BERGER: As I mentioned before we went live, it's -- I'm under no small amount of pressure when one of your lifelong mentors is on -- is watching you, and introducing you. But Marines are taught to handle pressure, so try to not -- I will try to do my best here.

The state of the Corps today, I think I'm very comfortable with where it is right now, although it clearly -- the service and the Department of Defense are in a period of change and always with

change come some unease, some uncertainty. Readiness wise, I think pretty clear. Three or four years ago, General Miller, my predecessor, spoke with Congress and told them here's where we are coming out of the Middle East. We need to rebuild our readiness. And Congress provided that, the resources to do that. So for three years, stable funding, good resources. He rebuilt the readiness -- Congress and General Miller rebuilt the readiness of the Marine Corps. So today we are a ready Marine Corps. We also -- it also set us up for the modernization which you hinted at.

The past year has had -- no doubt has had some challenges. But like in combat, I think the past 12 months has also given Marine leaders and Marines opportunity to shine because there is no book that they could read, how to -- you know, how do you move the Marine Corps through a pandemic. How do you recruit? How do you do recruit training? All that. There was no book for that. But as always, they adapt. They improvise. They rely on noncommissioned officers and junior officers and we very much trust of the make great decisions, the make great decisions along the way, and they did.

For example, think a year ago would have been safest, most conservative if we had stopped recruiting, stopped recruit training and sort of figured it out for a month or two. After listening to the recruiting force and listening to the training pipeline, they were pretty clear no we can sort this out, we can figure this out. Just give us the tools and we will run with it. And of course that's what happened. But it is really hard to recruit when the high schools are closed and colleges are shuttered. They really went in a different direction.

But I think long-term, like in a lot of other areas in the private sector as well, some of those techniques and tools that were picked up over the past 12 months we'll carry forward with because they're useful. They after the sort of toolkit.

I think the Marine Corps today is very ready. It is clearly -- we're running the Marine Corps, we're running the Department of Defense at a pretty good clip based on security issues around the world, but that's not new. You have seen that for the entirety of your watching over the national security sort of portfolio. I don't think that's new. We're just benefiting from a few years of rebuilt readiness for now we can move to the modernization part you highlighted.

I mean, the people are in good shape. The tempo has adjusted itself into a sort of a status where we can maintain the tempo of deployments and time home and then deployments again. In

other words, we are not burning out the individuals. It's not laid-back, but we're not burning them out either.

So I think overall, we are in a very good place where we could respond to a crisis anywhere on the globe. We are in a good place in terms of doing the business that combatant commanders need us to do to deter something from growing into a bigger problem. But clearly the pressing threat of both the People's Republic of China and Russia are driving us to modernize and adjust for the future.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. As I start talk about modernization with you, and asking you some questions there. If I could as a transition question, ask you about the budget trajectory where I do give had some comments in public already. But are you comfortable with the notion that it looks likely that the defense budget is not going to keep growing in real terms in the years ahead. I mean, who knows. I don't want to say that's an iron law of physics, but certainly the last Trump budget, the early Biden budgets, the mood of the Congress, the fiscal concerns from COVID response, all of this would seem to be pushing the country towards what looks like an emerging consensus that we should sort of keep the defense budget flat.

There are some people who would cut it a lot. Some people would like to restore the 3% to 5% annual real growth that Secretary Mattis and others called for with the National Defense Strategy of 2018. But it seems like we are more likely to be more or less flat with or without adjustments for inflation. Can you live with that as Commandant?

GENERAL BERGER: A couple of things to unpack there. First, our approach for the past two years has been before we went to Congress as for any increase in resources, which we may need to do, but before we took that step, that we would self-fund, we would resource ourselves to modernize, which we have done. There is a risk and that because your counterparts, the other services you're asking for larger budget and they're asking for an increase in strength. The last couple of years we did not go that path.

And my thinking, my logic was Michael, that if you're going to anticipate perhaps asking for additional resources down the road, you have to build to demonstrate that you have wrung every bit of efficiency and modernized inside the best you can if we asked for another dollar. That's where we are.

The size of the budget versus the trajectory of the budget, you introduced both.

I would say the second and the third part I would say would probably be the stability of the budget, the three elements that a service chief kind of focuses on. Of the three, stability is the most important. In other words, we can -- I can adjust the service if you have a good forecast going forward. If it's up and down, really difficult, the size of the budget we can adjust to.

I think overall the Department of Defense -- that's the size of the budget is really the secretary of defense's focus with Congress and he can -- he's in a great position of course to describe with Congress what the needs are. But as a service, if you can't -- first of all, just the basic of economics, which everybody on the net is going to clearly understand. If you can't match the rate of inflation, then you're buying power is going down. That's a challenge. That means you're going to continue to contract. You're going to delay modernization. You're going to do what you need to do to keep readiness up in the near term.

So our approach intriguing the size of the Marine Corps and divesting of legacy, older equipment has allowed us to modernize at a fast rate. Going forward, I think it's -- but my anticipation was that it was going to be flat, that we were not going to be a climbing trajectory for the next for five years. So I think we're set up okay. As the Department of Defense, that's really for the secretary to decide how much the overall size of the budget is and the piece of it. The most pressing part for me as a service chief is the stability. What can I forecast looking downrange?

MR. O'HANLON: And just to give you a chance to highlight a couple of the efficiencies and tough decisions that you've made, if I could, I've been reviewing your testimonies and your previous articles and so forth. At least two big things that come to my mind, you probably want to add to. One would be a reduction in headquarter staff where you've been aspiring to cut by maybe 15%. And another would be a much reduced emphasis on tanks as a key integral part of Marine Corps firepower.

Then maybe a third part would be shifting away over time from some of the large amphibious ships to a somewhat smaller approach towards moving Marines and their equipment around the globe. That part I sense is maybe more of a work in progress. But could you maybe add to my list with any other reforms that you think the general public needs to be more fully aware of regarding the Marine Corps to date?

GENERAL BERGER: The capabilities that you mentioned, the major programs like heavy armor, towed artillery, heavy bridging capability, which were all very useful for the last 50 years and would be useful going forward to some degree, we have to make -- you know, my assessment is you have to make trades based on what you think your utility is to the joint force.

So we're willing to trade things like heavy armor for capabilities that I think are unique to the Marine Corps that provide a unique contribution to the combatant commander, to the joint force. And that is expeditionary, the amphibious, the parts that we do very good, better than anybody else. So divesting of the capabilities you mentioned, part of it.

Part of it was contracting the in strength, strengthening the in strength of the Marine Corps because people are expensive. And we have to match the size of the Marine Corp. what we think we're going to be asked to do in the future. So people, the second part, in other words -- I know it's an oversimplification, but I'm willing to trade capacity and strength for quality of the Marine Corps that we have. So we will have a slightly smaller Marine Corps in terms of in strength, but they will be more senior and better trained. So that's a trade I'm willing to make.

Where we have to go in terms of capabilities that we don't have right now, we have to be able to help the fleet commander or the joint force commander against a peer or near peer adversary. And that means things like anti-ship, anti-subsurface. The capabilities in other words that we need to develop that helps them first deter, as you pointed out.

Shrinking the size of the Marine Corps, divesting of some legacy programs, all important. The civilian headquarters, 15% reduction, I think as hard as that will be, essential also because we -- you can't shrink the muscle of the Marine Corps, the real muscle, and still keep the headquarters the same size as it was before. It doesn't make sense. So we should right size that as well. Overall, trying to right size the Marine Corps, divest of older platforms and capabilities that were perhaps useful going forward.

The last part you mentioned was ships. I would say it's not a trade of one or the other. We're going to need L class amphibious ships, LHAs going forward because they are so versatile when you can launch F35s or MD22s and surface vessels on the water. You can do all of that from one ship. I mean, they are, as General Allen knows and other people have commented on, they are literally the Swiss Army Knives. They can do everything.

But we also need the organic mobility of much smaller ships, lower draft that can move a smaller unit around in a littoral -- in kind of an island area and make that organic mobility available to them. So we need a wider portfolio I would say. It's not an either/or.

MR. O'HANLON: By the way, on the Navy ships that move you around in large numbers already today, of course as you say they can carry airplanes. They're big compared to some of the other ships you just mentioned. They are small compared to the classic flat deck aircraft carrier. Do you think we can make greater use of these Marine Corps carriers, if you will, sometimes as a substitute for the flight deck? As General -- Secretary Mattis was trying to get away from always having an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf, partly because he wanted to be able to focus them more on Russia and China.

Is there still room for greater flexibility and maybe greater change in how we deploy forces abroad? Maybe using Marine Corps assets and the smaller carriers that you operate on rather than using the big flat decks in certain scenarios?

GENERAL BERGER: I think it -- the choices give a combatant commander options. An amphibious ship, even an LHA America class is not an aircraft carrier. And an aircraft carrier is not an amphibious ship. I think the value in other words in changing it up sometimes, as it does provide the unpredictability that Mattis talked about where -- to our allies, to our partners, we want to become very predictable. But to an adversary you want to be unpredictable.

So I think the employment of both embark Marines on amphibious ships and aircraft carriers at different times, very powerful because it was a very difficult for an adversary to see a pattern that's recognizable that they can set up something to counter. I think both have a place, both have a role. And we rely really on the joint force commanders, the combatant commanders to ask for the right capability at the right time. My job as a service chief, give them as much on a menu as we can.

MR. O'HANLON: Looking to that question, I've been intrigued and I know you've been think a lot about the future of warfare and the way in which the combatant commanders work with the service chiefs, the chairman, the secretary, the Congress to build the force of the future. And one thing I'm struck by is that service chiefs really have to play a huge role in this. And I'm personally thrilled that you do, because the combatant commander, as much of their thinking about war plans, they are also thing about day-to-day.

And from where I sit, I sometimes worry that combatant commanders get too caught up in the day-to-day maintaining deterrence and reassurance and presence and symbolic shows of resolve and also sometimes war plans that were created in an earlier era. The technology and warfare sort of survive longer than they should.

Which brings me to sort of my central question that I would like to put you in that maybe explore little further and follow-up. As you think about deterring China and Russia, but perhaps especially China, given the Marine Corps' maritime responsibilities, can you help me start to understand the type of scenarios that you worry about most?

Are you thinking about Chinese attacks on Taiwan where I'm not really sure if the Marine Corps role is enormous in that scenario? Or are you thinking more about Chinese movement into the South China Sea or the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea more than we've seen so far? Or don't you really think it is kind of specific scenario, specific terms and you were thinking more generally about just a broad region where we may have to compete, show presence, work with partners and you're less focused on combat scenarios?

Can you give us a little window into what's driving you as you think about the future of warfare and especially about the future of deterring China so we don't have to fight them?

GENERAL BERGER: The first part, the temporal nature, or the different lenses that combatant commanders view their challenges through versus service chiefs. So I think your -- I would agree with you 100%. Their horizon is clearly closer in then the service chiefs. Their risk is more near-term. So they're going to try to reduce that risk, buy down that risk by being as big and strong and prevent anything from bubbling up right away on their watch.

So I don't fault them at all. I'm sure I would be doing pretty much the same. The service chief, I've settled into, I think my horizon, the way that I can help best, is give the horizon that's about 10 years out. So every day, every week my sort of rolling horizon is a decade out because I think if I'm -- if my headlights are that far down the road, then I can set the service up as best I can to be ready for the future.

I don't expect the combatant commander to do that. That's my job. So he employs the forces that we have this afternoon. And I want them focused on the near-term threats. I think the

secretary of defense needs service chiefs focused on the road to make sure that we don't arrive at a place four five years into the future we find ourselves -- we have the wrong force, we have the wrong concepts. So we should have our headlights down the road.

And as you highlight, the secretary sits right in the middle of that, as does the chairman, trying to not arbitrate, but trying to balance but the near-term readiness and their risks this afternoon with the long-term, make sure that the department is ready for what the future operating environment might look like. I don't think that anything is wrong there. I think it's not a -- it's a natural stasis of things where the secretary sits in the middle as he rightly should, trying to balance the near-term needs with the long-term needs, all the natural state of things.

So how do you -- if you are a service chief or the commandant, then how do you set up the service for the future? I think the dialogue around -- and you mentioned it, around deterrence and competition and what all that means, is definitely worth unpacking over time. We haven't had a pacing threat in a long time.

So just the dialogue of deterrence is sort of a new/old discussion item. There are some veterans around who recall something about conventional and strategic deterrence, but not -- but it hasn't been a day-to-day topic for 20 years. So okay. So we have some -- go back to the history books. Let's learn about how it was done. Today's a different environment. But absolutely, there are lessons to be learned from history here.

What does the Marine Corps do? I think a couple of things. I think you need a forward sort of -- we call it a stand-in force or a contact force. You need a very forward expeditionary, fairly light, fairly mobile force all the time in the right areas if you're the United States because that's how you are going to do a couple of things. One, figure out what's going on in front of you. This is a sort of reconnaissance, counter reconnaissance effort. Somebody has to paint a picture of what the world is going on in front of us. And we need a force forward to do that. I think satellites and everything else contribute, but there is great value in being forward.

The second part is you can contribute to the deterrence in terms of making sure the adversary knows that you can see what they're doing. And this is a sort of developing topic of deterrence by detection. In other words, not just deterrence by punishment or the threat of punishment, but actually

deterrence by detection meaning they will have to change their scheme because they believe we can pretty much see what they're doing all the time. Okay, that's very valuable I think.

The response to crisis, whether that's a typhoon or in other words a natural disaster or a problem at a U.S. Embassy or whatever it is, the U.S. has always been very good at getting there quickly with something to try to help out, to try to contain. I don't think that goes away in the future at all.

And this is really the bread and butter of the Marine Corps as a Naval force; get there quickly, try to get a picture of it, try to buy time for the joint force commander, for the national leadership to sort through what we're going to do. But you need something there quickly and that's just the value of a very ready Marine Corps as a crisis response force.

So the deterrence aspect I think on the conventional side, we have work to do there is a joint force. The Marine Corps, Navy, I think is uniquely suited to be forward all the time, be expeditionary, be on board ship. It doesn't require a big footprint to shore. All of that though, a lot of work still to do.

MR. O'HANLON: Picking up on that. Thank you. That's a fantastic answer and give me some new insights into how you see your priorities. I wanted to pick up where John Allen left off with mentioning that you are roughly halfway through what would be considered a classic four year tenure as service chief and ask you to sort of assess how we are doing.

It's also know about three years and Secretary Mattis's National Defense Strategy. That was the previous administration of course, but it built on the Obama administration's third offset. And this is a fair amount of continuity and agreement at least on these matters of defense policy and the focus on great power competition. So it just seems like it's a good opportunity to take stock of how well we are doing.

You mentioned we still have work to do as a joint force. I'm fairly impressed at how much you've gotten done in two years, but also I know that service chiefs usually feel that it's very hard to get things done quickly. And you've only got four years to do it. There are a lot of big ideas and big buzzwords out there. Again, the National Defense Strategy, the third offset. There is the joint all domain command and control building on multi-domain operations. All these things follow on from air sea battle.

My friend Harlan Oldman, who of course has followed these issues for many years. So underscores that it's not always obvious how all the services fit into any one of these initiatives. So could

you take a step back and maybe as one of the joint chiefs, not just the commandant, but one of the joint chiefs look at the whole defense establishment, sort of assess how we're doing and where we perhaps need to stick little bur in our saddle so to speak and get going a little faster if we're really going to reinvigorate conventional deterrence?

GENERAL BERGER: We do it within the Marine Corps. And I think we're not alone. I think I won't speak for General Brown, CQ Brown, but we do talk a lot, he and I. I think our sense is if you're comfortable with the rate of change right now, the you're moving too slow. And I don't say that lightly. And I don't say just because we should move fast for the sake of moving fast because moving fast, there is risk in that, right? Things are going to wrong. You're going to try things that don't work out.

But we are driven -- I'm driven by the pace it was our pacing threat is moving and technology is moving. Those two aspects are both -- are key drivers for me in terms of the speed at which we must move. Now NDS, I think your point is valid. I think the foundational elements of that strategy, what they saw as the operating environment, what the main threats were, I think all that doesn't actually change that much to your point.

And I think it was -- it's valid today that you would need to update it. And this administration is certainly going about that. I think we'll see -- I believe we will see a new one sometime late this year or early next year. And all of that I think is natural because that's three years later. You probably ought to look at it, see what's still valid and what needs updating. But the basics of it I think are there.

Character of war, I think the premise of your question is the character of war, fundamentally changing and are we keeping up with it. I would say I'm frustrated that we're not recognizing early enough that the character of war is evolving, is changing, and we must evolve with it. We have not been in place before where we had a peer adversary. In any part of the military or economic or diplomatic or any other lens you want to look to, we haven't -- we been alone on top for so long that this is an uncomfortable place for us to be. We should be uncomfortable with that. But actually I think it drives us in a direction -- it will drive us in the direction that we will accept. And that is an understanding of, okay, if we can't be in the front of the line in every area all the time, 24 hours a day around the world, and that's not achievable anymore, then we are actually going to have the discussion we ought to have,

which is where can we accept risk. In what areas -- in other words, just as a military force, in what areas are very comfortable being behind? What areas do we need to be astride? What areas must we be in front? We have to maintain a margin of advantage there. Those are really hard discussions and because we're used to being in front on top everywhere all the time.

Well, that's not the world I see in front of us. So now comes the harder decisions about which ones are we comfortable actually be in astride or maybe even a little behind in in order to maintain an advantage in these other areas. The second part I think to that that I think the discussion that Secretary Austin and others are starting -- in the term he uses is integrated defense or integrated deterrence. I think that's a great way of capturing what we ought to think about.

Now, he talks about it I believe in terms of the whole of government sort of integrated approach, interagency and all the tools you got the whole kitbag. But there is also an integrated part with our allies and partners and within the U.S. military. So there's at least two levels of integrated there that we've really got to unpack, understand, because we're not going to be successful on our own. We have to be -- we have to acknowledge the value of the allies and partners which I think you could offer perhaps at times there was some hubris in terms of taken for granted. We can't -- cannot take it for granted. It has to be our work every day, every single day.

As a joint chief, I think I wish we had -- I wish we had started to move faster earlier. I'm uncomfortable with the pace. I'm uncomfortable with the amount of bureaucracy to your point that it takes to make a move. However, all that said, I am buoyed by a couple of things. One, young leaders in the Marine Corps who are not hesitating to move at all. They are frustrated with me. They see where we need to go in there like, you need to move the machine faster. So I'm really as always pushed by our junior leaders who are ready to move. They see the world in front of them changing too and they're ready to go.

And frankly also Congress who I think -- who wants to help the Marine Corps, wants to help the U.S. military move. They know some of the bureaucracies, some of the friction they created. So I think they're working hard to try to help how they can or in ways that are helpful, reduce the friction, reduce the bureaucracy, be able to move faster.

MR. O'HANLON: If you don't mind, I wanted to ask about your gut feeling about China.

And I know that there is probably a part of you as Commandant of the Marine Corps that would rather let somebody else answer that question in the government. But I'm also struck that if we look around the government, there are people whose responsibilities, like yours, are very important in regard to China. And we may or may not be having a fulsome enough dialogue about what we think China really wants, what they're up to, and also which scenarios with China should worry us the most.

And so I guess is a two-part question. Part one would be, in your gut, do you feel like China is an ultra-ambitious, rising power that's going to be very, very hard to deter without war and your gut instinct is that the chances of war are very high? Or are you close to the feeling that if we are responsive and we do a lot of the things that you're trying to do with the Marine Corps, the rise of China is probably something we have a pretty good chance, working with allies, to handle. So that sort of at a broad philosophical level.

And then I do think the answer is important because I've watched the Biden team and they're trying to find the right balance. They have this concept of compete we must, but cooperate where you can, confront only if essential. But then they've also designated China a perpetrator of genocide in Xinjiang Province, and that's a pretty strong statement. And there are a lot of people in the defense will do really think that we will fight China someday because rising powers fight established powers and it's sort of Thucydides' strap as Graham Allison has said. But I wanted to ask you where you come down.

And then also which scenarios, to the extent that deterrence is hard and war is a possibility, which scenarios were you most? Is it Taiwan or is it something else? So it's a big question, but I would really love to hear your insights.

GENERAL BERGER: I read Graham book, like many people. China for me is a topic I've spent the last 10 years trying to learn as much as I can. And the more that I read and listen and study, the more it's clear to me it takes a lot of study because they are not -- they are nothing -- they are not an easy culture to -- for us to see because we want a mirror image. And you have to really discipline your mind to try to understand where they are. And the first step of course -- and I won't go far down this road, but we drove -- we were comfortable talking about China, and PRC, and Communist Party all is interchangeable. They are clearly not. So the learning, the discipline, the education part I think, first step, is helpful.

I'm not there with those that believe that war is a foregone conclusion with China. I'm not in that camp. I think there are measures that both sides can take that don't make it something that's an inevitability. It's not. I don't believe that it is. That said, they clearly have a strategy. They have a plan. They are resourcing that plan. They have a unity of government that gives them an advantage. There are disadvantages in that also.

I believe they are on a march to accomplish their ends, their objectives. And it's pretty clear, and they're very open about what those objectives are.

As far as deterrence and competition, I don't think -- I think -- let me put it another way. Their ambitions, clearly all you need to do is look at a map from 10 years ago and a map from today and you can see what they're trying to do. We need to be in a position to hold the freedom of both the seas and the air and all domains, all aspects wide-open because that's where commerce flows. That's -- and everybody is a benefactor there. A rewriting of the rules with a narrow set of controls in there is not to the good of the world.

I don't think it's inevitable, but I do think it's going to be an active, everyday sort of competition for the foreseeable future. They are continuing to expand. We are trying to sort through how do we accommodate, but not allow any one nation to rewrite a set of rules that's done really well for everybody for 70 years in their favor, sort of thing. And that's of course the quandary.

So I know it's very basic, but first step for me is to continue to try to understand their culture, try to understand their goals, their objectives, their leadership frankly, and the timelines that there on all the way to President Xi and the timeline that he is on.

Tough scenarios. You cannot talk about the global competition or strategic competition without talking about Taiwan and where that fits in. But here I think this is where it's too simple to look at Taiwan, China, the U.S. in a symmetrical lens or symmetrical -- they are not -- is an asymmetric problem from a security aspect and it's more than regional. Someone, we got to open our brains a little bit and think. It's not just a -- this isn't how much firepower do they have versus us versus Taiwan. It's not that simple.

I think we also sometimes skip past the fact that Taiwan is responsible for Taiwan's defense. Okay. We can't skip past that first step. So how can we help them defend themselves? Not

skip past that first step?

I think two different scenarios in other words probably. One is that inch by inch, yard by yard movement forward that we see in areas like the South China Sea and in other areas where if -- and I'm just going to use sort of a martial arts metaphor where if you lean back, they lean forward. Okay. That's the everyday cabbage, salami slice, whatever kind of characterization you want to use, that was in their favor because there is no fight there. They just move, move, move forward a little bit at a time.

But the other part is a more dynamic, more kinetic perhaps scenario like Taiwan where it's clearly in their interest, and they have stated so overtly, that they want to bring Taiwan underneath the umbrella. And that's going to be counter to, so far, to our U.S. policy. So I think you look at it through different lenses, the everyday, every week competition versus what are the set of circumstances by which the PRC might move towards Taiwan and what might that look like.

MR. O'HANLON: Now Chris Rose, former staff to John McCain, wrote a book called "The Kill Chain" that's been very well received. And he quotes a series of Pentagon wargames in which we supposedly simulated conflict against China over Taiwan. And according to Rose, the United States lost 17 times in a row. I wonder if you could help us unpack that. And just how dire is that warning?

I mean, just to join one of my own thoughts quickly if I could, I sometimes therefore concluded that we need to think like Secretary Austin about more integrated deterrence across the full range of tools of government and also the full geographic range of where we could perhaps, in the event that China blockades Taiwan, we essentially do something like a blockade of China.

Now maybe it's not quite as airtight as China could blockade Taiwan. But we could interfere with shipping in the Indo Pacific region over towards the Persian Gulf. We could combine that with economic sanctions, try to convince as many of our allies as possible to place a form of economic punishment on China rather than trying to directly go into the dragon's lair, so to speak, and break the blockade 100 miles off the coast of China where it's being applied against Taiwan.

Is there anything you would add to the specifics on this kind of conversation? Or is this too sensitive and classified? Or is this not really a productive way and your mind for the United States to try to expand our options with dealing with a possible war over Taiwan?

GENERAL BERGER: The one you highlight is an acknowledgment and acceptance that

we should be prepared for if the People's Republic -- if the PRC were to decide that, okay, this is the time and we have to try to cease Taiwan now, we should clearly accept that that's going to probably going to go into all domains and it probably will be wider than regional. It may not be, but we should be prepared for it, absolutely should.

So the basics, in other words the old style of how do you contain, how do you prevent a seizure of Taiwan will probably not applicable going forward because there are capabilities in other domains that weren't there before and things that are frankly to be determined. In some, like space, how far any nation will go because the rules are not yet written for the international sort of rule of how things will work in that domain.

I think we have to -- we are adjusting the way that we look at any potential conflict over Taiwan. And that, I would agree with you 100%, has to go into -- must beyond the military and much beyond U.S. versus PLAN. It has to be a wider conversation than that.

I think the basics, the way that Secretary Austen and others have characterized what is it about deterrence or what is deterrence that we are actually after in conventional means. So that is really about the calculus in their head, the cost-benefit sort of calculus and where they are convinced that the risk is not worth taking that next step. So how do we best achieve that?

The last part I will mention is, regardless of whether it's Taiwan or another scenario, time will matter. If you can't get there quickly to begin to address an issue, every hour, every day is going to compound the issue. That's the same in the Middle East or in the Mediterranean or in the in the Indo Pacific. So having a forward force, having something in proximity really does help the United States.

Lastly, I will just turn it on and take, completely upside down. Let's say it's not a kinetic, a war fight, but a typhoon. Or you name the disaster. It could be an earthquake. Customarily, the U.S. has been nearby and sent help really quickly. The PLAN, the People's Republic of China is shrinking the size of their army, growing the size of their Navy and Marine Corps for a reason. We are going to have to think through, what if they get there first with medical supplies, with the ability to help ashore without bringing a whole brigade ashore, how do you -- how do we factor all that in? Because the relationship with allies and partners is also built on how we respond to natural disasters when a call for help goes out. What if we're not first? That's never been the case before.

So back to the -- how do you use the force to your advantage? How do you develop the relationship with allies and partners? Some of it clearly is training and interoperability and the kinetic aspects. But some of it frankly is using their tools plus yours in a way that can help mankind when needed. It's not the first place most people talk in the military. But my experience is, when a country needs help and they need now, every day, every hour matters.

MR. O'HANLON: Fantastic. And thank you for putting in a broader range of concerns and scenarios and natural disasters. That leads a little bit too -- I'm going to start bringing more questions from the audience, although I've already been doing so in order to buttress and expand on some of my own.

But one question is about the recent Northern Edge exercise and whether the Marine Corps learned useful insights about the expeditionary advanced base operations where you've been in favor of trying to make us much more supple and be smaller and maybe more resilient in a number of our intentional basing options around the broader Indo Pacific in particular. So what did we learn from Northern Edge and about expeditionary advanced based operation concept?

GENERAL BERGER: A couple of things. One, logistics matters. The more dispersed, the more distributed you are, logistics challenges go up. We know that. Everybody who has studied any kind of military history understands that. But it's compounded when you are against a -- facing an adversary. So it's not -- the sustainment of that force over great distances really becomes challenging if your lines of communication, your supply lines can be threatened. We are not comfortable with that. We haven't had our supply lines, our operational, strategic supply lines, we haven't had been threatened since World War II, I would offer. So this is new territory for us as well.

So first of all, we have a lot of -- we have work to do on logistics as a joint force, as a Marine Corps. Everybody is focused on missiles, and rockets, and aircraft and join all the main command-and-control, all of which is relevant, all of which is not going to go very far if we don't address logistics early on now. So that's one part of it.

Operating in extreme environments, especially in the Arctic in the North, brings an additional scent of environmental factors that you don't face in other places. Great, in other words, to train in Alaska. Great to train in Norway. Why? Because there are days where you can't launch and

recovery aircraft. There are days when you are weathered in and you have to figure out -- both sides are facing the same environment, but it's a real challenge. The missionary works different. Human beings work different. And this is May, right, when the Northern Edge is going on. You work in that environment in December, January, February, it's a whole another aspect to it.

We -- training in an extreme cold weather, training and the Arctic is really important. Why? Because for our concepts, second for our equipment, third for our people. Changing environments like that and operating in there is very good. With expeditionary advanced space ops, back to where I started. You can have all the mobility and all the lethality you want. If you can't sustain it; you're going to culminate pretty early. So we have to focus on the logistical aspects. That's not easy. It solvable, but we've got to put our shoulder into it.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. There are a couple of questions about acquisition policy and innovation policy in the Marine Corps. You referred to how many young officers often want to drive things faster than the institutional Marine Corps can keep up with them, so to speak. And I know that Former Chairman Matt Thornberry really pushed acquisition reform at the House armed services committee. And of course we've broken up the undersecretary position for acquisition into two pieces to try to spur things at that level as well.

So the question specifically, one is, does the Marine Corps need to create some kind of an innovation ecosystem or office that would help expedite the development of new technology. And then the other is, are you able to sort of get to the so-called acquisition valley of death better than before were an idea might look promising, but then getting enough money to get into more advanced development prior to a decision on actual full development and procurement can be often a difficult period for a weapon system. So that's a bunch of stuff on acquisition reform. I wondered if you would comment, please.

GENERAL BERGER: A couple of key parts that I picked up on the question. Two main parts. The first part, should we create some sort of innovation ecosystem. Here I will thank -- we are the benefactors today of decisions made 20, 30 years ago in the Marine Corps. Location-wise, the Marine Corps relocated its manpower, its systems command we do all of our acquisition, its war fighting lab, its combat development, it relocated all of that to Quantico, Virginia.

So within a five-mile radius, every part -- to make speed, every part that you want is right

there. So we are not in different towns or different states. That allows us velocity, I would say. It enables us to move much quicker and more agile than my peers who are spread across the United States. We are all within 5, 6 miles.

Ecosystem, I would offer that we have it. It may not satisfy everybody. Ours is the central note of that is the war fighting lab, laboratory, which is in Quantico, Virginia. That's the -- those are the people who are testing out ideas, concepts, equipment through the op, through the fleet, through the operating forces themselves. They are co-located in Quantico, Virginia. They are co-located with our acquisition arm Marine Corps Systems Command and the program manager for land forces for feeding of land systems. Everything is in Quantico. That helps.

Are we moving fast enough? No. Are the bright minds pushing us? Yes. But I will just use one example. I'm convinced that our infantry battalion is not built right for the future. But I also don't know what the perfect infantry battalion ought to look like. So our approach is, how we are going to learn fast, is we have three Marine divisions. Each one of them selected one battalion, organized differently, trained differently, equipped differently through the war fighting lab.

And for the next year and a half, two years, as they go through their regular cycle of training and then go deploy overseas, come back, we will learn from all three. My guess is none of those three is the perfect solution, but three different configurations with three different concepts and three different sets of gear, we're going to -- in a year and a half, two years, we going to have the best picture we have of what's the best -- what does the infantry battalion look like going into the future. This is what you have to do.

I think also I would just add we've got to be comfortable with getting out of the way sometimes between industry, engineers, Marines. We always want to get in the middle of the conversation. We always want to ask questions because the program manager wants to know what's going on and all of us are interested. And sometimes, sometimes a lieutenant or a corporal or a sergeant and an engineer, if you just step back and watched, they will actually come up with ways of doing things that you -- neither -- nobody had envisioned prior to that. You just got to be comfortable with some failures along the way. We should be comfortable with that. Turn them loose. If it doesn't work out the way we designed it, fine. Is there another use for it? Maybe there is. So in some aspects we got to get

out of our own way.

The valley of death, the second part, we absolutely have to figure that part out. We have a good idea. It's somewhere in the middle between that and a formal program or record. It sort of dies on the vine. Here Quantico, I think helps us again because they are co-located in the same place. So the first part, the war fighting lab and the equipment that we are experimenting with and trying out is in the same grid square almost as the acquisition arm. So they are co-located. They are talking because they are co-located.

I think we have fewer problems with the valley of death and perhaps my peers in some ways. We have one acquisition command. We have one war fighting lab, and it's all co-located. In the point I think is absolutely valid. Otherwise, great ideas just die. They have nowhere -- they can't find a home. They just die.

MR. O'HANLON: You know, speaking of different structures and mechanisms that might be set up, I want to come back one more time to China and then I will have a final question from audience as we already approach the 11:00 hour in what's just been a great experience for me and I'm so grateful.

GENERAL BERGER: I --

MR. O'HANLON: But I wanted to ask Commandant, if you feel like we have the right system in the U.S. government to think about China in a broad sense. So Secretary Austin is talking about integrated deterrence involving cyber, and economics, and diplomacy. But of course he doesn't control all those aspects of the U.S. response. And when I've looked into how we could use economic warfare along with war fighting strategies and gone over the Treasury, for example, to talk about what kind of capacity they would have to help build that kind of a strategy, they are very small in terms of their international office.

And the National Security Council already is probably too big and already asked to do too much. And the combatant commands, as you say, are often as least as focused on the near-term as on thinking about the long-term future. Whereas we try to follow your vision or Secretary Austen's vision, which are complementary I think of a long-term strategy for a rising great power like China, do we have the right place in the government that's working that problem whether it's a joint staff or the undersecretary defense for policy. But again, even those are just the military side of things. Do we need

to rethink how we do this at a governmentwide level?

GENERAL BERGER: It could be potentially the National Security Council. And I think it's too early to pass judgment. Their team -- three months, whatever it is, three, four months into it, I think it's premature to say that can't be done there with the agility that we need. We talk -- like you have the same history as I do. We talk about interagency like it's a thing. It's not a thing. You clearly need a centerpiece, a pivot man, whatever you want to call it that can fuse all those aspects together to get the whole of government that we are seeking, that we search for.

I think too early to tell is -- I'm not the one to pass judgment. But my sense is, too early to tell. If it does become big and bloated and slow and cumbersome, then that will really crush us. On the other hand, if it thins itself out, leans itself to the point where the different elements of our government can actually work, then I think it could be the place. But we are --

MR. O'HANLON: But --

GENERAL BERGER: For the first time I think the driver is not -- for myself, I'm just talking about myself. We have looked at our government internally and how do we make ourselves better. But for the first time really we are being pushed by a unitary government that's not a peer. Okay, they have speed. They have -- if it's all the powers in a single person, we haven't been pressed by that kind of a strategic challenge before.

So I think that's pressing us, to your point, to figure out how to be more agile, to figure out how to streamline, to figure out how to fuse all that together. The chairman, the joint staff, policy, they will clearly fill a role within the Pentagon. They are not the centerpiece for how to stitch together all of government that you're hinting at.

MR. O'HANLON: I certainly wish Kurt Campbell and the other team at the other parts of the team at NSC well. I do think it's a daunting task for the NSC given that it's small. Yeah, but thank you.

So my final question again really synthesizing and combining a couple of questions from the audience have to do with, how do you find a way for the Corps to do it all? Because you and I have been talking about great power competition and modernization.

We began with (inaudible) and you commented I think fairly favorably how the Corps has

dealt with COVID and the recovery from budgetary problems and high deployments of earlier years. But do you have concerns that as you're being asked to address China's rise and the return of great power competition, that you may not be able to do quite as well some of the other, lower intensity and more diverse tasks that remain important, whether it's in regard to Iran or terrorism or any other challenge? North Korea we haven't talked much about today. Are there any other concerns that you would have where it's important not to let our vigilance and our preparedness slip even as we have this new priority on great power competition? Over to you for the final answer of the day, sir.

GENERAL BERGER: There is a risk of that if we don't discipline ourselves, I would agree. In other words, you can lose your focus and then try to become all things to all. And then that's how organizations get themselves in trouble. I think my job is to keep us -- help keep the Corps focused. We are by nature and by I think by unique role, a crisis response force for the nation.

Okay, that must stay in the center because you never know with the next crisis is going to happen or where. You need something you can put at the problem very quickly. It may not be the perfect fit, the right wrench for the right bolt, but get something there fast, sort it out, biased time. This is the Marine Corps' role. That requires a very high state of readiness.

The second part after the crisis response, is to understand our role in strategic competition in great power competition. And our role I think is be forward, try to make sense of what's going on in front of us, have a level of lethality that can hold an adversary at risk where we need to, when we need to, but not try to be everywhere all the time will or all things to all people, no.

I am very confident that if you build a force that's targeted at a certain level, your pacing threat in our case, that any Marine commander can take that force and go to some of the mission. It may not be the perfect fit, but he will be able to adjust.

The inverse is not true. If you build a force that's solely counterinsurgency or solely crisis response, low end of the conflict, they cannot scale up to a higher end against a higher, much more capable adversary. That's how you -- your casualties go through the roof. So my aim point is a pacing threat. Build -- in terms of capabilities and concepts, use that as our pacing threat. Stay focused. Don't try to be everything to everybody.

MR. O'HANLON: General Berger, thank you very much for the time today. Thanks for all

you are doing. You and your men and women around the world in the Marine Corps, it's really an honor for us at Brookings. And I know again my good friend John Allen and the whole team are very grateful of the time you spent with us today. So we will now sign-up from Brookings. Thank everyone else for being part of this conversation as well, including the questions from the audience. And wish folks a great rest of the spring and beyond as we hopefully start to emerge from this COVID shut down as well. So thank you again. Very best wishes everybody. And signing off for Brookings.

GENERAL BERGER: Thanks, Michael. Thank you, very much.

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