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FORCE DESIGN: A CONVERSATION WITH GENERAL ERIC SMITH, 39TH COMMANDANT OF THE US MARINE CORPS

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MODERATOR: MICHAEL E. O'HANLON
Senior Fellow and Director, Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology, Brookings

GENERAL ERIC SMITH
Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps

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O'HANLON: Well, good morning, everyone, and welcome to Brookings. I'm Mike O'Hanlon with the Foreign Policy program. And it's my distinct honor today to welcome General Eric Smith, the 39th commandant of the Marine Corps, to Brookings for a discussion on the state of the Marine Corps and the process of defense transformation in this important time under a national defense strategy of the Biden administration that, like that of the preceding Trump administration, is trying to reorient the US Department of Defense for great power, competition and specifically deterrence of China and the Pacific, as well as handling the ongoing crisis with Russia and challenges that abound everywhere else. Because, as the Marine Corps has always done, it's a response force for the country globally, as well as all the things that it does within the priorities of the National Defense Strategy. Let me just give you, if I could, a brief word of introduction for General Smith, and then I'm going to ask you to join me in a minute and a round of applause, not only for his service to the country, but also for his personal recovery from an amazing incident last fall where just some great Americans helped him on the road to recovery in a in a health emergency. That's instructive for all of us, but also just inspirational for all of us. But before I get to that, and before I ask you to join me in a round of applause, let me say that he grew up in Kansas City, Missouri, and then Texas, went to Texas A&M University and was commissioned in the Marine Corps after that. So he went from the Texas A&M route, not the Annapolis route.

SMITH: I couldn't get in.

O'HANLON: I don't know, I'm dubious and, like many of his generation, certainly spent his time in the desert, but also spent a lot of time focused on Latin America, the Western Hemisphere and on the Pacific with third Marine Expeditionary Force, where he commanded as one of his many tours, spent time also in Africa. And so, the commandant is like a Marine is supposed to be a man who thinks globally and, leader of the Marine Corps, who is trying to prepare the Marines for all sorts of unexpected challenges as one as the as well as the one big challenge we know about, which is, of course, the ongoing competition with China. So like his predecessor, General Berger, he's built a Force Design or transformation plan that's really, I think, been the pace setting, an avant garde part of the military of the entire U.S. military for trying to build new capabilities that can deter war and more successfully, in the Indo-Pacific and specifically with China. And we'll talk about that in some detail. Ideas like the littoral combat regiments, the Marines have been building some new weapons, various new capabilities that they've already begun to deploy and that, I think are bolstering deterrence in the Western Pacific. But as I say, I want to. Ask all of you to join me in just welcoming this

great American to Brookings and congratulating him and thanking him for this amazing path of recovery since his medical emergency last fall. And General Smith, it's great to see you here and in good health. And thank you.

Speaker 3 Thank you.

SMITH: Thank you, thank you. I'm. I am truly grateful for that, very kind introduction. And, as a guy who's, who's literally come back from the brink of the dead, for those that aren't CPR, certified, I would encourage you to become CPR certified because I was, I was found by, a guy who was just in town for the Marine Corps marathon, happens to be a certified CPR instructor, and was on me for, you know, within a couple of minutes and was staying with me for the better part of an hour before an ambulance arrived. And so, you know, that's that's why I'm here today, and, and I am learning CPR, so, because it's, it can save a life. Might be yours. So I'm, I'm now an avid, CPR fan. So my wife is a big fan as well. At least that's what she tells me.

O'HANLON: So. Well, let's let's stay on the issue of people and the health of the Marine Corps and the men and women that serve with you. If I could, Commandant, just for a minute, we'll get to Force Design, and your transformational goals in just a second. But I know that Marines always emphasize the importance of the individual Marine. Every Marine, a rifleman. And of course, it's an ethos that has been with you for 250 years. So whether you want to talk about recruiting, retention, morale, I would just love to hear your take on the human side of the Marine Corps to start, please.

SMITH: Yeah, thanks for that, Michael. We're making our recruiting goals. My own son is a recruiter. He's an officer recruiter, and he knows that that's his mission. And we're not selling anything. We're offering, we're offering people a chance to become a Marine. And the way that we actually work. I'm a I'm a former officer, selection officer, officer, recruiter. Again, my son's an officer recruiter now in Texas, people will come up and say, well, you know, I, I think I want to join the Marine Corps and we'll say, well, I don't think you're qualified, you know, so, you know, if you here's a sticker and go away. And we're challenging from day one, we're challenging them. If you think you have what it takes, jump up on a pull up bar and let's see what you have put on your running shoes and let's see what you have. Take the Asvab. Let me see your SAT scores. Let's see if you have what it takes. And and so because we're we put our best and our brightest on recruiting duty and we reward them, for successful completion of their mission of recruiting new Marines. We have, a really professionalized recruiting force. We know how to do this. It's called systematic recruiting. Makes so many

phone calls, you get so many contacts, have so many contacts, you get so many applicants, so many applicants. You get so many that go to boot camp. I mean, it's it's a mathematical formula, but the secret sauce is the Marines, because they're out there in the public. I mean, every Marine who's out on recruiting duty, their spouse gets tired of them wearing USMC t-shirts because that's all they wear is something that says USMC on it because people will ask, oh, you're a Marine. Yeah, yeah I'm a Marine. Well, I want to be a Marine. Well, well, I don't know if you have what it takes, but you know, again, jump up on a pull up bar and and we'll see. And and because we haven't lowered our standards and we haven't adjusted our standards, we, we continue to be the thing that people aspire to be. That's that's what I would argue.

O'HANLON: And you've been making those recruiting goals consistently even as the other services have struggled.

SMITH: We have.

O'HANLON: Although I did hear some good news last week that the other services are having a better year this year for the most part. But you sustain that kind of success all through Covid and everything else.

SMITH: We have.

O'HANLON: What's your greatest concern about the human welfare side of the Marine Corps right now? Even though your numbers are good in terms of quality and retention and recruiting?

SMITH: Yeah, my my goal is retention. You you recruit the Marine, but you retain the family. So we have to have better housing. We have to have better barracks. We've got a barracks 2030 plan that completely revamps our barracks. Builds new barracks. It builds them in a manner that, two individuals per room with a community kitchen with, a communal area for watching TV. Better washers, better dryers. Marines don't ask for much. They just ask for decent pay, decent housing, a quiet place where they can recover at the end of a long training day. So barracks 2030 is our most comprehensive barracks investment plan we've ever undertaken. It's several hundred million dollars, but the Marines are worth it. And we've got barracks that, frankly, for 20 years took a hit, when we were like many things, when we were fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, we were just producing battalions to go to war, producing battalions to go to war, come home, reset, retrain, go to war. And we let our barracks lapse. We let a lot of things lapse. And that's come home to

roost now. And we have to prioritize our barracks. And we're doing. If you go to Camp Lejeune now, you'll see some of the newer barracks, the Haerter Yale chow hall. The way we feed Marines. If you go to 29 palms, the chow hall there is world class. It's you can get what you want. You know, it's not the old stand in line like at boot camp, you know, shoulder to shoulder. And this is what we're serving today. If you don't like it, too bad. It's. Yeah. Meal options. We're doing better physical fitness. We're doing smarter ways to maintain your fitness. Sleep studies, sleep clinics. I mean, we're we're trying to modernize how we treat our people because it's all about people. Because if there's no Marines, there's no Marine Corps.

O'HANLON: Just one more question on this general topic. If I could. And then I want to get to Force Design. There's been some talk recently on Capitol Hill and elsewhere about whether women should be asked to register for the draft. And I was the beneficiary of an invitation from General Amos when he was the commandant a dozen years ago to go watch some of the first women who ever did the infantry officer course. And you've now opened up. Of course, the DoD has opened up all positions to, both genders. And I wondered if you could give us a snapshot of the state of women in the Marine Corps today, but also, that that's question one. The second question on this topic to finish up will be, do you think there is a case for more focus on national service writ large? Leave aside registering for the draft, which we don't have anyway. So to me, it's to me it seems partly a symbolic thing. I wonder if we should be getting back to the idea that this nation could benefit from more of a culture of service, whether military or nonmilitary, and if you want to speak to that. But if you could first let us know the state of women in the Marine Corps today.

SMITH: Sure. Well, I'll flip the script and I'll do the second one first because it's easy. Yes. I think that a call to national service is warranted and frankly, long overdue. And it doesn't matter if you're joining the Peace Corps or if you're going to be a teacher, an educator, you know, if you're going to serve in Congress, there's a call to national service is long overdue, because we we can't accuse people of being part of the "Me Generation" if we don't give them an option. And the option can't be only serve in the military. It might be serving as a firefighter, might be serving as a police officer, might be serving as a politician, might be serving on a school board. But service to something besides yourself, that is, that is key. And we we seek that out in individuals. Our officers, selection officers and our street recruiters, our enlisted recruiters seek out those who are looking to serve and do something greater than themselves. And then the second part of your question, with regard to women, we are increasing our number of female officers and our female Marines. We're up into the mid-teens, percentage of of the Marine Corps is female. We've opened up every MOS. In fact, I just talked to Nicole Mann and Jasmin Moghbeliy, who are our two astronauts, callsign Duke and

callsign Jaws. Jaws Moghbeli. And, Duke Mann, whose husband, by the way, is a former F-14 pilot callsign Girly. I mean, go figure, Girly Mann. That's a joke, but it's not, that's a callsign. But, you know, these are our these are astronauts, and they're emblematic of of where women can go in the Marine Corps. Bobbi Shea is about to take over Marine Corps Forces Command, which is our largest, command in Norfolk. And Roberta Shea goes by Bobbi. So we've we've opened up every MOS. We've had one female officer, Marina Harrell. We've set standards. And to be an issue, officer, you must complete a certain hike in a certain amount of time, carrying a certain amount of weight. The pack doesn't care if you're male or female. It just cares that it gets carried. And so if you can meet the standard, then you can meet the standard. So we have no restrictions on our MOS. Combat engineers, pilots, infantry, artillery. There's no restriction, but we have to recruit more women. And not to be politically correct, but what I know is you can't get 90% of your population from 50% of the general population. The math eventually works against you, and you'll have a Marine Corps that's sized to society, which is 50% male. So we'll be at 50% capacity. If we don't maximize our female Marines. I mean, Tracy [inaudible] back there, you know, is, is is emblematic of our exceptional Marine officers. And, Tracy, a twist into a pretzel if you say something wrong to her. She can do anything. So she can do anything.

O'HANLON: And we're looking forward to having her at Brookings next year. I also want to give a shout out to John Mauer, who has been here this year. Marcos Melendez, who was here last year. And we just benefited enormously at Brookings. From all of our military and federal executive fellows who teach us so much. So thank you for sending them here each and every year.

SMITH: Yeah, we'll keep doing it, please. They get a lot out of it.

O'HANLON: Well, I wanted to ask you now about Force Design of the Marine Corps, which you used to call Force Design 2030. My understanding is that you've tried to get away from any specific time focus or window. Not trying to do your best imitation of Xi Jinping with his 2027 edict, for example. And so could you explain? First of all, just in broad terms, because not everybody in the audience knows equally well what Force Design for the US Marine Corps today is, what are its core elements, and then what time horizon is it occurring along, and roughly how far along are you recognizing in advance that I think you're going to say there is no end to the process. So it's it's impossible to say exactly what percent is complete. But of the initial plans that you and General Berger developed, how far are we along, at least on an interim basis?

SMITH: Yeah. So Force Design was originally, we asked ourselves, are we best trained, organized and equipped to deal with the mission we've been given through the National Defense Strategy, which is the authoritative document. I mean there's a there's a there's kind of a joke that if you look at all the services, there's a delay, deny, and I won't say deceive, but that the Marine Corps is, you know, okay yeaht thanks for your for your, your guidance. We'll continue the way we've been doing things. So we've kind of just denied, the order. Right. We're going to stay the same. Stay true to our core values. Well, our core values are honor, courage and commitment. They're not. You know, this myth versus that myth versus this capability versus that capability. So what we said is we've been given lawful guidance in the National Defense Strategy to be able to deter and, if necessary, defeat the pacing threat of the PRC. And are we best suited right now to do that? And the answer was no, we're not. And if we would not change, we'd be the best looking outfit to ever get run off the hill. Because the Chinese were out stickiness. They were outrageous. They were outmaneuvering us. They were out building us. And so we developed Force Design as a way to fit as part of the joint warfighting concept, the GWC, the Marine Corps can't stand alone. No service can stand alone against the pacing threat. And so how do we enable the joint force to overcome China's advanced ranges of their weapons systems? How do we serve as the inside force? Because if you're outside of a house and you're trying to kick in the door, somebody is going to get hurt. If you're an it's going to be the person kicking in the door. If you're already inside the house, somebody's going to get hurt, but it's going to be the person who's living in the house, because now we're mixing it up. Now we're at close, close combat, which is what Marines pride themselves on. Mission of the Marine rifle squad is locate, close with, and destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver or repel the enemy's assault by fire in close combat. I mean, that's our mission, from the from the ground up. And so by being the inside force, by being inside the weapons engagement zone and being able to influence, in this case, the PRC's behavior, the PRC's attempts to to maneuver through the SLOCS, sea lines of communication, and being able to shut those down and make them untenable for passage. We believe that's how we contribute to the joint warfighting concept.

O'HANLON: So if I could just stay at the conceptual level for a while, but explore that a bit more. I realize you can't get into every detail here, but from where would you do these things? Because of course, there are a lot of Marines now on Okinawa, and a lot of Marines in Hawaii, and then California in North Carolina. But Okinawa is still relatively far from the Taiwan Strait, so depending on the scenario, that might not be close enough. So I know we've been talking about contingency access in the Philippines for some of the services. There are also islands further south in the Ryukyu chain in Japan. Are these the sorts of places where you

were thinking that you would deploy in a crisis and then have capability that could be effective from those places?

SMITH: Yes. The entire first island chain, Philippines, down to Papua New Guinea, all the way down to Australia. And from the Ryukyu's. So the ability to enclose a space, and shut it down. Shut down sea lines of communication is part of the plan, and it's part of our capability that we bring. And remember, we still provide the Marine Expeditionary Unit. We still provide Marine divisions. We still have artillery. We still have. Long range fires. We still have 834 in the infantry battalion, which is bigger by 300 than most infantry battalions in the world. Most are 500 or less, and we're 834, give or take. We're still toying with that number a little bit. So we we are still plenty big enough to deliver a knockout punch. But our goal for the National Defense Strategy is to be able to deter. And if we can't deter and demonstrate that today is not the day for Xi Jinping -- he should wake up every day saying, today is not the day, maybe tomorrow, but not today. Because I have to contend with subs, I have to contend with Army multi-domain task forces. I have to contend with Marine littoral regiments. I have to contend with anti-ship missile capabilities. And the last thing that I think he wants is to see Renhais and Luyangs on the bottom of the ocean.

O'HANLON: So you mentioned some of the things I want to talk about specifically in more detail. If we could get into a couple of those. When I first studied Force Design 2030, as it was called, then under General Berger, and you were the assistant commandant, the the the idea is it stuck with me as the biggest ideas and some of the most controversial. So you were not you two did not shy from controversy. Even within your own broader Marine Corps retired community. You decided that you didn't need tanks, that the Army still had tanks, but the Marine Corps did not, because either whether you were doing expeditions all over the world or dealing with China, either way, the tank was less important than it maybe had been. You decided you didn't want unguided artillery, and at least not in the kind of numbers you had had before. But you did want a lot more precision strike capability in terms of missiles and more artillery, longer range surface to surface missiles. I think you wanted more survivable tactical communications grids that could remain intact and functional, even if satellites were being jammed or destroyed. And you wanted smaller amphibious ships that were not so many, sort of putting small, you know, a lot of eggs in a small number of baskets. At least those are some of the highlights that stuck with me. Do I have it about right? And that'd be question one. And then question two. We can get into maybe a case by case. How far along are you in acquiring each of those kinds of capabilities?

SMITH: Yeah, you basically have the case. Correct. In the in the terms of long range fires, we still possess cannon, artillery, and with wraparound, rocket assisted projectile, you can reach out 30km. I mean, 17.5km is what you can get an artillery round on, what we call full, full charge. Charge Six Red Bag. Charge Six Red Bag. Which you have white bag and red bag. Red bag means you're burning through the tubes pretty quickly, but you can shoot out, you know, 17km out to 30km. Well, 30km is is nothing. I mean, that's 12, and it's 18 miles by Texas math, 18 miles. And that just isn't going to get it done. I mean, Pedro Davila was the Commander of 11th Marines at, Guadalcanal, and he turned his artillery tubes seaward and started hitting Japanese ships in the slack, in the sea lines of communication. So all we're doing is we're trading in some of our artillery, we're keeping some, but we're trading in some of the for long range artillery, long range rockets that'll go out in the tens of kilometers. And they're, they're guided. So you're not just slinging lead out there. Because frankly, it's, it's a game of logistics. And when you're playing an away game, which the Pacific is, it's our backyard, but it is still an away game for us. And you can't bring the heft and the bulk because you're going to be susceptible to undersea warfare. You're going to be susceptible to mines, you're going to be susceptible to air, to drones. And so we have to get lighter and more mobile, to be able to deliver the punch that we're required to deliver by the National Defense Strategy.

O'HANLON: So these littoral combat regiments, you've already built a couple, and they are effectively in position and equipped with much of the weaponry you are aspiring to. Can you tell us a little bit more about them in terms of what they have, which weapons are most important and then how they would operate? Are they going to operate battalion by battalion, or is larger formations just a little bit more about those if I go.

SMITH: Sure. The Littoral Combat Regiment, is formed in Hawaii. The third will form two more, before we're done. So we'll we'll keep our east coast largely as it is. And our west coast, and Okinawa based, will form into the littoral combat regiments. What they bring with them is a sensing and making sense capability. Some of the programs not to not answer your question, but some of the programs are classified. Some of the pods that go on our MQ-9, are classified. It's called a T-SOAR pod. And what it does, is it, I guess in the unclass world, it it can mimic. I'll be careful here. It can mimic things that are sent to it, that it detects, turn it around and send it back so it becomes a hole. It becomes a black hole. It becomes mostly undetectable. The Littoral Combat Regiment, with its mobility, with our ship to shore connectors and our shorter shore connectors, our landing ship medium, we can disperse our force and be in position to thwart an adversary's breakout, if you will. And that's that's really the goal is to avoid, conflict. I mean, it's always our goal to, to deter combat, but to be able to fight it decisively if required. And we still have three methods. We still have one method. Marine

Expeditionary Force, still have the air wing, still have the infantry division, still have the combat service support to engage in major combat. We just don't have tanks anymore. But again, I can kill a tank at 40km with a drone. Why would I carry a tank of 72 tons? It has a max range of four kilometers. That doesn't make any sense to me. 72 tons and a lot of gas. And it can be killed with a top down attack weapon at ten times the range that its main gun, can reach.

O'HANLON: And we still do have an army, just in case.

SMITH: And we still do have an army. And it is a joint fight.

O'HANLON: So. So the Littoral Combat Regiment is is my image of it correct that its main target set would be at sea in most scenarios, or are there also scenarios where a Littoral Combat Regiment could be shooting at other targets on land? What's the relative likelihood?

SMITH: Absolutely both. While it's designed to shut down sea lines of communication, those sea lines of communication often start on shore. And so it's got plenty of punch. It's got plenty of infantry battalion. It's got plenty of machine guns, plenty of mortars, plenty of rockets to deal with a threat that's on the ground, to overtake, or to attack and destroy a naval base. It's got that capability.

O'HANLON: Did you have to design weapons? More or less from scratch to create these? Or were you able to tap into things we already knew how to build and maybe just build more, maybe build up munitions stockpiles a little bit sooner than some services thought to do it? And was that the essence of it, or did you need to really invent new weapons?

SMITH: Some of it was inventing new systems. Some of it, long range strike missile. You know, our, our HIMARS on steroids, if you will. Our naval strike missile, while the naval strike missile was already out there, it was about how to get it employable, how to get it mobile, how to get it mobile enough that it could hide in plain sight. And you can put a tarp on it and drive it down the road, and you look like any other vehicle that's driving down the road. So a lot of it was using existing technologies so we could move quickly. And we're iterating on our naval strike missile. We've already extended the range once. Will extend the range again. We'll get it out there. Well, in the unclassified world, we'll get it out there in the many tens of miles. Which is sufficient to shut down the SLOCS.

O'HANLON: How about the process of acquiring different kinds of amphibious ships? I think this has been slower. When General Berger was here a year and a couple months ago, finishing up as commandant and kindly visiting us like you have today. I asked him just how things were going, and Melanie Sisson and I were trying to figure out with him just how far he had gotten. You had gotten as Assistant Commandant in the process of transformation, and that was an area where he felt like progress hadn't been as rapid. Does it matter as much as these other things that we go to smaller amphibious ships? And is there some way to if it is important, is there some way to then, you know, hasten the progress?

SMITH: Yeah. So so the Marine Corps is an amphibious force, all stop. We are soldiers of the sea. We come from and we return to the sea. And our minimum requirement is 31 amphibs, ten big decks and 21 LPDs. And that's now codified into law. So that's our minimum requirement. That allows us to produce three ARG/MEUS - Amphibious Ready Group Marine Expeditionary Units - one from the East Coast, one from the West Coast, and one periodically deployed from Okinawa, Japan. That number, the CNO and I have locked shields on at 31. That is reinforced by our littoral connectors, our LSM, our landing ship medium, and we don't know the final number of those that are required, but we believe that it's three to move one part of a, of a littoral combat regiment. So those numbers will be in the, you know, 10 to 15 range. And that's a, that that is not a hard and fast number, but we're experimenting in the interim with other ships, stern landing vessels that are readily available now to get the concepts down. But our amphibious ready group is still the coin of the realm. It's still the crown jewel of the Marine Corps. It's still what we what we prize. And again, what the CNO and I haven't locked shields on amphibious readiness. And frankly, the entire fleet, you know, they they've got an [inaudible] that's less than they want. And Admiral Franchetti is working hard to get that up to get our ships in and out of maintenance. But some of that, in all candor, comes from an insatiable COCOM demand signal. When an ARG/MEU is extended, it's supposed to go out for six months. It's supposed to come home for six months, then it's supposed to work up for six months. So it's a, you know, two to make one, ideally three to make one, but it's two way or six months away, 12 months at home. Ideally it's six months away, 18 months at home. But when those ARG/MEUs get extended due to the current world environment and the combatant commanders have a need, it's it's a wicked problem because if the ARG/MEU doesn't come home, it can't undergo maintenance. And if it doesn't come home, you can't swap out the crew and you can't swap out the ARG/MEU. You and you can't get a new one that's, that's fresh and ready. And the ship just continues to defer maintenance. And that's, frankly, what's happened over the years is, you know, the insatiable demand signal from combatant commanders for good reason. Which goes to the

size of the force and the force sizing constructs that, that we're now committed to. But I would say it's it's really the demand signal of the ARG/MEU that, you know, your, your, your own worst enemy, you're building something that everybody wants and they tend to ask for it and to extend it.

O'HANLON: So since you're part of the Department of the Navy, and since you obviously work with the Navy in an expeditionary capacity, could I ask you about force sizing, since you just mentioned it? And my understanding is that the Marine Corps is more or less happy with its current size, but the Navy is not. If we go by official statements and goals, the Marine Corps, you're at three divisions, three air wings. So I want to ask you about aviation in a minute, not least because John's here [inaudible] But, but I you know, I also take note that the Navy has had a goal for a decade of getting to 355 ships and maybe even more when you start to count in unmanned systems. And yet they're still in the ballpark of 300, and they've been there for really a long time. So what do we need to do about this? Do we need to finally figure out a way to build 355 ships, even if some of them are smaller and less expensive? Do we have to ask combatant commanders to rein in their appetite a little bit, even though there are good reasons why they ask for so much deployment? Or is there some other solution that you can think of?

SMITH: I think it's a combination of both of those things. I think it's a combination of building one doing multi ship multi year procurement saves a tremendous amount of money. Our last you know, bundle deal of one LHA and two LPD saves. I think it was $300 million. It was a significant amount of money. I don't quote me on that number because I'm pretty sure I'm wrong. But it saves, you know, 10, 15% of the cost of the ship. So I think it's a combination of building the fleet back up. And it's a combination of of reducing demand signals. And it's a combination of finding new ways to meet that. So one of the things we've done with our task force in Djibouti is it's it's there, it's capable, it's got CH 53's, it's got a ground task force and it's capable of deterring Houthi aggression. It's a combination of multiple things, I think. But. But primary is rebuilding the fleet. And I don't know what the final number that I'm referring Katie will settle on is, but I do know the number of amphibious, which is 31.

O'HANLON: So as a member of the Joint Chiefs, you are thinking, of course, about your own service, but you're thinking about the entire US military and the National Defense Strategy. And I want to give you an invitation to give some advice to not necessarily each of the other services, but to the overall joint force and to the defense community. If the Marines have really gotten after this idea of trying to deter China more effectively, it doesn't look to me like most of the other services have been quite as quick to draw as you

have. And I wonder, in the broad realm of capabilities where you see the greatest need for additional progress. And again, I want to ask you to be more specific about which service, or which program than you want to be. But as you know, for a long time, there's been a debate in the United States and elsewhere about the vulnerability of forward assets. And you've responded with these more mobile, smaller, logistically less demanding kinds of regiments and and also trying to go to smaller ships and so on and so forth. Some people have said we need more long range bombers or unmanned aircraft flying off of aircraft carriers that can deliver ordnance from greater distance. David Ochmanek at RAND has talked about putting, assets on Okinawa that can launch unmanned systems without runways and recover them by parachute, and then they could carry sensors and anti-ship missiles to deter China. In the end, he thought it might have a crossing the Taiwan Strait. Other people talk about putting unmanned underwater vessels permanently on station in the western Pacific with that same suite of capabilities, you know, sensors and anti-ship missiles that can be deployed to try to interfere with an attempted Chinese amphibious assault. Any of those ideas strike you as maybe more important than we're giving them credit for, that we need to get after them a little bit more quickly. Just how do we stand? In other words, in implementation of the National Defense Strategy.

SMITH: I would say all of those ideas have merit. The idea of of a permanent sentinel underwater, that's not manned, that's uncrewed, that has long duration time and can prevent, Chinese invasion, of Taiwan. That has merit. It's got to have defensive systems on it. And again, there's nothing unmanned about unmanned because those sensors require someone to to oversee them, require someone to monitor them, require someone to maintain them. So there's really nothing unmanned about unmanned, unmanned aircraft all require a remote pilot. They all require an air traffic controller. They all require, a human in the loop. I think the the real deal is, is AI and autonomy. And as long as there's a human in the loop, it doesn't say how far back the human in loop is. And I'll give you a quick example. The Navy Sea, with system close in weapon system, it's a, 20 millimeter Vulcan phalanx cannon. And when inbound, sea skimmer missile is coming in it, it looks like an R2D2, with a multivariate cannon, and it fires multiple thousands of rounds per minute, I think is 4000 rounds a minute. Once the human in the loop has said engage any target that is coming at me inside of 4000 yards, descending, accelerating whatever parameters it gives, you're free to engage. So there's a human in the loop. The human turned control over to the machine at some point. And so I think that is is kind of where we're going to have to go because. Human in the loop on all of our systems is important, and it's required really by by law. I mean, you can't have just like we were the party to the Ottawa Convention on on landmines. We don't leave landmines laying around. You've got a human in the loop, but it doesn't say how far back the human has to be. And I do think automation is is kind of the wave of the future. I mean, it's

already here. And machine to machine learning is key. Which is why our MQ 9's are so important because they're talking to each other. They're learning. They're bouncing off ground sensors. They're picking up signals from destroyers, from frigates, and they're sensing and making sense of what's happening. And they're ubiquitously passing that data to the ground force and to the to the surface force.

O'HANLON: That has just a couple more questions for me, and then we'll go to you all. So please be preparing your questions for the Commandant. We'll have the last half hour mostly of you asking questions, but I wanted to touch on the state of Marine Corps aviation, as I promised I would in a minute, a minute ago and and ask you how things look, whether it's in terms of acquisition of systems, whether it's in terms of maintenance, just how the overall fleet is looking, because obviously it's a crucial part of what you do.

SMITH: Yeah. We're we're in good shape. Our CS 53 K Operational, First Squadron, Cherry Point. It is the only truly heavy lift helicopter in the DoD inventory. It can literally lift itself, 58,000 pounds of goodness plus its internal capacity. It's got, in-flight refueling capability. It's fly by wire. I mean, I've actually been up in it and, sat in the in the copilot seat and, you know, I know I didn't fly it because it kind of flies itself. But CH 53K is coming online and replacing our stage 53 Echo. Our MV 22 squadrons are in good shape. We've lifted the red stripe. They're they're the most tested aircraft we have. They're completely safe. They have a better safety record than most aircraft. Our F-18s are in in better shape than they were with parts. As we send down them and our F-35s, our businesses are coming online, and they're in good shape. So I think we have the aviation capacity that we need. Our attack helicopter squadrons are in good shape. We're modernizing the weapon systems that they fire so that it's more than just a pot of rockets on a Cobra. It's actually a longer range system, that can can reach out and do some real damage. The real issue is munitions. Aviation delivered munitions are crucial. And, frankly, our stockpiles of ground and aviation delivered munitions need to come up. To be most effective.

O'HANLON: Can I do a follow up on the munitions question? Because this is of greater interest across the whole joint force. There have been studies that have suggested we run out of munitions in a week or two in fighting China. Now, I guess with some munitions that might be okay, because hopefully by then you might have sunk most of the amphibious fleet they're trying to use to cross. On the other hand, if you're getting fired at by their missiles and you're trying to intercept, and there are many other scenarios where you need more than a week or two supply. So what led to that mentality where we didn't buy enough? And without

getting too specific, how much do we need to increase stockpiles? We need to double them, triple them, quintuple them. I mean, just as a notional way of thinking about this problem.

SMITH: Yeah. And I'm not to be flippant, but my answer to that is one more. I mean, if I'm, if I'm a rifleman, and I have 28 rounds in a 30 round magazine, I want two more rounds. If I'm, slinging artillery, I want one more round. If I'm dropping mortars, I want one more round. If I'm firing anti-ship cruise missiles, I want one more. So there's. Because there's an insatiable appetite for these munitions, in Ukraine, and elsewhere. Then there's got to be a steady OSD, DoD, industry collaboration to keep our production lines hot and to keep those munitions coming, because it's really all part of a jobs program as well that, you know, there's no weapons builders, just like there's no amphibious shipbuilders, there's welders. I think I've said this before. There's welders and there's, steam fitters and there's electricians, but there are no shipbuilders left. And if there's not a steady state work down in the shipyards in Pascagoula, or in San Diego, they'll go to work for Harley Davidson because they can weld at Harley Davidson. And if there's not a steady state, demand signal for a munitions production facility or energetics labs out in Tucson, then they'll they'll go somewhere else and you'll lose the talent. And having a stockpile of munitions is not a bad thing, because you never know what's around the corner. The one thing that we know is that we don't know. And so I think getting our stockpiles back up is really kind of job one, because they are, they are enough. We have our war reserve, which we don't break, but. I'll just leave it at that. That we have our war reserve, which we don't break. But. Having one more round is not a bad thing.

O'HANLON: You mentioned Ukraine and I don't want to ask you for a comprehensive assessment. I know that's not your main responsibility with your job. And General Cavoli is coming to town next week, along with much of NATO.

SMITH: Chris is the capstone classmate of mine.

O'HANLON: Oh, is that right?

SMITH: Yeah, we went to the new one star course together, and, you knew back then that he was a force of nature. A force to be reckoned with. Chris is a is a brilliant mind, and, he's the exact right guy.

O'HANLON: I notice he's also class of '87. You guys are making me feel very old, but that's okay.

O'HANLON: Yeah, but you don't look old. It's good to see the energy.

O'HANLON: Well, the question about Ukraine is, as you continue to modernize the Marine Corps, what are the 1 or 2 most important lessons for you? I'm not asking for a comprehensive answer. We could. You know, it would be a little unfair of me to start that topic now. What? We're trying to get to the audience, but I'm sure there are at least 1 or 2 things that stand out for you that probably affect the way you think about Marine Corps modernization.

SMITH: Yeah. What I know is, is range matters. And if you again, if you're going to be out sticked by the adversary, then in terms of sensing and in terms of striking, then you're of no, you're of no value. You have to be able to sense at range. You have to be able to make sense of what's happening, and you have to be able to share that data ubiquitously across the battlespace with the joint force. Which is why our MQ-9 is so important. And frankly, the TPS-80, because if you can't share the data that, you know, it's Chad-C2, it's a joint all domain command control, joint all domain command and control. I mean, the name says it all. And if you're not capable of conducting Chad C2 on behalf of the joint force, then you're a standalone and you're you're fighting on an island. And the one thing we don't want to do again is have to fight solo. Because we've done that and we we did it at Guadalcanal, and we're still capable of that, but we don't want to return to that. That's that's not if we could redesign the Pacific campaign, in World War II, we would probably do it differently today. That is not to disparage our World War II Marines who fought valiantly and and so many of them sacrificed their lives to take Iwo Jima and conduct the island hopping campaign. But I think if we were to sit back in history, we'd probably do it differently now.

O'HANLON: Not take quite as many islands or what do you think? What?

SMITH: I think we would have skipped a couple.

O'HANLON: Yeah.

O'HANLON: Very last question. Sort of tying together all the China talk that we've been engaging in. And just ask for your synthesizing comment on this to the extent you can mention it or talk about it. What scenario with China worries you the most? And the reason I raised this is because a lot of the focus I know is on

preventing the invasion scenario, which has to be job one, because if you don't stop that, then you've already lost. But I worry about, you know, lower level violence, gray area violence, up to sort of what I call leaky blockades or limited uses of force to interfere with Taiwan's economy, even if the blockade is not airtight. Some of these scenarios could play out over months and years even. I wonder where your head is at in terms of thinking about the kind of contingencies with China that are the most difficult to deter?

SMITH: Yeah, I would concur with you. It's it's a it's the leaky blockade of Taiwan. It is the encroachment upon the sovereignty of other nations. It's the artificial building of artificial features and then calling them an island, calling them, Chinese territory and expanding an economic exclusion zone. I mean, that's what worries me the most is the constant buildup of artificial islands. One, it's decimating an ecosystem. It's decimating fishing grounds, and it's it's unprovoked. And it's it's illegal. I mean, you can't build a feature have it stick six inches out of the water and say, that's an island now because we just built an island. I mean, it's atop a volcano mount. And then you've just built an eight hole and decimated an ecosystem, and called it your own. And then you patch together, a string of islands, and pretty soon you've got an economic exclusion zone that includes the entire South China Sea. And again, the South China Sea is not China's Southern Sea. It's the sea that happens to be South China. Big difference there. It doesn't belong to China. But that's that's kind of what worries me the most.

O'HANLON: Thank you. I've learned so much from this conversation. I'm sure everybody else has. But let's bring others into the conversation as well. So we'll start right here in the front row. If you could please wait for a microphone and identify yourself before asking your question.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yeah, well, thank you for coming. My name is Diego. I'm my in turn this summer and I'm an incoming sophomore at Yale. And so my question is about --

SMITH: I went to Texas A&M. So take it easy.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: So my question is related to recruitment and retaining talent. You've been talking a lot about very highly technical fields that require a lot of expertise in advanced degrees, and back in 2015, Brookings released a report stating that the intelligence of Marine Corps officers was decreasing since the past 35 years, and with the recruitment and retention rates of the Marine Corps, I assume there may still be an issue. So what is the strategy to increase the retirement or recruitment of highly educated Marines, of

highly educated individuals that can not only meet the demands of the new redesign? That requires a lot of AI, machine learning, and and advanced systems, but also improve them down the road.

SMITH: Yeah, the real question is how to retain them. One once we recruit somebody who's got an EL score, of 120, it's what's required to be an officer. And I have a 120 on the number. Phil Scoot has got probably 134. I am 120 on the number. And I'm doing. I'm doing okay. So once we recruit someone, then it's a matter of the training. And in the case of, cyber space, Jerry Glavey, Lieutenant General Jerry Glavey, who's, [inaudible] cyber, he is incredibly intelligent, and he's a product of cyber com. We can train you to to do whatever we need to train it to. There are no computer scientists that are born. I mean, there's individuals who are born with with a certain aptitude. And hopefully through good education, they they realize their full potential. But we can train anybody who's got a 120 EL to do any MOS in the Marine Corps from, you know, from being an infantry officer to being a cyber, warrior to to being an artillery officer. So I think it's really a matter of our training and taking in any individual who's got the determination and the desire and getting them through our proper training, which we really do a pretty good job of. I mean, we're we're mixing it up daily in the cyber world. I mean, at the unclassified level, we are every day engaged in back and forth, tit for tat, evolutions against those who would seek to infiltrate our systems.

O'HANLON: We'll stay in the front row here for a second before moving back.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you. John Harper with The Fence Group. I have a couple of drone related questions. I was wondering if you could clarify what you were saying with regard to the MQ-0. You suggested it had a sensor that could mimic certain things. Does that mean it creates an electronic decoy that would kind of hide the location of the drone? And then with regard to loitering munitions, I know incorporating more of those into the Marine Corps is, part of the focus of Force Design. I was wondering if you could give an assessment of how you think that is going. And also, if you're proposing any loitering munitions for, the, replicator initiative for the first tranche to kind of help you increase production of those.

SMITH: Yeah. For for loitering munitions that they are they are an answer. They're a part of the equation. For replicator. That's an OSD led effort. And there are loitering munitions involved in that. There are that is part of the the suite of capabilities that are being proposed for replicator, loitering munitions are cheap. They're effective. They're hard to, to to, to defeat because you can swarm. So they are part of our future, launching munitions. And then the question is, it's always about scale and it's always about size, because you have to

move it. You have to get it in position. So, you know, if it's four feet long or six feet long or eight feet long because it's got a longer rocket motor, then carries more fuel, then at some point, you know, you're you're in the it's like the knights at Agincourt. When you go back to that battle, the, the French knights were, were so heavily armored that they were knocked off, their horses by infantrymen with pikes and they were opened up like tin cans. So we've got to make sure that we don't get so heavy that we've we've ranged ourselves into non mobility. And what was your the other part of your question.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: The, I was wondering if you were I know the Army had proposed the switchblade for replicator. that's been picked. I was wondering if the Marine Corps is proposing any lowering munitions for that. And with regard to the MQ-9 What you were saying earlier about you said it could the sensor can mimic certain things. And I was wondering if you were saying it creates kind of electronic decoy that would hide the location of the MQ-9 fruit from Chinese sensors or.

SMITH: Yeah, on the MQ nine, without getting without crossing classification levels, it has the ability to. Somewhat disappear, off of an enemy radar. I'll just leave it at that. So. Thanks.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Has a Marine Corps proposed loitering munitions for [inaudible]

SMITH: No, no, but we need to.

O'HANLON: In the back, please.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Good morning. My name is Ed Jeep, and, I'm glad to see you, sir.

SMITH: Good to see you Ed.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I have a question about you mentioned AI and the kill chain and the man in the loop or the person in the loop. Where is the Marine Corps center of excellence for dealing with how to develop those issues? And is it linked into kind of a unitary, DoD wide policy going forward? Because there's a lot of voices from the civilian world. Obviously the morals of, you know, using, robots in combat and all kinds of stuff like that. And I'm just curious to know where the Marine Corps is, where does the Marine Corps develop those and kind of work that out? And how linked in is it with the rest of DoD.

SMITH: Yeah, Ed It is at Quantico. It's at the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab. And they're they're experimenting with machine to machine learning and human to machine learning. That feeds into OSD, because obviously it's a DoD function to determine, you know, how how much autonomy is allowed in the kill chain. I mean, if you read Chris Rose's book, "Kill Chain" I mean, it kind of lays it out. But we're doing it through the Warfighting Lab, and we're running it up through OSD. It's still a debate about how far back the human in the loop can be. How much can you send an autonomous drone out with when you see this signature strike it. I mean, I think we can go further, you know, autonomy to where we send out ammunition. And when it sees a certain signature, it verifies through its onboard database that that is, in fact a [inaudible] and it strikes.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: If I could just follow up. What do we need to resolve that debate in time to be effective with our development? Like, do we need a congressional do we need a law? Do we need a presidential directive of what do you what is your opinion on what we need to to kind of be ready?

SMITH: I don't I don't think we need a law. I think we already have the law of armed conflict. And I think that's sufficient for us. I don't think we need, congressional action. I think the National Defense Strategy, calls for it for for autonomy. And and obviously, Congress has oversight and they have oversight into the systems that we're building and how we employ them. And all the service chiefs have testified. And frankly, I don't think that's I don't think that's first and foremost on anyone's mind that we're going to somehow abuse that system, or unleash, you know, the Terminator, on, on civil society. Because that's that's not how it works. I mean, it's it's a validated. You saw [inaudible] and there's a human in the loop somewhere that turned on the autonomous system because certain criteria were met, and those criteria would have to meet the National Defense Strategy. [Speaking in Spanish]

O'HANLON: A lot of background with. A lot of background with Southern Command. I think I met General Smith at the Colombian embassy, and we're about there about a decade ago. I know you worked with South Comm. Yeah. So that was pretty impressive.

SMITH: I spent a couple of years in Venezuela. I speak, I speak, Venezuelan Spanish, which is different than regular Spanish for those of you that have been to Venezuela. One, they speak incredibly fast, like I'm a [inaudible], like machine guns, and they use lots of different words, like, there's a mix of Spanglish and

English in there, like, instead of dinar, which is to fill, they say full [speaking in Spanish] and you're like, what? [speaking in Spanish] So anyway. Sorry, bad joke, but it was a good two years.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Hey, Tony [inaudible] with a Bloomberg. A pregunta on the V-22. You made a claim here that it's absolutely safe. I need to push back here. Given the events of the last two and a half months where four aircraft and 20 service members are killed. And bipartisan criticism of the program. The clutch is being redesigned after knowing about these issues since 2010, and it can't fly its full envelope emissions until middle of next year. So what's the basis for completely safe? And thank you for being here, by the way.

SMITH: Yeah. You're welcome Tony. So the aircraft is no airframe is completely safe. I mean, every airframe can have a malfunction. Every airframe can have pilot error. Every airframe can have a mechanical malfunction. Due to design flaws or due to workmanship. But the MV-22 is a safe airplane. It's mishap rate per 100,000 flight hour is equal to or less than any airframe we've flown than, 53 years than our 40 sixes. It's it is a dynamic aircraft, as you know. I mean, it converts from full airplane mode to helicopter mode. Which is is a unique, challenge, and it brings with it unique engineering challenges. But but I stand by the aircraft is completely safe. No aircraft is is immune from mechanical problems or from pilot error. But, the aircraft is safe for flight, and I'll fly on it today.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: [Inaudible]

SMITH: Yes. It could. So, it can conduct any mission that it's designed to conduct. It needs to be within a certain, number of, minutes from a landing spot. Until we get, the full green light to, to fly, unrestricted missions again, which we're working toward. And we largely have gotten that. Thank you. Thanks, Tony.

O'HANLON: Yes, sir.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Hi, my name is Theo. I'm an intern here. Or I'm an intern in DC. Thank you for being here, General. Yeah. In World War II, the Coast Guard played a critical role in delivering Marines to the fight in the next conflict. Do you see a role for the Coast Guard and Marines to partner further, and perhaps moving around littoral regiments, providing kind of ship borne fires?

SMITH: You know, I don't I don't think so. I mean, if Admiral Fagan were here, Linda Fagan, who's a good shipmate, I think she would tell you that, that they've got their hands full, doing illegal fishing, dealing with, with safety. So I don't think that we would rely on the Coast Guard to deliver us. Although I'll never say never, because you don't know. But I don't think so.

O'HANLON: Just a reminder that just to throw this in as it's a great question. As you know, the Coast Guard is is modest in size. The Marine Corps is modest by DoD standards, but the Coast Guard is about one fourth the size of the Marine Corps and personnel. So we'd have to really build up capacity to have much available there. So we you know, the Army is the biggest service. Half million active duty almost in the Navy and Air Force are both in the 300,000 range. These folks are a bit less than 200,000 active duty Marines. Coast Guard's 40,000. And the Space Force is about 10,000.

SMITH: But but they're punching above their weight class.

O'HANLON: So I hope so. Okay. Let's see. By the way a quick advertisement for tilt rotor technology because defense industry gets a bad name. But they're working hard to make it even better. And next generation tilt rotor is going to be simpler and I think therefore less accident prone. But yeah. Complex subject no doubt. So glad to have it raised, Tony, thank you for the question. Here in the middle.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Hi, my name's Vernon Wendover, and I'm a research intern with the, University of California's Political Violence Lab. You've spoken a bit about, the Pacific and the Ukraine. And I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you see as, the Marine Corps overall in South America and Africa.

SMITH: Sure. We we cut our teeth, in what we're called the banana wars. Nicaragua. So we we still have a presence in South America. US Marine Corps forces South, based in Miami, is fully engaged through Central America, South America, Argentina, Brazil. We do [inaudible] which is, regional amphibious exercise. We're doing multiple exercises, across Central America. And in Africa, we, you know, I cut my teeth in Liberia as well. So we always have an argungu that's dedicated to the Mediterranean, and it can come out of the med through the Straits of Gibraltar and go down and cover the west coast of Africa, which, frankly, is is where most of the, the challenging, nations are, where most of the violence is. So what I would say is we're still fully committed to both the African continent and the South America and our Marine Corps forces South, based

out of Miami. Employs units from the east and west coast on a rotational basis in the South common area of responsibility and our Marine expeditionary units. And our work in Djibouti covered down on the African continent. Thank you.

O'HANLON: Over here please.

SMITH: And I like your hair, by the way. I'm living vicariously through you because when I retire, I'm growing it out. I'll call you for some advice, because I'm. I'm growing it out. So I've been having this haircut for 36 years. 37 years, and. And it's getting old.

O'HANLON: So, unfortunately, I don't have the same type of hair, but, thanks for your time Commandant. My name is Mark and, intern at the American Enterprise Institute. So it seems to me like, Force Design has a very big focus on intra theater logistics. In other words, you're very worried about the first island chain operating in the Philippines. Even down to Papua New Guinea and Australia, as you mentioned. And although the Marines are the first to fight, it still seems to me like there's a question about inter theater logistics, in other words, about getting to the Indo-Pacific in the first place, especially considering that the capacity that we would probably need to fight China is a lot more than what we have stationed in the Indo-Pacific right now. So can you talk about and my understanding is that pretty much every service at Indo Paycom is worried about the tyranny of distance. So can you talk about the extent to which and also how you think about getting to the Indo-Pacific? In the case of a protracted conflict?

SMITH: Yeah, it's a great question. And it's a wicked problem that we frankly don't have the answer for right now. Jackie Van Ovost, the best transporter on the planet. She's the commander of US transportation Command. She's on this daily. In terms of C-5, C-141. And in terms of, the Merchant Mariners, who we're going to we're going to need to transport equipment and remember, they're they're Merchant Mariners, they can walk off the job. So that's why we need our MPSRONs, our MPS ships, maritime pre-positioning ships, based out of Diego Garcia. Without those, we're we're starting behind. And once you get behind, you just fall further behind. So for me, he MPSRONs -- pardon me -- the MPSRONs are vitally important. We have three of them, and they carry enough ammunition, enough stores to get the Marine Corps through the first 30 days. And at that point, then we would hope that the civilian, or the US TransCom has then enacted or activated the civilian Craft Civilian Reserve Air Fleet and begun to move things into the theater. And then we'll have to move intra theater logistics, which is a challenge. I mean, and it doesn't have an easy solution

moving into theater logistics. It's going to be all hands on deck, to get that done. And frankly, that's that's an area that keeps me awake at night is the resupply.

O'HANLON: By the way, just a quick, celebration of the progress that women in the military have made. You mentioned, General Van Ovost, General Richardson, I think is still the South Com Combatant Commander. You mentioned Admiral Fagan, the head of the Coast Guard, Franchetti of the Navy. So, a lot more, room for progress, but headed in the right direction. A lot of very impressive Americans.

SMITH: Absolutely. We're I mean, the last time I checked, country is 50% female, and you can't get 90% of your military from 50% of your population because eventually you're on the wrong side of the cost curve, and it just doesn't work that way. We have spectacular female Marines, and we're looking for more. Again, our female astronauts are are emblematic of, Jasmine Moghbeli and Nicole Mann. They're they're stellar, and they're just emblematic of our pilots.

O'HANLON: And Deputy Secretary of Defense Kath Hicks. They got some good momentum going here. Okay. And please question over here in the third row.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you for doing this, Commandant. Meredith [inaudible] in with Janes. I just wanted to ask about the discussions at modern day Marine. It came up that there may be some efforts to try to get an additional, stern landing vessel for experimentation. Can you give us an update on how those discussions are going in terms of getting funding? As that has taken such a priority for, it's getting set up for the landing ship medium.

SMITH: Yeah, so I don't have an update for you. I wish I did. We're looking for surrogates to use as experimentation platforms, but I don't have an update for you on on any of those surrogates right now. I wish I did, because we're not moving fast enough. We're not, the stern landing vessel, is is one of them. But it doesn't do what a landing ship medium does. It doesn't have the beach gradient. It doesn't have the carrying capacity. So we can experiment with it. But frankly, I can experiment through wargaming and analysis, which is why we have the Miller Center, which is our wargaming analysis center. And it can fine tune and, and spit out results. And we know the beach gradients, throughout the Indo-Pacific. We know the time, distance factors. We know the speed of a landing ship medium. So really, we just need to produce the landing ship medium. That's that's what we need.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I think I saw a hand, right here. Yes.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Afternoon, sir. My name is John Stubbs. I'm prior Army, an intern at Bell and Brown University. For a bit of context, I was in an armored brigade, and I was part of the immediate response force when Ukraine was invaded, we were sent to Germany. So I have a very armored kind of mindset. And so my question.

SMITH: That doesn't make you a bad person.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: We've focused a lot on the Pacific, but when it comes to land wars, say Ukraine, for example, if we were to have to get involved in that, would the Marine Corps be able to augment the Army with inland battles, without army, without army or armor? I apologize, or would you just focus on like, maritime cities, things like that?

SMITH: Yeah. So we would but what I would say is at our height, we had three tank battalions. We had 150 tanks, 162 tanks, 52 or 54 tanks and a battalion, 52 tanks, plus the commander and the XO each had a tank. So 54 tanks. So Texas Math, you know, it's 162 tanks and a Marine Corps that I mean, that's that's nothing. And they're not all designed for Europe. And what I believe is that what we can do is augment an armor formation by killing tanks at ranges well beyond, what a 120 millimeter main gun can kill at four kilometers. If I can kill you with a drone at 20km, that that's where I can contribute. So I think the Marine Corps can contribute in the European theater. And that's some of my discussions with General Cavoli is what is the Marine Corps bring to that fight, should it come out? And what we bring is the capabilities that our Marine Expeditionary Units and our MEFS bring our Marine Expeditionary Forces, because when that MEF comes that that brings heft, it brings bulk and it brings unmanned capability, ammunitions, again, that can go out, you know, 40, 50 miles instead of tank main gun range, which is four kilometers.

O'HANLON: That's a great segue to what I'll make the last question of the day, and I'll pose it myself, because I didn't see any more hands. And it's a good time to wrap up again, recognizing that you are not General Cavoli, but that he is coming to town. And this is sort of the big hot war right now. And not that we're likely to fight in Ukraine, but you do have to worry about which NATO allies you might have to send Marines to help defending. Is there any update you can give us on how you're thinking about that set of challenges,

whether it be in regard to Finland or the Baltic states, or Poland or Romania, anywhere else along the front line, any kind of prioritization that you've had to increase in terms of force modernization, in terms of logistics, anything else along the same lines that John just asked?

SMITH: Yeah. What I would say is the Marines are highly sought after, mostly in the High North, with Norway, Finland, Sweden, and we continue to exercise and operate with them. We're bringing, multi-domain, steel, in a phrase from the Army, but, multi-domain awareness to, to the Baltics, multi-domain to the North Sea. We're bringing our sensing capability so we know which subs are coming and which subs are going. We've got the ability to strike, and we've got the ability to partner, most importantly, with our, our partners, because they all one of the things they all ask for is more Marines. I want I want some more of that. And it goes back to, you know, Nordic response. When I was a, when I was a young lieutenant, there was a, a video of first Battalion, eighth Marines doing an exercise with the Nords, and they had forgotten more about cold weather warfare than we'll ever know. The guy named Ernie Manicotti was a First Lieutenant in first Battalion, Eighth Marines. He was the the central figure in this, in this PBS special, you can still look it up. And, what I know is fighting in a cold, wet environment is brutally challenging. The Brits know how to do it, but the Nords know how to do it better. And so part of our evolution is just the individual Marine, getting them able to employ their reconnaissance systems, their radar systems, their missile systems. You got to still thrive and survive in that environment. And that's something that can't be replicated. Although Alaska, as I talked to Senator Sullivan, often about Alaska, there's great training in Alaska as well. And it's something that we're, we're engaged in and we're trying to produce more battalions to go to Alaska for cold weather training, because there there's there's really no cold like Alaska cold.

O'HANLON: That's for sure. Well. It's not cold here, although it's nice for this time of year. Happy 4th of July to everyone. Thank you for joining us today. If you could give us 60s to get off stage and stay in your seats for that time, but please join me in thanking the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Eric Smith.