

**General David H. Berger**  
**Commandant, US Marine Corps**

**Defense Writers Group**  
**Project for Media and National Security**  
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**Moderator:** Good morning everyone and welcome to this Defense Writers Group with General David H. Berger, Commandant, United States Marine Corps. General, we're honored by your presence at such a busy and dramatic time.

The ground rules, as always, this is on the record. You can record it for accuracy and quotes but nothing may be rebroadcast, either audio or video. I'll ask the first question then we'll move around the room. Almost a dozen of you emailed in advance to be on the list, but we'll get to as many of you as we possibly can. I'll save a few minutes at the end for General Berger to wrap up with any concluding thoughts.

Sir, you've embarked on dramatic, even historic changes in how the Marines are equipped, prepared to fight, including how and where they are postured and deployed. Give us a little bit of the underlying rationale for force design and my question for you, sir, is what do you see in the world of risk that your very vocal critics do not?

**General Berger:** Great question. I'll answer the very back part first very quickly. I think if they were sitting here, the critics, they would probably see the risks not any different than me. They have a disagreement about the process or the solution but not a lot of difference on how they see the threats. The execution of it, we have a lot of discussion about.

The back story, and you all have the longevity of course to know this, but my prior job was at Quantico for force development. General Neller, four star, thought the same things as the rest of us did, and when asked a question in testimony after the 2018 NDS was out, he answered it very honestly and said I think we're not organized, equipped, trained or manned for the future threats, and he was very clear about the future. But if I remember right, he didn't say like a year, he just said the future. Then he went on to say we're very prepared and ready right now, but we're not built right for the future.

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I worked for him at Quantico doing combat development and my assessment, exactly the same. That has been conflated into oh, you must not be ready today. That was not his point or mine, so two very different timeframes.

I had the huge benefit, of course, of coming from Quantico where that's your job, is force development. For me, first of all, I think lost on some but not most of the folks in this room because I know probably half of y'all. There's a difference between force development and force design. That's an important and not a small distinction in that force development, the annual process we do that's tied to the budget process, that makes adjustments in your force to make sure you're doing what you should be doing. That's force development.

Force design, probably not a lot different than non-government organizations, is when you recognize that that annual process is not going to match what you see in the future, then you take a step back and you look further, deeper, and sort through where you need to be longer term. That's force design. That's what we did. In other words, the force development process not broken, it's very good. Our thinking then was how far out, first of all. The question was how far out should we look? We picked ten years. Why ten? Because it was beyond the manpower and budgetary sort of churn that makes it really difficult to make major adjustments. Inside that, really hard. Outside that, you can sort of be free to think through where does my organization need to be? So we picked ten years. We could have picked twenty or fifteen, but when we thought about it, we thought maybe twenty or fifteen was so far into the future, it was going to be a lot of change that nobody could forecast so you'd be a lot of, in our world, a lot of assumptions. A lot of assumptions. So we picked ten. You could argue whether it should have been shorter or longer, but I'm just giving you the logic. We picked ten. Knowing that you're never done in this project. It keeps going because we have a threat.

So we went with force design, looking at our annual process. Those changes aren't going to be enough to stay in front of the adversaries, the threats and technologies, so we went with force design.

In my career, my career is 40-couple of years. When I first came in we were not solely, but our primary focus was on the

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Soviet Union. It was very much threat driven. Every exercise, every class you took. We had memorized their formations, how long their weapon systems shot, we knew everything about the Soviet Union. Then North Korea below that. But every wargame I can remember up through the time there was a [Russia] was all centered on Europe and the Soviet Union.

Then came the period in the middle part of my career where we didn't have that sort of peer threat, peer challenge, so we, rightfully so I think, we went to reinventing better versions of ourselves, how we would operate, better technology. The next best bomber, the next best tank, the next best rifle. That went on for about 20-25 years, and that was, I think, the right thing to do. But we were our own competition for that whole period. We were our competition.

Then came the world that we're in right now where we have China and Russia and North Korea and Iran and violent extreme organizations. A very different place than we were from the '80s when I first came in. It's different, but there are some parallels here and that's the only reason I'm bringing it up, sir, is we're back to very much threat-informed, the decisions we make. And it begins and ends with concepts.

So back to where force design in the Marine Corps came from, the first part of force design, again, I think like organizational change like you all read about, was not about equipment, wasn't about people, it wasn't about posture or formations or how big a unit ought to be. It wasn't about any of that. It was about how. How do we think we're going to need to operate five, six, seven, eight years into the future. How? Then came later, then came how do we need to adjust our structure, what technologies, what capabilities might we need, what we need to get rid of, but all that was the front end of that force design was all about how, it was not about what at all. The what came after the how.

So that's the roots of it. Concepts. How the Marine Corps will need to operate as part of a naval and a joint force. From that, the derivative is force design which answers some of the questions of the concepts and the organization of the Marine Corps, updated every year like you're seeing from us because we're learning and we have an adversary that's moving, so nothing is static here. Technology's moving pretty rapidly so we're never going to be done.

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The other two parts of that magical sort of force design part is the talent management, the HUMINT part. How are we going to bring in and manage our people? And then training and education. How are we going to prepare that force? None of it would matter, of course, if we didn't have the right people and if they aren't trained right.

That's sort of the back story very quickly.

Critics? Here's the thing I probably didn't understand until General Neller turned over to me. When you're a service chief - - this morning is a perfect example. You benefit from all of the intelligence enterprise in the Marine Corps and the Navy and Army and Air Force and DIA and CIA and NSA. Every day, that's my update every single day. Which my predecessors had too. But I never did until you're a service chief.

So what do I have that the critics don't have? It begins with that. What's the threat actually look like? They have bits and pieces, certainly, if they have security clearances, but nothing like what a service chief or the chairman or the SecDef have. We're the benefit of all of that, ingesting that every day, every week. Meeting every Friday as Joint Chiefs in the Tank, debating it. All that will go away the day I retire, then the next person will have the ability to absorb all of that and make their own judgments.

I think it's great. I think the critics don't have that. They had it if they were a service chief, but like me, it goes away when you retire. Then you just have bits and pieces and you make your own conclusions, but it's not the all-encompassing that service chiefs have.

**Moderator:** And things change.

**General Berger:** And things change. They absolutely do.

**Moderator:** First from the floor is Meredith Roaten of National Defense.

**DWG:** Hi, sir. Thank you for doing this.

I wanted to follow up on an event that I did last month where Eric Smith, the Assistant Commandant, was talking about the buy-in that they're getting for Force Design '23 from the Navy and

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also from lawmakers.

I was hoping you could elaborate a little bit more on that now that we're closer in the lawmaking process and how confident you feel that lawmakers understand what you're doing and you're having that conversation.

**General Berger:** Before I started, actually before confirmation, when I knew, General Neller and I were talking about how we would need to go through this modernization process, I spent time with a couple of members of Congress who I knew from testifying when I was in Quantico. So I asked them, if you were me, and you were starting this in the front end, how would you approach it? Got phenomenal advice which I have followed. And the advice was that Commandant, there are four committees that deal with the military in Congress. They each have a chairman and a ranking member, so eight people. Focus on the eight first. You will have to meet with each one of those individually and explain why you want to do what you want to do, and generally how you're going to approach it, and then you have to promise that you will come back, circle back with them regularly to give them updates, one at a time. Not collectively. One at a time. Couldn't have gotten better advice from the beginning. I would not have known that, frankly, unless that senator had told me, and it has paid off.

All eight of them don't agree with every element, but what the Marine Corps is doing is keeping them involved, informed. They're not surprised by anything. And I'm asking them at each of these annual, semiannual kind of updates, do you see anything here where we've got a bad read on it? Where you think we got it wrong?

Focusing on those eight, I would never have known, I don't think, on my own. Great advice. That has prevented any surprises, it's gotten the support that the Marine Corps needs. Our movement is informed by what they see and what they believe is in the art of the possible too.

Same with combatant commanders. They employ the force, right? So we have to constantly say okay, we did six months of these experiments and these wargames, we're going to make these adjustments, what do you think? How does that affect you?

I think the two camps that we spend so much time with --

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Congress, combatant commanders, and I would just add like the Secretary of Defense, same way. Secretary of the Navy, same way. A lot of time. But that's what you've got to do. It paid off.

**Moderator:** Next is Dan Lamothe of the Washington Post.

**DWG:** Good morning, sir.

I wanted to ask you a Ukraine-centric question. As we see munitions and weapon systems alike get drawn down, how has that come into play for the Marine Corps in particular in terms of where your service takes on risk? And as you look at the conflict there, what has caught your eye as a surprise? What has caught your eye as significant and things that you're feeding back into your own decisions?

**General Berger:** I might break it into two parts there just the way actually you did. There's systems that we're sending to Ukraine, and then there's ordnance. Two different buckets of things.

On the systems, what's the impact? Whether it's MLRS, the rocket systems or towed artillery or anything else, the impact there is not just on how many systems we have but also parts. So we have to monitor very closely, because it's like you have another Army or another Marine Corps that you're feeding. So at the same time we look at the number of systems and how is that going to affect us and our war plans and our training. We also have to look at the parts and will that affect our own readiness, our own material readiness? Now we need tires and alternators and everything else, just like we would. So that's on the system side.

On the ordnance side I would say you can break that into two categories. The amount and types of ordnance that you need to fight an O Plan, a war that's on the books; and then the amount you need for training. Add that all up together equals how much ammo each service needs of all the different types. There you're watching very closely not just what you need, what you think you will need in the warfight, but also what you need to train to keep your own crews, your own Marines very competent. Their own skill sets up, because you draw that down too much, now the risk is on you, that you're feeding the Ukrainians ordnance and they're great, and now your readiness might suffer

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if you didn't monitor it closely, so we have to do that. And we have.

The Secretary asks us each time there's a presidential drawdown, tell me the risk to O Plans, tell me the risk to training and readiness. And I would just share with you, I'm not talking out of school, it is no holds barred, nobody's holding back. It's a very healthy discussion.

What surprises me, the last part, or not surprised me. What's sinking in. The amount of ordnance in a conflict like this is surprising some people. How many artillery shells? And if there was an air battle it would be how much air-delivered ordnance. It would be the same story. Just the quantities I think surprise some people because I believe some had read for 20 years in precision strike and this and that, and deep, long-range meant we're just going to fire a few of these very precise things and the war would be over. War's not like that. So I think some of were maybe not so surprised, and you all too, because you've seen these come and go, but some I think had this belief that things were quick and they were 96 hours and then one side wins, right? That's how it goes. No, this is a slugfest. This is a human fight.

What and how do we weave it back into the Marine Corps? I have, like I mentioned before, I have tempered my hey, there's 15 lessons we can learn right now. It's a fight that's ongoing and both sides are adjusting. So take a deep breath before you run off and change your whole organization based on what you saw in six months. That said, I think a few things are becoming clear. The value of empowering tactical leaders and training them to a really super-high degree, and empowering them, giving them authorities, giving them capabilities at the lowest level, and their willingness to take initiative is huge.

The Ukrainian lower unit level leaders are not having to ask up four levels to get permission to do things. They're seeing a window, an opportunity moving quickly, which is the way the Marine Corps trains ourselves. It's a huge advantage.

Logistics, like you all have written about. Logistics, logistics, logistics, logistics. You can have all kinds of ideas and weapon systems and command and control and all that stuff. It doesn't matter if you run out of Schlitz and quickly you can't sustain that force. Logistics, logistics, logistics,

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logistics. That's the first thing you have to think about in any conflict you think might last more than 48 hours. It better be logistics.

Here, you all have sat in on wargames and all before. There's sometimes that we fall into a trap of we come up with this great scheme maneuver with these big blue arrows and this is how it's going to be, and then we tell the logisticians, I need you to come up with a plan to support that. The right way to do it, the way we do it in our joint force is the logistician has to be like first. The intel person goes, okay, that's what the threat looks like, and then if the logistics person isn't involved from the beginning, you're wasting your time. We have to fight distributed. WE have to empower lower unit leaders. We have to plan for logistics in a contested environment that's very distributed, very spread out. This is where force design has taken us.

So the Ukraine conflict isn't validating everything in force design but some elements along your question I think are very relevant for us moving forward to pay attention to. Absolutely, yeah.

**Moderator:** Next question [Irene Lewins], Marine Corps Times.

**DWG:** Thank you very much, General Berger.

Of course you're for now focused intensely on the job at hand, being Commandant, but you have a little more than half a year left in that role. What will the process for onboarding a new Commandant look like, and how involved will you be in that process?

**General Berger:** First, thanks for not saying you have like a week left, because then I would have had to get up here and go there's something going on that I'm not aware of. [Laughter].

Four years is our term, so next summer for me and for the CNO, four years is the time. What do you have to do? I was taught by some really great people in the last four or five years that there are relationships that you have when you're a senior leader and their personal. They're useless unless they become institutional. And that's probably not exactly how the person told me but that's how I remember it.



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So every personal relationship that I have in Congress, with you all, with the Secretary of Defense, I have to translate that into institutional. In other words, it becomes a Marine Corps relationship. Because if I take it out the door with me, then the next person starts from zero again. So one part of that transition is ensuring that every single relationship, to whatever degree it's personal, becomes an institutional one. That you all trust the Marine Corps, not just Dave Berger. Same with the Secretary of Defense, same with Congress. They're built by humans and then they have to become institutional.

Once the person's identified then the process is pretty straightforward. If you have a lot of time, which I did because I found out in January. I had like six, seven months to think, to write, to listen, to meet with people. That was just incredibly useful time. And the fact that I came from Quantico meant that I was already up to speed with where General Neller saw the world. So I felt I had a gigantic advantage.

So here, hopefully the Secretary and the President can sort through that with Congress and know early on, and that allows that person to begin to think, just like I did. Think, write, ball that up, put it in the trash can, write it all over again, bounce it off a bunch of people. The people you've gotten to know over 35-40 years, you travel around like I did and you meet with them. I met with every previous Commandant face to face, to listen. Different timeframe for them, but still some of the common challenges, so I listened to them about their relationship with Congress and the media and the Secretary, and civ/mil relations. So you spend time traveling, you spend time thinking, you spend time writing. That's what we do in all our turnovers, but we do turnovers every two years so it's not like it's new. This one's a little bit different though, scale-wise, for sure.

Is there a step that you all think -- just as I laid out, what would you add to that turnover, six months?

**DWG:** How are you ensuring that the foundation you've laid for force design is institutionalized and doesn't go away with you when you leave the role?

**General Berger:** That's a great question. I think if it's -- the easiest way to answer that, if it's right for the institution, then it's right. If that person is part of it,

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it's even better.

In the Marine Corps, we're pretty small. We're big, but we're pretty small compared to the other services, so we have a total of 15 three and four star generals. We meet regularly. All of them drive where the Marine Corps is going. So it's not like we have 40 or 50 and some are on the outside looking in. All 15 are part of the debate.

How do you ensure it when you leave? Make sure, first of all, that it's right. But I would say more actually important than right is you build in the mechanisms, the confidence that there's a way to constantly test, evaluate, reassess and make changes along the way. If it's so rigid that I know I'm right, I know exactly what 2030 should look like and you're right, I think you're going to build in -- I don't really see it that way. But in the Marine Corps the way that we are experimenting inside the Marine Corps and with the Joint Force and then making changes in decisions that were made, I think the next person will do the same. So it's not a single answer, clairvoyant, I know exactly where we're going to land. It's more of a process of learning, testing assumptions, making adjustments along the way. As long as you have that, I'm absolutely confident it wouldn't matter who came in behind me, as long as the process is there to learn along the way.

**Moderator:** I'll use the power of the chair to answer as well, on behalf of the group.

You talked about how in designing any O Plan, whether it's military operations or programming, you have the intel, logistics, et cetera. You have to have a media line of operations too. The media are part of any battlefield whether it's [political] or terrain. And if you ignore the media line of operations and don't think about these people at the start, you have lost a very important part of the battle. That's me as a retired journalist.

**General Berger:** You're right.

**Moderator:** Megan Eckstein of USNI News.

**General Berger:** Semi-retired. Still coaching, teaching, mentoring, though.

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**DWG:** Thank you.

I want to talk to you about amphibious warships. Earlier in the fall I got to speak to a few of your generals about the ramifications of Navy plans to decommission some older ones, to potentially not buy the replacements that had been in earlier shipbuilding plans. I understand that there's been some effort to get to a compromise and I won't ask you what that is because I know it's all pre-decisional still. But with yesterday's release of the compromise NDAA, it looks like it includes funding to continue amphibious shipbuilding, and I just wonder kind of what you make of that congressional support for those ships, and does that change the conversation going forward? It seems like there's just this perpetual back and forth between the Navy and Marines on how to look at the future of amphibious ships and I wonder if Congress weighing in changes that in any way.

**General Berger:** There's a lot in that one. There was a decommissioning part of your question, there was a ship building part of your question, there was a Navy and Marine Corps part and a Department of Defense Congress part. There may be more than those four. I'm not sure.

**DWG:** I ask very complex questions. Sorry.

**General Berger:** I'll do my best, but if I don't touch them all, please circle back.

Let me try to take them in the order you laid them out. Decommissionings.

Clearly the CNO has the best sight picture on costs to keep them running and blah, blah, blah. We know we have a requirement in the Marine Corps that's a Marine Corps requirement for amphib ships, connectors, intra-theater connectors like LAWs. We know what our requirement is, but in terms of decommissioning and the cost to maintain them, the enterprise in the Navy is really big. So he has a great sight picture on what that cost is.

Congress, of course, wrote the check to buy the ship so they want to make sure you're not building something and then throwing it in the barn a few years later and not putting them - that's not very good. And they have a constituency that you all are very, very aware of that is a factor that's not really a

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factor directly for us, but indirectly it is.

We need to make sure the inventory of amphibious ships, combatant ships, is adequate to do what the President and the Secretary need us to do based on the National Defense Strategy. It's not any more complicated than that. But inventory is more than how many, it's how many that are working, that are usable. So we can have 100 of something, but if only 20 of them are usable, then the 100 is not a relevant number, it's the 20.

So from our perspective we have to focus on both. The inventory of amphibious ships and the readiness availability of those ships. The CNO is pretty open about it. He's not very happy with the maintenance part of fixing them and getting them out on time and then they get underway and break again. He's not very happy with all of that. Making progress, but he wants to hold them accountable. Me too.

New ship building. I think largely informed, frankly, but media giving credit where it should be. I think that Department of Defense leadership -- civilian and uniformed -- is a lot more aware of, even if we're not smart enough on the industrial base than we were five years ago. I don't think we're cavalier about it. It wasn't as big of a focus as it is right now.

Now industrial capacity, diversity, this is a discussion like every week, and it never was before Now it is. When you only have so many factories, so many shipbuilding companies, the mergers that took place over time to get to three or four and there's not much competition, all this is like now an every-week topic of conversation.

Back to the shipbuilding, the same way. I think if the CNO had his druthers he would double the number of shipyards tomorrow. Because we need capacity and we need competition. We need both to get the citizens a good price on their ships, right? And quality. But labor, labor, labor, labor, like you all know very accurately, is one of the main limiting factors.

We have to keep a shipbuilding industry and an armament industry and a jet-building industry. We've got to keep that active, warm, producing all the time. If it goes cold, it's hard to bring those workers back.

I'm very confident that a couple of things will happen in this

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NDAAs that you all saw this morning. One is, it clearly states from Congress that the role of the Commandant of the Marine Corps in defining requirements, that's a very positive thing. It doesn't say anything negative about a personal relationship between the CNO and the Commandant or the two services of bickering with each other. It just says Congress understands that that's a service requirement so we want to hear from the service what you need. I think that's not complicated at all.

I'm comfortable with the way things are moving forward. The only thing I would say, ma'am, is this first step is just the authorization. It doesn't have a nickel in it. So we'll wait and see what Appropriations comes through with in terms of decommissioning and shipbuilding and all that kind of stuff. But I think this first one is a very clear signal to us in a good way. At least my read on it. I don't know what yours is, but mine's positive.

**DWG:** I appreciate that. Thank you.

**Moderator:** Dmetri Sevastopulo, Financial Times.

**DWG:** Thank you, sir. Two questions.

One is on Chinese amphibious capabilities. How good do you think they are today, and how far do you think they are before getting in a place where they can do something serious on Taiwan, even if it's not the maximum thing they could do?

Secondly, when you were talking about logistics, logistics, logistics. Taiwan will be a lot more difficult than Ukraine. Is the US moving fast enough to start positioning things, whether it's people, the process, the level of supply chain you need for an operational plan?

**General Berger:** On the Chinese, the PLAN's amphibious capability and capacity both. I would say capability far behind us. Capacity, they are moving very quickly to expand. I'm looking back four or five years, and the trajectory that they're on. Where they're shifting, they're doing their own sort of force design in their military and cadre in some large ground formations and investing more in amphibious formations, that's a good signal where they're headed, that they want to go out into the world and do things. You wouldn't need as big an Army if you thought there was a huge threat to China mainland. They're

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building an amphibious force so they can project power and I don't see that trajectory stopping. So capability wise, way behind us. Capacity wise, we should pay absolute attention to.

And by capability, I mean at the high end for us, and you all may have been out on an amphibious ship before. When you're as good as we are with the Navy, where you can do simultaneous flight deck and well deck operations at night, that's the very high end. And the equipment. We have F-35s coming off of our ships. They have something a lot less.

Capability wise, we have a huge margin of advantage that we need to maintain. Capacity wise, they're outbuilding us in their shipyards, and I don't see that slowing down at all.

Logistics and Taiwan. And if that doesn't answer, hold me accountable here. But logistics and Taiwan. You're right. Not Ukraine for a lot of different reasons. Both sides have a different logistics challenge if China were to consider moving on Taiwan. They would have a huge challenge because there's not an overland move. We would also. So in that geographic sense it's a different scheme. Very different scheme.

The heart of your question, or the last part. Are we moving fast enough? You're always going to get a no from me because I want us to move faster. Why? Because you never know when the other side's going to move. So if I said I'm comfortable with the way things are going, then you might believe I know exactly when the Chinese might move. I don't. So everybody around this table should not be comfortable with where we are or the rate at which we're moving.

We have to posture ourselves just like Admiral Aquilino lays out, we have to posture ourselves in a way that gives the Chinese a view looking out from China that it's harder than we thought. We have to do something more before we can maybe use our military to compel. He calls it like pushing the timeline out. Delaying that timeline. Some of that is absolutely logistics and posturing.

The good part is, it's not the first time for us. It's been 80 years, but we know how to posture and do logistics. We'll do it in a very different way, but the capability we have in the US military and Military Sealift Command, although there are definitely some arguments about we don't have enough of it, it's

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old, it's aged. It's there. We will modernize it.

I'm very confident we're headed in the right direction, but if you're asking me are you comfortable? No, I'll never be comfortable. I don't know when they might make a decision.

**DWG:** What more do you need from US allies to allow you to reposition things?

**General Berger:** We need the access and basing and overflight kind of normal sort of stuff. But I think, sir, a bigger part of it is not what we need them to do that they're not doing right now, it's a change in how we think.

Traditionally, we think of the US going somewhere and bringing all our stuff with us and sending all the sustainment in some sort of long pipeline, a la Ukraine, right? We ship it out of the US, it gets over there, turn it over. I think in the Indo-Pacific, if it were to come to any kind of crisis or conflict in that region, it's not going to be only this giant pipeline coming from California. It's going to be much more lateral from countries in the Pacific, frankly, that 80 years ago we couldn't draw ammo from them, we couldn't draw parts from them, couldn't draw fuel from them. Now it's all around us. We just need to adjust the logistical, our approach, and work out that network so that if his unit needed parts it doesn't need to come from a factory in CONUS. The alternator that he needs may be in Japan, may be in Korea, may be in Australia. So now it's inside the theater which if the other side's trying to contest what you're doing, that's a different problem set than it's all got to come from the US. WE need to look around us.

The last part of that, I would say, our units which we are doing right now, have to be much more self-sustaining than they were in Iraq and Afghanistan. Where we could supply them with chow and water and fuel and everything else. Now our units, we are training them to be self-sustaining wherever they are in an austere environment. There will not be aircraft after aircraft after aircraft after aircraft with pallets of water bottles. Not going to happen. And we're plenty capable of doing that, it's just a shift is all.

**Moderator:** John Ismay of the New York Times.

**DWG:** General, several months ago I think you had a bunch of us

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in your conference room and you talked about a number of things related to force design. Please correct me if I'm wrong, but I think you offered that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Littoral Regiment was a test bed for a lot of the operational concepts in your Force Design 2030. Among those, the idea that in the future a Marine unit cannot expect to own the skies or deny enemy overflight of ISR and stuff. The concept that your Marines will have to fight, assuming that if they can be detected through IR or RF energy, if they can be targeted. If they can be targeted, they can be attacked and killed.

**General Berger:** True.

**DWG:** And you talked about integrating [inaudible] munitions. I think you had things like quadcopters as a high volume consumable.

**General Berger:** Yep.

**DWG:** I thought about that continually while watching the war in Ukraine. I'm wondering, do you think that the war in Ukraine has validated some of those concepts? I'd be interested if you have a cell of Marines somewhere looking at that, looking to pull lessons or even forward in Poland or Germany or the UK where Ukraine soldiers are training to pull lessons directly from their soldiers to then integrate and change and think about what 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Littoral Regiment will do in the near term, what the Marine Corps will do in the future.

**General Berger:** Yes and yes. Yes, I think what all of us are seeing in Ukraine has validated some of the approaches we're taking. I'm not into blanket statements, like everything that's happened in Ukraine is the answer all around the world. But much of what we're seeing in Ukraine is agnostic of what theater, what part of the world you're operating in.

I am even more convinced than when we sat down before, that collection, ISR, whatever you want to call it, is absolutely becoming more and more ubiquitous. And the rest you laid out. The rest of the kill chain you laid out.

So what do you do about that? I think it absolutely validates in part the changes that we're making in how we are training. We have to be distributed, you have to have enough mobility that you can relocate your unit pretty often. You have to learn all



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about, like some of us learned 30 years ago, camouflage, decoys, deception. What we didn't worry so much about 30 years ago now is every time you press a button you're emitting. Every Marine, every Soldier, every Sailor grows up with these now. They don't think anything about pressing a button. This is what they do all day long. Now we have to completely undo 18 years of communicating all day long and tell them that's bad. That will get you killed. So turn your cell phone off. They're like, I won't touch it. It just stays on. No, there's parts of the cell phone you don't understand. Or here's what you need to understand.

I think the signature management, the electronic signature management is huge. Signals intelligence pushed down to much lower levels than some of us were accustomed to is all the way we're going.

Last part, I think learning for you and me, a bit uncomfortable, but I don't think we're going backwards and I think it's the right thing to do, is how much intelligence we're sharing. We're willing to share as a nation. At the tactical level, real time.

We were always worried about doing that for giving away trade secrets or sources or you know all the reasons why. But for all the right reasons, we're making decisions now on sharing with our allies and partners, and I think that's like a direct derivative of the National Defense Strategy. But we were always brought up like OpSec. Don't share that intel. The UK's the same way. We're in a different place in intel sharing than we were when I was brought up, but I think that's matching where we should be.

**DWG:** I was sort of skeptical of the idea of things like Naval Strike Missile on the back of JLTVs and then the Moskva was sank. That was like, I get it.

And you mentioned to Dan's question earlier about rethinking the munition set and the quantities you need for an O Plan. Can you tell me sort of what you're looking at as saying we really think we need probably more of these or less of something else?

**General Berger:** I think the push that initially Secretary Mattis, the focus that he placed on lethality still remains, but what we have learned in the last year and a half, last six

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months, I think along the same lines. Is the ability to collect and quickly close a kill chain or a kill web fast, even if it's not your own organic weapons, has a huge advantage to you.

Back to your point, it's not the SM6 on the back of the JLTV in and of itself that's so valuable. It's the fact that it's connected to a sensor that's connected to some fusion decision-making, whatever process, and it's agnostic. That actually doesn't care where the sensor is. It could be a satellite, could be an MQ9. Connecting those things in a very short timeline has been a huge advantage. We'll do much more of that. I think you'll see us focus really heavily on the collection part, the reconnaissance part, and trying to deny the adversary the ability to collect against the Joint Force, our own Joint Force. The SM6 on the back of a JLTV, the Naval Strike Missile, all that, that is clearly an essential part but the magic of it is stitching that altogether quickly. It could be the UK's, could be somebody else's sensor. But the speed at which you can do that is magical.

Last part, the part we have a lot to learn still, how much and where do you put the artificial intelligence on top of that to enable you to make a quick decision informed by artificial intelligence? We're on the front edge of that. A lot more to learn there. It doesn't make the decision for you but it sifts through the whole chaff and everything really quickly to give you, okay, you've got three options. Quick. Which one do you want? And we recommend A. That's where we're headed I think.

**Moderator:** I'd like to honor our international members.  
[Toshida Kochi] of Kyodo News.

**DWG:** Thank you for doing this.

I have a question about regarding to Japan and Taiwan. The Japanese government plans to revise three security documents this month including its national security strategy. And they will have a counter type capability. So considering the possibility of Taiwan contingency by China, what benefits do you think would be to the US military for Japan to have a counter type capability? And do you expect further cooperation between Japanese Self Defense Force and the US Marine Corps, especially in Okinawa?

**General Berger:** The first question, do I think it would be

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beneficial for the alliance and larger for China to have a certain kind of capability, I'm really not qualified to -- my opinion doesn't matter, in other words. You have to I think answer the question as how does it fit into the bigger scheme? And then the rest is all policy and politics which is not in my, not what I work on.

That said, and I've lived in Japan, and most of my career has been deployed that way. I think this last few years especially, all positive. I think the Self Defense Force and the work beginning with the Rapid Deployment Brigade and to take it where it is right now with the Western Army and maritime surveillance of the Southwest islands, all huge.

I think the more -- let me put it in a bigger brush. The more Japan is very confident of defending itself is a good thing for offsetting PRC ambitions. You're not going to have to defend yourself but the more, the stronger it is in defense the better it is at deterring, I will just say. Both Taiwan and any potential problems with Japan itself -- I'm a huge proponent of not just the technologies but the way in which the subsequent leadership in Japan has modernized the forces there is all fine. And the speed is good, really good.

The amount of investment and effort, political capital, that Japan has put into their Self Defense Force, there was risk in doing that, but I think the leaders saw we can't not do this, we have to do this. It's really good for the US.

**Moderator:** Kaitlin Kinney of Defense One.

**DWG:** Thank you, sir.

[Inaudible], more broader and philosophical. You kind of talk about preparing the Marine Corps for the future fight. All the efforts you've done with force design. And then you've also gotten the buy-in from Congress. I was just wondering when you talked about, you know, how people are kind of shocked about how much munitions are going to be needed for a future fight. I'm interested in where the Marine Corps plays in informing the citizenry and preparing them for like this future near peer fight. How are you getting the public to kind of understand why this is all happening and to prepare them if something like that does happen.

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**General Berger:** I think the two most apparent ways to do that are you all and Congress. I'm just giving my own personal opinion, which is what you asked.

The two major venues for doing that are the media and Congress. How? The media, and some commonality here. The more the media and the more Congress are part of wargames and exercises and you all see it firsthand and you watch the planning and you understand how things are playing out, then you're not just reading a Power Point slide anymore. Then your communication to the public is informed and it's first person. If we go backwards and say we did this major exercise last month and we did it all over here and we learned all these things, and we're going to come brief you, that's not as powerful, that's not as first-hand as you all being inside the command post on the ship asking questions and then walking away from there going I watched the whole planning process. I saw how they executed, and you can inform the public in a better way than us briefing you afterwards on the result of an exercise.

Same with experiments. Here I think we're going to have to be a little less risk averse because experiments sometimes don't go right. They prove something that you hadn't expected. Well we should be willing for you to stand next to us and go, well that didn't work very well. Okay, what are you going to do next? And that doesn't mean failure, that means we're learning fast, if that makes sense.

I think in a large degree, the same with Congress. Many of them have the security clearances that you need to be in a higher level wargame, but my own experiences, we have not been, we haven't blocked them out but we also haven't invited them in. We need to. They need to do the same. Because they communicate with their constituents, their population, too.

So from my personal perspective, being available, accessible. The venues, the arteries for how do you reach America is the media and Congress.

**DWG:** The thing is, though, the media and Congress have very low trust ratings in recent surveys, whereas the military is higher. So how do you get the public to trust the media and Congress when that's the venue in which you want them to prepare?

**General Berger:** This is a huge worry for me. It's going to

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sound sort of Pollyannish, but I think a cornerstone, whatever you want to call it of a democracy is a free and open press. And when public trust in that is not good, we should very much worry because that's a worry about democracy. Maybe some people think that's dramatic. I don't think it is. Our democracy hinges on it. So if public trust in that is waning, that's not a good sign at all. We need to immediately turn that around. How? That's your question. How? I'm open to suggestions here.

**Moderator:** The Defense Writers Group.

**General Berger:** Perfect.

I don't know whether that's more side by side, co-writing, co-speaking, I don't really know. Maybe it is we find a way, you all suggest a way where we're actually side by side and then there's a transference of trust because we're both behind the podium or both behind a microphone or both writing an article, or both doing something. I've never seen that done, frankly. I don't know if anything like that would work, but I am very worried that -- I don't know. It's not good.

**DWG:** Embeds. That died a sad death many years ago. I think one of your predecessors had a hand in that.

**Moderator:** One of the problems for doing embeds is that embeds only work on large muscle movement, force on force. And when you think about Taiwan, North Korea, Iran, you just don't see the opportunity for embeds. There has to be some creativity about headquarters embeds, planning embeds. You're never going to send 120,000 troops across a berm with a thousand reporters with them. So to John's point, you've got to really rethink that.

We're suffering from the tyranny of time. There are ten people that want to ask questions, but the last one goes to Nick Schifrin of PBS News Hour.

**DWG:** Forgive me for asking something in the news that's going on this morning and overnight.

**General Berger:** You don't need forgiveness. Please.

**DWG:** The NDAA includes the end of the vaccine mandate.

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**General Berger:** Yes.

**DWG:** John Kirby was just asked about it. He reiterated the President's opposition to ending the vaccine mandate and of course we've heard from the Secretary.

From your perspective, how do you respond to what appears to be the end of the vaccine mandate, and how do you think it will affect things moving forward? And do you think the mandate limited your recruiting or anything, or had any negative impacts?

**General Berger:** First, the great part about wearing a uniform, like you all know, is I don't have to get involved in politics, nor should I. That is what the Secretary of Defense does.

All I care about, all the service chiefs care about is are our Marines, Soldiers, Sailors, are they healthy? Are they protected? Are they ready to deploy?

So the lens that I look through is taking care of Marines and their readiness to deploy. Their health, that's it. I don't need to worry about the rest of the politics. In other words, mandate or not.

All of us wearing the uniform, we get a bunch of vaccines every year. They keep us ready. They keep us from the whole platoon breaking out in something. That's all good. We want Marines to get the vaccine not necessarily because it's going to prevent them from getting it, but it's going to prevent them from getting sick, in a hospital, and worse if they have other conditions.

You can expect us to keep pushing for it. The mandate is a political thing. But should you get vaccinated? Absolutely. Look at all the medical science. From my perspective, mandate is different from get vaccinated because that keeps the unit and you healthy. Pretty simple. Not complicated.

**DWG:** Isn't that easier, though, with a mandate?

**General Berger:** We get like 8, 9, 10 vaccines. I don't know what they are. There's no mandate for them. I don't have to get involved in that. I get a Tetanus shot every 10 years. I get a Yellow Fever shot. There's no presidential mandate.

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Marines know that when their leadership says you need to do something because that's important to warfighting and your own health, the politics part isn't a part of that.

**DWG:** It sounds like you're in favor of vaccination --

**General Berger:** Absolutely.

**DWG:** -- but you're not saying that you oppose the efforts --

**General Berger:** I don't plus or minus. Those are now partisan kind of political things. But it really to me is, I think you want me to take care of your sons and daughters, right? Stay out of the politics part, but if a vaccine is good and my son's a Marine or a Sailor, I want you to take care of them. That's what our job is.

**Moderator:** With apologies to those who still want to ask questions, we've reached the end of our hour.

General, the point of the Defense Writers Group is to bring senior leaders like yourself together with the best reporters in town for an elevated, sophisticated, worthwhile conversation. I think we've achieved that today. Thanks to you and your staff and to all the reporters for coming. Apologies we don't have two hours, but the General has a very busy schedule. Thank you, sir, for a great discussion.

**General Berger:** Thank you, sir. Thank you.

I'll hang out, if you want to ask a question.

**DWG:** I want to follow up on the language in the NDAA about amphibious requirements. The consultation between the Navy and the Marine Corps. Sorry, Mallory Shelbourne, USNI News.

What will that enable you to do that you couldn't do before? I'm thinking about the budget that came out earlier this year. The Navy wanted to end the LNG line. You're [inaudible]. So what is this going to enable you to do that maybe you couldn't do last year?

**General Berger:** We can stop talking about what the requirement is year to year to year and talk more about what we can afford and how to use it and how to maintain it, because the CNO wants

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to keep the LPD line hot also. You all know the reasons. We're in 100 percent agreement there.

What it does is stop talking about 31 or 35 or 38. We know what the minimum is. Now let's talk about what we can afford.

**Moderator:** Nancy.

**DWG:** I'd like to use my last question to tie everything together.

I want to ask you what effect -- you know for 20 years the US said that the war in Afghanistan was a priority, that it demanded the most of American military resources. And then as you know, it ended tragically and suddenly and changed I think people's perceptions of the military.

My question to you is how did the means with which the United States left Afghanistan, how is it affecting recruiting now? How is it affecting the morale of your troops? How is it affecting public trust in the US policy going forward towards China? How is it affecting some of the future planning that you were talking about?

**General Berger:** Great question. I would say my responsibility is to divide political decisions and policy from performance of the individual Marines in those units.

The second part, no question that the Marines and Soldiers and everybody else who was on the ground in Afghanistan, incredible few weeks of performance to get all those people out in a really hectic, high threat environment.

There should be no question among the public, in other words, that wow. And that's what we want to make sure happens,

The decisions, the policies, the politics, that's different. But we need America, I need you to have that much trust in the force itself and the leadership within that force that that's the best in the world, by far. That's what it should be.

**DWG:** And on how people thin about planning towards China? We saw in the Reagan Survey, for example, people see China as the biggest threat, but they're not confident that the US has a strong strategy. Do you see a correlation with how the US left



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Afghanistan and how people are thinking about its readiness?

**General Berger:** The best I can do is answer it the way you all did earlier. I think this is our role, to explain the strategy so that people understand it. And make sure they're confident in the force but they understand the strategy.

So I think informing, changes that equation of how much does America think our strategy's on target? We've got to do a better job of explaining what the strategy is and how it's going to make sure the nation's goals are accomplished. We have to explain it better.

I am very confident, myself.

**Moderator:** Last question, truly.

**DWG:** Thanks for doing this.

We're seeing drones used a lot by both sides in Ukraine including loitering munitions. I was wondering how well prepared from both a technology perspective and a training and readiness perspective are Marine Corps units to deal with UAS threats, and what needs to be done in that regard to better prepare the Corps for the counter-UAS missions?

**General Berger:** Big to small, but your question is on small UASes I'm guessing. I want to make sure I get at what you're interested in.

**DWG:** Yes.

**DWG:** Okay, the small part.

How well prepared are we? Every single exercise now, both sides, and most of our training right now is on force on force. Both sides are going to have a ton of little drones. We have to get comfortable operating in that environment. Do we have the counter-measures in place? Yes, but for every measure and counter-measure, that cycle never ends, and as fast as we get a counter-measure in place the other side or a commercial vendor's going to invent something to overcome that. We can never rest easy on that.

What we have to do is get comfortable with operating in that

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environment. With them flying around and it doesn't bring you to your knees, it doesn't scare you, it doesn't -- you have to figure out how to operate in that environment. And we are doing that now in every single training environment.

I would tell you, five or six years ago it would worry you if you were out there because you hear this like lawn mower flying around thing and you can't see it, and I can't do anything about it, and it's really bad. Now Marines are aware of it, know how to operate, know how to camouflage. It's become part of the operating environment. If you're saying it gets more in the future, I'm in the same place as you are. We're going to see a lot more, not less.

**Moderator:** And a second time. Thank you for the generosity of staying for the bonus round.

**General Berger:** Thank you all. Thanks so much for what you do.

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