

**General James B. Hecker
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And US Air Forces Africa**

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Moderator: Good morning and welcome to this Defense Writers Group with General James B. Hecker, Commander of US Air Forces Europe/US Air Forces Africa.

The ground rules are as always. The session is on the record. There is no rebroadcast of audio or video. You can, of course, record it just for accuracy and quotes. I'll ask the first question and then we'll go around the room. Lots of people emailed in advance. We'll get to as many as we can. If somebody didn't ask and if there's time, send me a note in Direct Chat, not Group Chat.

With that, we'll get started. General Hecker, we are honored by your time. Thank you so much for doing this, sir.

General Hecker: Thank you, Thom, for the opportunity to be here. I really appreciate it.

DWG: Great.

When you were sworn in as Commander of US Air Forces Europe and Africa the world was three months into the war in Ukraine, an invasion that really changed the shape of Europe and what we think about security on the continent. There's new instability in Africa, another hat that you wear. So I'm curious, can you tell us how you've reshaped your forces since then? How has your thinking and planning altered to meet this new age of danger?

General Hecker: Thanks for the question. It's hard to believe that it's been a year and two months since I took command, and it's hard to believe that the Ukraine has been going on for a year and a half now. But it has. But that has given us the opportunity to take a look and learn some lessons from what's gone on in the last year and a half. And I think by far the largest lesson that we've learned is that neither side was able

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to get air superiority. Ukraine couldn't get it and Russia couldn't get it, and I think we all thought that Russia would get it within a couple of days and we'd be looking at a ten-day war. But since they weren't able to do that, we end up with the fight that we have today -- one that we haven't seen one like this probably since World War I where you have two folks toe-to-toe throwing 155 rounds at one another indiscriminately in some cases -- hitting hospitals, hitting schools. A lot of casualties back and forth. And then as we've progressed a little bit in the war they started getting a little bit more sophisticated weapons. We on the Western side provided weapons -- over [50] countries -- such as HIMARS, then we went to HARMS and things like that. So that had a little bit more range to it, but still not as discriminate as some of the other weapons that we have.

And then what we've seen out of the Russian side is they have gone to solely using one-way UAVs that they buy very cheaply from Iran or they use cruise missiles off of their bombers that they launch from thousands of miles away.

So when we look at that and we look at the reason why they couldn't get air superiority, it was because both of them -- both Ukraine and Russia -- have very good integrated air and missile defense systems. So their surface-to-air missiles. That alone is what has prevented people from getting air superiority.

So that's my number one priority throughout NATO on the air side, is the counter-A2AD missions -- so counter anti-access area denial missions.

So we've been putting a lot of effort on improving our skills and using all of the allies to do that, number one, and we can talk more in detail on that later.

My number two priority is based on knowing how Russia is going to fight when they can't get air superiority, and that's the one-way UAVs that we talked about and the long-range cruise missiles. We need to make sure that we and NATO have a good integrated air and missile defense system. So we have really been trying to improve our capability there because we know that's what we're going to need to protect ourselves.

Then to make us all better my third priority is information

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sharing. It's amazing what you can do if you share information amongst your allies and how much better and capable you make each other, really at zero cost with just a policy change. So that's number three.

Number four, is the concept of agile combat employment, better known as ACE. I think most people know to kind of protect what the US Air Force had and now what NATO has. We try to disburse our aircraft or our high valued equipment amongst the base so they don't just hit one section of the base and they hit all your aircraft. That's not good enough now. Now as weapons get a lot more accurate, et cetera, they can just hit every single aircraft even if it's disbursed. So what we have to do now is disburse our aircraft amongst different airfields and potentially even highways and these kind of things that Finland brings to the plate as they recently got in. So ACE is our fourth priority.

The last priority is command and control. How are we going to command and control all these units, especially if they're taking off and landing at other airfields using the ACE concept? How are we going to make that happen? And especially if we get denied communications because we're cut off from a cyber attack, et cetera.

So those are the five priorities primarily derived from the lessons of the last year and a half from Ukraine.

Moderator: Sir, thanks so much for that very thorough answer. I appreciate it.

Our first question from the floor is Eric Schmitt of the New York Times.

DWG: Good morning, General. Thanks. A two-part question.

First, I wanted to get you to elaborate a little bit more on what you've learned about the Russian Air Force, its capabilities and its vulnerabilities right now, particularly as it continues to launch attacks, aerial attacks against Ukraine's cities.

And part two, if the United States is forced to withdraw from Niger and shutter its two US military drone bases there, what impact will the loss of that ISR have on counterterrorism

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missions in the Sahel? Thank you.

General Hecker: Thank you and I appreciate the questions.

As far as the Russian Air Force, I think that most everybody thought they would be able to take out the IADS in Ukraine and then be able to get air superiority. And they weren't able to do that.

I know it's a hard task to do because it's hard for us to do. But it seems like they kind of gave up on that pretty early on. It seems like they didn't prioritize that as much as obviously we're going to make it a NATO priority. So that was the biggest thing I think about their air force.

Now they are getting adaptable because they figured out pretty soon after they lost over 75 aircraft that it was better not to fly past this area or else we're going to get shot down. And then they were able to adapt and come up with things that they hadn't had before with one-way UAVs. They worked with Iran with the Shahed 136s, and that's been relatively successful. A lot of them get shot down by Ukraine, but not all of them. And then they're obviously using a lot of their cruise missiles that are launched off their long-range aviation assets and their bombers. And they're getting some of those through. But Ukraine's doing pretty good with a lot of Western help in the way of surface-to-air missiles and stuff like that, and a lot of those are getting shot down.

As far as Niger, if our civilian lawmakers decide that they want us out of there, then obviously we've been doing planning for that and we'll be ready to get us out of there. We hope it's in a permissive environment, but we're planning both just in case to make sure we can get everybody out of there safely.

It obviously will have an effect on our ISR and our ability to continue to do CT in that region, but we will obviously look toward some other allies that are in the West there that we could maybe partner up with and then move our assets there. So we're kind of looking at some of those should that become the case, but of course what we hope for is that we have a peaceful, diplomatic solution to this and we don't have to move.

Moderator: Thank you.

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Next question is Jeff Schogol of Task & Purpose.

DWG: Thank you very much, General. I just wanted to follow up on something you just said to be sure I'm accurate.

You're saying the US Air Forces Europe is planning to evacuate its drone bases in Niger including the one that cost \$110 million. And if so, are you planning in case the Nigeri government decides that you have to leave? Or are you planning in case ECOWAT invades?

General Hecker: We are planning it because it's prudent planning to be ready for all situations. There's a lot of hypotheticals that we could come up with with why and if we should evacuate. We are hoping that we don't have to evacuate. That's the number one thing and that's why we're maintaining close ties, the military ties that we've had in the past and we're trying to make sure we reach a diplomatic solution that doesn't turn kinetic at all. So that's the goal is to stay in 101 and stay in 102 and work this out peacefully.

If we are told by our civilian leadership to leave, that's what militaries do. We do planning on all different situations. So we're doing planning on a permissive environment where we might need to get our citizens out; a permissive environment where maybe the embassy requests us to help them get out; or get ourselves out. And then we do the same thing in a non-permissive environment. So there's obviously a lot of branches and sequels to the planning that we do. We just need to be prepared for all of them, and of course we're hoping that we use none of them. Zero.

DWG: Just as a quick follow-up, the headline I'm getting out of this is "Military prepares to evacuate \$110 million drone base in Niger." Are there caveats are nuances I need to include there?

General Hecker: I think "preparing in case asked". If you just say military prepares to evacuate, that acts like we've already made the decision and we're going to evacuate. That decision is not anywhere close to being made yet and I think we have weeks if not much longer before civilian leadership is going to give an order to either stay, or well, to evacuate or not evacuate. But I think it would be mischaracterizing if you say that we are preparing to go because that acts like we're going to leave and

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we've already decided we're going to leave, where we have not. As a matter of fact we hope that we don't have to leave.

Preparing to stay might be a better way to say it because that's what we're hoping we're going to do. Anyway, that's how I see it. But there's no talk right now from our civilian senior leadership that tells us to leave. But we are doing prudent planning for anything they may ask us to do.

Moderator: Thanks, sir.

Next question is John Tirpak of Air and Space Forces Magazine.

DWG: Good morning, General. Thank you. Two hopefully quick ones.

There's a B-2 bomber task force in Iceland. I was hoping you could talk to us about what they're going to do during their time in Iceland.

Also what's been termed the unprofessional behavior by Russian air forces, what have you seen up in the northern tier and the Black Sea? And what constitutes an action that would have to be responded to. They've dropped flares in front of our drones, they've done some really close fly-bys. At what point does that risk becoming an actual engagement?

General Hecker: For the bomber task force, you are correct. We do have a couple of B-2s that have gone up to Iceland. They'll be doing different missions over the course of the next couple of weeks here. Obviously I'm not going to get into exactly what those missions are because we're going to keep that to ourselves and kind of see how it's reacted to by Russia. So I'm not going to tell you an exact thing.

But what we do is we tend to partner with our allies and NATO. We can fly north, we can fly in the center, we can fly down in the south. There's a lot of different places that we can fly and we typically tend to exercise all of them. And then we exercise working with a large number of the 31 nations that are in NATO. So there will be a lot of planning going on with those nations and then we'll be executing the missions over the next couple of weeks and you'll see that play out.

As far as the unprofessional stuff that Russia is doing. You

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probably remember they took down one of our MQ-9s. We're 99 percent sure that was on accident because their pilot just screwed up. Normally you would not intentionally run into a propeller because it could take you down just as easily.

Since then it's been relatively safe and professional here in USAFE. Totally different if you were asked that question over in CENTCOM. In CENTCOM they're dropping flares on them and this kind of stuff constantly. They haven't done anything since that event that I talked about a little bit earlier, they haven't done anything that's been unsafe or unprofessional. So I don't know why that is, but it's still occurring in CENTCOM but not here.

Now what would provoke us to respond I think we part of that question. It's hard to say. It's a hypothetical kind of thing, but obviously manned aircraft, if something like that goes down it's going to be a lot more serious than an unmanned aircraft going down, and that was something that we'd definitely go up the chain and get a decision from our civilian leadership on how they wanted to handle something like that.

Moderator: Thanks, Sir.

Next question is Luis Martinez of ABC News.

DWG: Hi, General. Two questions. One a follow-up on Niger and the other one on Russia.

On Niger, is one of the reasons that the US may pull out is if the US designates what happened inside Niger as a coup? Would that be one of the reasons why you would be forced to pull out your forces?

General Hecker: I don't know what the President's going to use to decide if we pull out of not. And who decides if it's a coup, it's definitely not going to be me. It's probably going to be the State Department in consultation with the [inaudible] present. So the bottom line, I can't answer that question. I'll just be told to pull out or not.

DWG: And following up on your analysis at the top about Russia and Ukraine. How much of a surprise was it that what you saw in regards to the Russians, that they were not able to take out the IADS? And as you said, you've had to make adjustments to your

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ACE. Because it sounds like that was a very standard response, but now you realize that you've had to make some adjustments, how much of a surprise has that been to you that you've had to make adjustments based on your own planning, based on what you're seeing on the battlefield in Ukraine?

General Hecker: Let me talk about ACE first. ACE has been around way before the Ukraine-Russian war started. It was mainly in response to the situation in the Indo-Pacific, knowing that China had several cruise missiles, very capable cruise missiles and things like that, and we had to move or else we don't want to lose all our aircraft on the ground. So ACE has been going on for a while.

Enter Ukraine, and now we kind of see how they're doing and what's being effective for them by them moving their airplanes around against the threat that we most likely face, and definitely face if we go to Article 5. We need to make sure that we can do that as well. Ukraine has been doing it for a year and a half and they've got really good at it. We haven't been doing it very often. We do it, but not every day like they do, so we've just got to make sure that we could be as proficient as they are.

Can you repeat the first one again? How I was surprised that they couldn't get air superiority and not have --

General Hecker: Right.

DWG: I guess I would say that I was somewhat surprised, but I know how hard it is to take down some of these systems. But I thought since the Russians built these systems that they would have some insight and a better way to figure out how to get around these systems because it was their engineers that built these in the first place. So that portion kind of surprised me.

The other surprise was that they kind of gave up on it as soon as they did. They initially were trying to do it, they got a lot of airplanes shot down, and then they just backed off and really never came back to it.

Moderator: Thank you, sir.

Next question is Oren Libermann of CNN.

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DWG: How are you, sir? Thank you for doing this.

My question is can you give us a sense of how the counter-offensive that we've now been watching for two months and change or so, has that changed the Russian air operations? I think there's been some open source reporting that it's forced the Russians to come in with a little more close air support. Have you seen that? And more broadly, how has the counter-offensive changed if at all how the Russian Air Force operates or is forced to operate?

General Hecker: When we look at the number of strikes, if you would, or close air support kind of missions that happened before the counter-offensive and then now we've looked at it after the counter-offensive, it may have increased slightly, but really not significantly. What we're seeing from those forces is a lot of those are what we call dumb weapons. So they're not GPS guided, those kind of things, they're just gravity fall and typically would have a hard time hitting their target. But if you have a large crowd out there you don't need a really accurate weapon. But that's kind of what we've seen since the counter-offensive.

DWG: Thank you, sir.

Moderator: Next question is Jeff Seldin of VOA.

DWG: General, good morning, and thanks very much for doing this.

Two questions. First, with Niger, if you do have to leave the bases there, do you have any concerns about influence from Russia, China, even Iran in Africa? What are you wanting to do with the bases in terms of what state you're going to leave them in? And can you be more specific about what other options would exist for new US bases in the region? How quickly could those be stood up?

Separately on Russia and Ukraine, with [inaudible], is there anything you see that could result in one side or the other being able to establish air superiority? And specifically for Ukraine, if they could do that what would that mean for their ability going forward?

General Hecker: The first one was if we have to leave, how

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would we leave the state of the base.

It depends. If we leave slowly in a permissive environment, we'll take everything back with us obviously. If it's more not a permissive environment, we will take all sensitive equipment that we have and other things like housing units, mattress pads, things like that that aren't sensitive, we would just leave behind if it was a non-permissive environment where we thought people's minds were at risk.

For the new bases. New bases, we've just started looking at that and it's somewhat of a military where we would like the base to be, but more of that's going to be diplomatic through the state on where we decide to go so I can't really give you any ideas yet, or how long it's going to take before we get to those things.

The last one had to do with air superiority? On, do we think either one will be able to get it later on.

Right now it doesn't look like it. Here's where they'd be able to get it. If Ukraine in particular, or Russia, starts running out of their integrated air and missile defense things and they can no longer shoot down the aircraft, then it becomes a problem. That's why it's so important that Secretary Austin holds the Ukraine Defense Contact Groups. He's going to be on his 15th one here in September, and typically we have over 50 nations that participate in that. And the number one thing that is brought up every time that Ukraine needs is surface-to-air missiles. So that's very important.

I don't think anyone is going to get air superiority as long as the number of surface-to-air missiles stay high enough they can fend them off.

DWG: If I could follow up on Niger real quick.

If you do leave, if you are forced to leave, would the bases be left in such a state that somebody else can move in and use it? Or just the most basic facilities, runways that sort of stuff? Or would it be left so that someone could move in and use it as an air base?

General Hecker: That's hard to say. It's a hypothetical and we're still looking at the different options for what's going to

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stay and what's going to go and those kind of things. Realize, these bases we share with a civilian airport. That's what it was before. At least 101 we share with a civilian airport, so we'll just have to wait and see.

Moderator: Thanks, sir.

Next question is Shelley Mesch of Inside Defense.

DWG: Good morning. Thank you for taking some time to talk with us.

Back in March at the FAA you had said that F-16s for Ukraine likely wouldn't be a game-changer. Since then it has been announced that Ukraine will be doing some training with F-16s. Could you expand a bit more, is that still your thought? What kind of impact do you think F-16s could have in the war now?

General Hecker: That is still my thought. MiG-29s are pretty capable aircraft. If I went to war would I rather be in a MiG-29 or an F-16? I'd rather be in an F-16. What the F-16 will give them is, it's going to be more interoperable with the current weapons that we're giving them now. So right now weapons that we are giving them have to be adapted to go on a MIG-29 or go on a SU-27 or something like that. The F-16, it's already interoperable with so that will help out and give them added capability. But it's not going to be the silver bullet and all of a sudden they're going to start taking down SA-21s because they have an F-16.

In addition to that, to get proficient in the F-16, that's not going to happen overnight. You can get proficient on some weapon systems fairly quickly, but ones like F-16s, that takes a while to build a couple of squadrons of F-16s, and to get their readiness high enough and their proficiency high enough. You're talking, this will be four or five years down the road. But I think in the short term they'll help a little bit, but it's not the silver bullet.

DWG: You've talked quite a bit about ACE and in the overall Air Force conversation we share a lot about how it would be used in Indo-PACOM. Could you tell us a bit more about what ACE looks like in EUCOM and what sort of construction is going to be needed?

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General Hecker: There's a lot more land in EUCOM than there is in Indo-PACOM so we have a lot more options. If you go back 34 years ago, before the Cold War ended, we had a lot of air bases that had a lot of protection at these bases, and back then if I flew a fighter into any one of those bases, when I landed -- no matter what country it was -- they could give you gas, they could change your tires if you needed to, and some of them could even load up weapons on the aircraft. We launched that after the Cold War. That atrophied over the last 30 years. So we are working to get that back.

What are we doing? We're looking at some airfields. We're going to start out with 20-25 kind of. Of course I'm not going to tell you where they're at and those kinds of things, but they're in strategic locations around Europe. Then we're going to put equipment in there that common aircraft need, any kind of aircraft. Then we're going to work with the nations and their maintenance so that we can get interoperable on different kinds of aircraft like we were able to do 34 years ago. So that's something that obviously doesn't happen overnight, but as I said it's one of my priorities so it's something that we're really getting after.

Moderator: Thanks, sir.

Next question is Nancy Youssef of the Wall Street Journal.

DWG: Thank you, sir.

I wanted to ask you about the Russian use of helicopters. What is your assessment in terms of how effective they've been and what are ways that you think that the Ukrainians could make them less effective?

General Hecker: They've added, I don't know the exact number of helicopters that have been shot down, but they've had a fair amount that were shot down especially early on, primarily due to hand-held heat seeking missiles that Ukraine had. So what we are seeing since then is they have been a little bit less likely to try to go over enemy territory and are kind of hanging back and they're using more UAV types to go in and get intelligence with. So not near as much effectiveness as they would have if they had air superiority.

So quite honestly, we're not seeing a lot out of their

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helicopter force.

DWG: You mentioned F-16s not being the silver bullet. If F-16s were with AMRAAMs would they be able to shoot down Russian helicopters?

General Hecker: They would if the Russian helicopters got within AMRAAM range, they could shoot them down. The AMRAAM can shoot down aircraft and it also shoots down one-way UAVs. That's where NASMs is typically, it's AMRAAMs that are loaded with them. So they would be able to shoot down them, but all Russia has to do is just stay out of range of their AMRAAMs. They're staying out of range of the current missiles. Then any time we give them a new capability we might have hit one of their command posts and they go oh, now they can go 20 miles as opposed to 15. Then we shoot them at that and they roll their command posts back to 25 miles. They'll do the same thing with the aircraft. The problem is you won't be able to chase them down in an F-16 over their land to get close enough because you'll get shot by one of the Russian surface-to-air missiles.

Moderator: Thank you, sir.

The next question is Ellen Knickmeyer of Associated Press.

DWG: Hi, General. Thank you for doing this.

On Niger, can you give a [inaudible] operations now at the [inaudible] 101 [inaudible]? I'm not clear the [inaudible] flight has affected [inaudible] or if you're having trouble getting kind of the resupplies you need. Could you kind of [inaudible] say maybe what percentage of the [inaudible] you had? And also if there's anything unusual since, any kind of changes as far as what your counter -- I mean the terror operation, what you're seeing on the ground there since the coup and [inaudible] extremist groups?

General Hecker: The only thing that we've really seen, it's been pretty much normal. The only kind of things we've seen has been announced in the press and you've seen there's been a couple of protests in and around the base. There have been some protests downtown and those kind of things. But I don't know if you're aware, but the perimeter of the base is protected by Niger soldiers. When that protest was going on they protected the base just like it was theirs -- because it is, for one

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thing. But we have folks there. And we anticipated that's what they would do and they did their job and they did it very well. Now luckily it was a very peaceful protest. Nobody tried to come in but the Niger soldiers were there if we needed them.

Moderator: Thank you, sir. I've just been alerted to a time constraint, so the last question before I give the General time for wrapup goes to Michael Morrow of Breaking Defense.

DWG: Thanks, General. Good morning.

I wanted to follow up on two things that have been discussed. The first is on the counter-offensive. There have been some reports that Ukraine won't achieve its objectives. I was hoping you could just give your assessment on the state of the counter-offensive and then how it's going.

Secondly, with F-16s, there have also been reports that Ukraine may not be able to fly with them until next year which is much later than maybe some of the more optimistic projections. So could you talk about how that timeline kind of fits in with the four to five year proficiency that you talked about? Thanks.

General Hecker: As far as the counter-offensive, nothing ever goes as well as you would hope it does. How it would go if you could do everything perfectly. So it started off a little slow. We've seen it pick up slightly since then, but you've got to remember, they put mines everywhere. In a square meter they're planting five and six mines. So it's very slow to back them up. So it's definite progress but it's slow progress and of course all of us would like fast progress, but in a situation like this that's heavily defended and fortified, it's very difficult. So slow progress is better than the alternatives.

As far as F-16s go, I think you know that training has begun with some Ukrainian pilots. It's really their young pilots that barely have any hours at all so they're not currently fighting in the war, that kind of stuff. But they're getting language training in the UK and then they're going to get a little bit more training on propellers and then go down to France and fly in the Alpha Jet for a little bit. That all is going to take time and that probably is not going to happen before the end of the year. So that takes a while to make that happen so that's why it's going to be at least until next year until you see F-16s in Ukraine.

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Moderator: General, we can't thank you enough for taking time in your incredibly busy schedule to meet with us today. I want to thank you for a very thorough and thought-provoking discussion. I wanted to give you the last couple of minutes for any wrap-up thoughts before we say goodbye.

General Hecker: First, thanks for the opportunity. I appreciate you guys giving me the time to talk. The five priorities that I led off with, I can't tell you how important those are. The counter-A2AD mission, having integrated air and missile defense, information sharing, command and control and ACE. It's really what we need in NATO, and we need to be able to do that with all of our partners.

In Niger, we're going to play it out. We're doing a lot of prudent planning, but right now we're not going anywhere and we don't plan to go anywhere until we're told to go anywhere, and right now there's not a need to go anywhere so our civilian leadership is saying hang tight and continue planning in case something happens. We'll be ready if something happens, but hopefully this thing gets done politically and diplomatically with no bloodshed.

Moderator: Sir, once again thank you for your time. I very much appreciate your very professional staff support. And to all the reporters on the call, thank you for joining us today.

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