

**General CQ Brown
Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff**

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Moderator: Greetings everyone, and welcome to this very special Defense Writers Group. Under the cliché of someone who needs no introduction but I'll do it anyway, is General Charles Q. Brown, Jr., Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Quickly, our ground rules are, as always, this is on the record. You may record for accuracy of quotes, but there is no rebroadcast of audio or video.

I'll ask the first question. A number of you emailed in advance to get on the list. We'll go through those. If there's any time left, we'll move to others, saving the last few minutes for the Chairman's wrap-up. We have a hard stop at 2:30, so we will be efficient about that.

General Brown, thank you for being here, sir.

General Brown: My pleasure.

Moderator: My opening question. You've been in your role as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs for right about six months. Crises around the world, it's a new age of danger, an incredibly volatile period. I would just like your reflection, sir, on what you've learned, how it feels, what the world looks like to you as the nation's highest ranking military officer.

General Brown: First of all, thank you for the opportunity to be here. Just to your last part, the highest ranking military officer, I never really imagined myself in a position like this. I was going to do four years and get out. But I also say, as you described, Monday will be six months and it's hard to believe it's been six months just because of how quickly time has flown.

Some reflection. The thing I do think about is the fact of my confirmation to a change of responsibilities one week, and then

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another week later was Gaza. So my transition has been pretty quick. But I've spent time thinking about coming into the position.

So on 2 October I put out a memo to the Joint Force and set up my broad expectations. The first is honing and [inaudible] skills has primacy in everything we do. Second was that we want to modernize aggressively with new concepts and approaches. Third, trust is the foundation of our profession.

So for warfighting, I really believe that that is why we exist, to fight and win our nation's wars. But we want to be so good at what we do that we never get to a conflict. So it's what we do in each one of our services, having been all my career as an Air Force officer, but a lot of times in joint [billets], my last job as the Air Force Chief.

To make sure that each one of the services has the capabilities, how we work with our allies and partners on modernizing and aggressively [inaudible] new concepts and approaches. We have a warfighting concept, each of the services have their concepts. It's how we bring all those together. But also it's how we modernize and ensure that we do the things we need to do today but also have the capabilities that will be required for tomorrow. I [inaudible] accelerate, change or lose as the Air Force Chief. I still believe in it. I believe that we've still got to continue to accelerate so we make sure we fight with an unfair advantage.

Last, trust is the foundation of our profession. That trust is what we do with each of our service members, so we do right by them and that each one can serve to their full potential without any detractors. So assault, harassment, discrimination, that's the focus. It's also how we take care of their families. So I talk about quality of service is when they come to work each day that we provide them the capabilities to do what the nation's asked them to do; and quality of life is how we take care of them and their families when they're not at work.

It's also trust that we have in our elected leadership and whether it's for me here personally, working with our Congress, but also our leaders around the country and the world. It's the relationships they have with the local elected leadership and building those relationships.

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The last is the trust with the American public. We are an all-volunteer force and as being an all-volunteer force we have to have that connection. I really believe young people only aspire to be what they know about, what they see or know about. My dad's a retired Army colonel. "High school, four years in the military will not hurt you." That was a quote. And I don't know if I would have come in the military if not for my dad, but it's provided me a lot of opportunities. That's the thing I think about. We have to have that connection with the American public and show the great opportunities that, whether you serve for four years or four decades there's great opportunity.

The last thing I'd say is, I've been really impressed by the Joint team. Having been part of the Joint team but never served on the Joint Staff, but the Joint Staff actually helped me get through that first week which was pretty, I would say somewhat benign compared to the other weeks since then. They've done an outstanding job of preparing me for every meeting I've gone into. I felt fully prepared. Part of it's based on my own personal experience, but the key events that they helped prepare me for time and time again, that part I've been impressed with, and how quickly they're able to respond. And then the same thing with the rest of the Joint team, with the combatant commands.

Moderator: My quick follow, sir, draws on your very important point that America's ability to convince adversaries of our warfighting skills keeps them at bay. How would you rate the health of American deterrence today?

General Brown: I'd say it's pretty good, but I do believe it's something we've got to continue to improve upon. The reason I say that is, I came in during the Cold War. I talked to General Cotton here recently and some folks on our staff. When you think about deterrence theory and the theory of deterrence, do we have the depth of knowledge that we had during the Cold War where you had people that really focused on deterrence. And you've got to think about deterrence as a cognitive aspect. You're trying to convince somebody. And if you don't understand how they think and operate, it's hard to determine.

So I personally have spent a lot of time thinking about that and engaging on it. As a matter of fact as the Air Force Chief, I had the four Action Orders, and Action Order C was on competition. The competition wasn't about orders of battle --

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airplanes and missiles -- it was about understanding our adversary and how they think and how they make decisions. You can't deter what you don't understand. And the better that we understand and how we -- let's say our focus out of the Middle East more broadly, more towards the Indo-Pacific. That will help us better deter.

I think we get stronger every day, partly because of our focus, partly because of our nation's focus, partly because of our allies' and partners' focus on the People's Republic of China which is our pacing challenge. But we have a historical aspect of the Soviet Union vis-à-vis Russia and NATO and those relationships.

So all those have gotten I would say stronger and continue to get stronger.

Moderator: Thank you very much.

The first question is Tony Capaccio of Bloomberg.

DWG: I know you get asked a lot about Ukraine and Israel. I want to hone in on what you just talked about, knowing the adversary.

Back in November, into December, you [inaudible] a press conference on Taiwan. You said, "I do think that President Xi Jinping doesn't actually want to take Taiwan by force. He will use other means to do so."

Fast forward to today. Do you still believe that? And what's the basis for that insight?

General Brown: Most nations don't want to go to war. If you had other means to not go into a conflict and some different relief would do. I still believe that watching kind of the pressure that Xi Jinping and the PRC put on various nations, Taiwan included, gives me that indication. I do not think a conflict with the Peoples Republic of China is imminent or inevitable, but I do believe there's tools that they use economically -- look at the pressure they put on Hong Kong to make that shift. There's increased pressure that they put on Taiwan since Speaker Pelosi went to Taiwan a couple of years ago. You see the pressure they're putting on the Philippines vis-à-vis Second Thomas Shoal. So it's those kinds of things

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that continue to put pressure to change the will of various nations.

I'd say the same thing with nations that have relationships with Taiwan where they've gone in and tried to break that relationship of those nations that have a relationship with Taiwan. So those are the tools that I see.

Those are the areas we've got to pay attention to. What happens in the diplomatic space, what happens in the information space, what happens economically because those are the indicators I think that are probably more telling than some of their military capabilities of what their intents are.

DWG: Do you think the concept of indications and warning vis-à-vis China and Taiwan means a change? Instead of troop movements and missile movements. This sounds more subtle I&W.

General Brown: When you think about, our National Defense Strategy talks about integrated deterrence. I think there's also indications and warning. And what I mean by that is, I can't just pay attention to the military movements because there are a lot of other things nations will do economically, diplomatically. If you don't pay any attention to those, that actually changes, may impact deterrence one way or another.

So I just think as a senior leader, particularly in my position as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, but I think our other senior leaders also need to be paying attention to those kinds of factors because those may be the first indication that something is going in a direction that may cause a conflict, and the better we understand that, the better we can work with the rest of the interagency and with our allies and partners to mitigate what might be the risk of a potential conflict.

DWG: Understand your adversary. Thank you.

Moderator: Next is Michael Gordon of the Wall Street Journal.

DWG: Sir, you were in the meeting earlier this week with the Israeli Defense Minister Gallant. When the DoD briefed us on that session they said that the US side agreed that the four Hamas battalions in Rafah need to be [inaudible], they couldn't just be left there, and that the US side had promulgated a number of concepts or ideas, alternative ideas, for how to go

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about it, including precision targeting.

My question is this. If we think back to the American experience in the Middle East and how it dealt with militants in urban settings, whether it's Mosul or Bukavu or Fallujah or Ramadi or Baghdad or Raqqa, in no instance did the US rely exclusively on precision targeting. There was always a substantial ground element -- either American forces or SDF or Iraqis.

So my question is, in your discussions with the Israelis, is it understood that there has to be some sort of ground element in Rafah, just one that is sequenced in and used in kind of a careful manner with special attention to minimize civilian casualties? Or are you saying that this target set should be dealt with exclusively through air precision targeting?

General Brown: I won't get into the actual details of what we talked about, but I'll just tell you based on your question and based on experience, you have to have a combination of capabilities to be able to do this, and we did the same thing. Like you said, we had either -- a lot of my experiences in the Defeat ISIS campaign. But using the SDF or the [inaudible] force or the Iraqi armed forces to do some of that as well as some of our special operations forces. So it's going to be a combination capability.

I'll just say in the conversations we've had with them, broad concepts, without talking specifics, and being [inaudible] -- you know, the Israeli delegation was supposed to come earlier this week. That will probably happen here in the not too distant future, and the intent then is to continue to engage in more detail with the Israelis to understand their concept and then us also to provide alternative opportunities to how to approach it.

DWG: You mentioned the Israeli side of bringing forth concepts. Did they outline either their kinetic plan or their plan to deal with civilians in sufficient detail that you know what their concept of operations is? Or are you still really waiting for that next delegation to find out what their plan is for Rafah?

General Brown: We did get some briefs through their COGAT, which is focused on the humanitarian aspects. But that again was broad.

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And one of the areas, I'll just tell you I get a chance to talk to my Israeli counterpart on a regular basis. I've been in meetings, as you described, earlier this week. This is one thing that we've talked about consistently is ensuring they're accounting for the civilian population and also increasing humanitarian assistance. So they've got to factor that in.

The piece here is to be able to hear the part they talk about on the civilian piece and tie that into how they're going to work operationally. I'll just tell you, we have a little bit more detail on some of the broad concepts of the humanitarian and moving civilians than we got on the operational piece. So I'm anxious to hear both of those and how that all comes together.

DWG: When you said the COGAT --

General Brown: COGAT. I wish I could tell you what the acronym stands for.

Moderator: Somebody will Google it.

DWG: It's occupied territories. It's the Israeli IDF institution that deals with [inaudible].

Moderator: Thanks.

Next is Lara Seligman of Politico.

DWG: You said you got a bit more details on the [inaudible] civilians. Can you tell me a little bit more about that? Is there any feasible plan to safeguard civilians that would actually work in the situation in Rafah that would be acceptable to the US?

General Brown: Here's what I would say. We probably need a bit more detail. That's why I said broad concepts of what they want to do and the timelines they want to work it on. I think additional detail will help tell us a bit more of the feasibility of their plan and how they're going to execute it. As I said, it was broad concepts with a bit more detail than the operational concepts of going into Rafah.

DWG: And then as a quick follow-up, I understand that Israel had asked for some big ticket items like fighter jets and

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helicopters. Is that something the US is willing to consider approving in the near term? And is there any more talk of potentially conditioning military aid to Israel?

General Brown: I can't answer what the US government's going to do as far as their requests, but they did make some requests. They've made requests in pretty much every meeting I've been in as well. So we'll stand by on that one.

DWG: Are they asking for anything new?

General Brown: I wasn't surprised by any of the requests they made.

Moderator: Next is Lita Baldor of AP.

DWG: Thank you, General, for doing this.

Just to follow up on Lara's question. I'm wondering what impression you're getting from the Israelis now based on the current status, the current meeting, versus a couple of months ago as far as whether you think the US has had any influence on what they plan to do in and around this next operation including the precision guided, more precision weapons. And do you think there is any sense among the Israelis that the US would condition or put some limits on weapons in order to pressure them to do that?

General Brown: I will tell you, I think they have listened, and I sense that based on the dialogue that happened even before they went into Gaza because we've been in constant communication. Secretary Austin's talked to his counterpart a number of times, I've done the same. As a matter of fact I talked to General Levi just recently. As a matter of fact he welcomed the dialogue and our thought process.

Now they are a sovereign nation. So they do make their decisions, but they do listen and we have a relationship with them. No different from any relationships that any one of us has, you don't always have 100 percent agreement. But there are things we agree on. We've talked about those as well.

Your second part of the question on conditioning, they have not -- although we've been supporting them with capability, they've not received everything they've asked for. And some of that is

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because they've asked for stuff that we either don't have the capacity to provide or not willing to provide right now in particular. But it is a constant dialogue with them, and we still have that dialogue, and I would say the same with General Kurilla. He talks to General Halevi and members of the Israeli military probably a bit more than I do.

DWG: Just as a follow-up, is there any sense that the US is withholding some of that in order to get the Israelis to focus more on humanitarian aid? To get more aid in and to use more civilian cost sharing?

General Brown: We do make decisions on how we provide the capability versus -- and it's no different how we work with others. I won't get into details because I don't make those decisions on what goes or doesn't go. We do make recommendations based on what their ask is and how that impacts their readiness, particularly if it's going to come from our stocks. Or in many cases some of the things have gotten more into foreign military sales cases.

Moderator: Shawn Carberry of National Defense Magazine.

DWG: Thank you.

I want to go back a little bit to where you started from about the priorities that compete with other, about warfighting, modernization. With what's happening right now there's been tremendous out-flow of US resources to partners. You have the Houthi situation which is also requiring US/EU's, a lot of munitions and resources. So how is that sort of demand currently affecting the other pieces of this equation of the readiness, deterrence, and modernization? If you can give some insight to how you're trying to monitor those competing interests.

General Brown: Some of this is based on my experience at having been on both sides of the coin. I was Deputy Commander, United States Central Command; Air Component for INDOPACOM; then I became the Air Force Chief of Staff. So as a matter of fact in my interview with Secretary Esper to become the Air Force Chief of Staff, he played me against myself. We were having a conversation about our bombers -- US bomber presence or bomber task force. What would you do? Mr. Secretary, I'd put all the cards on the table, we'd have a conversation about risk. That's

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exactly how I do that today. I try to put all the things we're trying to get done on the table and have a conversation. Because it's very easy for us to talk about all the things going on in the world. We can talk about the Middle East in one bucket, whether it's Israel, Gaza, our forces in Iraq and Syria, or the Red Sea, Ukraine, PRC. You can talk about those in individual siloes and if we do that we will fix one problem and create two or three more.

So what I've been trying to do is step back from a number of these areas and look at it more holistically.

If you go back to the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act, there's a term in there that was responsibility given to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs as a Global Integrator. There's one sentence in there, but it's much broader than that. I think that I have that responsibility to take a step back and [inaudible] advice is to look more globally.

One of the things I'm doing is as I engage with the combatant commanders, is to talk to them about how we look at things more globally. The typical response is if there is a crisis, they will ask for more capability. My point back to them is what if you got nothing? How would you mitigate? How would you be more creative with the tools that you already have? Tell me about the risk. Then we'll have a conversation because there's risk in another combatant command or risk to a service based on readiness.

If you have all those conversations in one piece and you look out a little bit ahead of a crisis, then you can start to map things out a bit better. That's the approach that I'm taking. I'm asking questions. I'm engaging with staff on this as well. We can't just focus on the here and now, we've got to focus on the here and now and working more closely with our J7 who does out doctrine and training and our J8 who does the resourcing, and be able to map some of these things out so that we can have a conversation so we don't keep causing problems for ourselves.

The last thing I would say on this is our use of data. A lot of conversation about data. How do you take the data that we have today and use it to help make decisions and provide advice? So we're using that for some of the tools to look at force posture movements to play out scenarios, pull the data from the services and then look at it and what the impact is on readiness. Here's

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what you could do, but there's an impact downstream that you have a better appreciation of because you can model that out. So if there's an impact, you may pick a different pathway based on looking at the data.

DWG: Do you have a sense of what some of the priority areas are that need the most attention? Whether it's the defense industrial base, whether it's continuing to hammer on Congress to get funding on time, are there internal things with [inaudible]? What's where the low hanging fruit is making progress?

General Brown: I don't think there's any low hanging fruit. I would say all of the above.

The first thing I would look at is predictability. Getting the budget on time would be really helpful. The CR that we just finished up with, that was the fourth longest CR in history. So 170 days. That's not healthy. When you think about it, there's roughly close to 450 things we could not do, whether it's new starts, changing procurement, MilCon. All that stuff just kind of sat.

You also think about the defense industrial base. Just recently I had a chance to go to Camden, Arkansas and MacAlister, and back in December I went to a shipyard out in San Diego. So I asked them the question about CRs. Consistency is going to be important to them. With consistency they can write contracts, they can have a workforce, they can set up their supply chains. All those are things that are important and if you don't do that, you start to lose trust. You lose trust not only at the larger companies but it's also the smaller subs that provide some key pieces and parts. If you want to get them back and keep them, it's going to cost more.

One thing I look at is time. We lose time. Over the past 15 years, we've been in CRs for five, so one-third of the time. If you're trying to stay ahead of your adversary that's not the way to operate. So we've got to really look at how we get a budget on time which give a particular ability to our defense industrial base, and then we've got to prioritize where we want the defense industrial base to grow out. Part of that's also the workforce. When you think about long lead items, that may be part of one of our long lead items, is making sure we have the talent within the defense industrial base, and part of that

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is giving them predictability which means they can hire folks and keep them on versus trying to go up and down based on changes in budget cycles.

Moderator: Next is Dan Lamothe of the Washington Post.

DWG: Thanks for sitting with us today.

I wanted to ask you about the forthcoming establishment of the pier off the coast of Gaza. A lot of talk in town right now about the concerns that would go with that, particularly vulnerability of force. A big target. A spot in the world with a lot of anger at the United States. Is it safe to assume that citizens, I guess, can expect destroyers protecting it, Reapers overhead? Things like that that would help protect the American forces in a pretty vulnerable spot?

General Brown: Let me first say that force protection is at the top of the list any time we put our forces anyplace in harm's way.

There will be our own capability, capacity to protect our forces, but the Israelis have also committed to help protect the forces in the area and we have other nations that are also part of our allies and partners in the area with capabilities as well.

So as that capability has started moving out of the United States in the direction towards the Med and to the Middle East, that has given us time to actually work with allies and partners and others to start looking at not only the force protection piece but all the other pieces and parts that have to come together. I do think about it. We don't want to get a floating pier there and then you don't have things to put on it coming out of Cyprus, for example. You want to make sure that the beach and the location that you're going to put this in is going to be set up and ready to go.

So the Deputy Commander from the United States Central Command has been in the region over the course of the past week, engaging in Cyprus and Israel with others to get all these pieces and parts together. That's one of the things that once this started moving, it actually energized focus on this particular capability of a maritime aspect. It's been talked about for a while, it's just now that we've got something

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moving, all the talk now is starting to turn into action.

DWG: To that end, if you're going to deploy these forces into harm's way, do you feel like you have to have necessary assurances from the IDF, from the Israelis, that this won't just become another spot with a bottleneck of humanitarian aid?

General Brown: I do. That's something I talked to General Levi about this just recently. General Kurilla's done the same, talking to the Israelis. So I do.

Moderator: Tony Bertuca, Inside Defense.

DWG: Thank you so much for being with us.

My question is about the defense industrial base munitions. The Israelis have asked for some weapon systems. You're still waiting on a supplemental from Congress that in part would help you replenish things that you've sent to Ukraine. To what extent does not having that supplemental restrict what you can do? Is that part of the conversation?

General Brown: What that supplemental, the lack of a supplemental prevents us not just for Israel, but it prevents it for us. When you think about the supplemental, and you can talk about it whether it's the Ukraine supplemental, the Israel supplemental, 80 percent of that money comes back into our defense industrial base, to our American workforce, American jobs, American capabilities. Because what they're doing is, they're going to replenish some of the things that we've already provided but also if they're doing foreign military sales, it actually creates capability that they can approach us.

I'll tell you, the one thing I've found as I've traveled around the world is that US capabilities are highly desired. That's why I think this supplemental is important. So it's bigger -- I think we've got to talk more about Huawei this actually supports our defense industrial base. And I've asked my staff about that. Building out a truck you can actually show where those dollars go and how it actually -- it doesn't go direct to Ukraine or Israel, how it comes back into our defense industrial base and gives us additional capability in the long haul.

One other piece I would add to that is in this particular budget for '24, the department asks for seven multi-year procurements

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on munitions. We got six of the seven. But if I go back to what I said earlier, we spent 170 days not doing multi-year procurement and not increasing funding to our defense industrial base to provide that capability.

So I think the defense industrial base is going to play a key role within our future piece and also our overall deterrence.

DWG: Just to bring it back then to Israel and how it may or may not be constraining. You talked about ways to calculate risk. Is that part of the risk calculus about why maybe you can't give Israel some of the things that it wants, because you don't have the supplemental?

General Brown: It is. If you can't see that something's coming it's hard to give something away. I would just say the same thing applies -- I was just a week or so ago in Ramstein for the Ukraine Defense Contact Group. And as I talked to some of my counterparts, early on they were willing to give stuff, but what they want to make sure is there's something on the back side so they don't decrease all their readiness and then have a bathtub they can't refill in capability.

It's the same thing for us. We want to make sure that as we do this -- and the further we go along in this, you get additional capacity, the defense industrial base picks up its pace, then you could actually in some cases I would say take a little bit more risk because you know you've got a capability coming in behind and you understand the temporal aspect of that risk, how long it's going to be based on what the defense industrial base can do.

Moderator: Patrick Tucker, Defense One.

DWG: General, thanks for doing this. It's good to see you again.

Going back to the fall, there have been a couple of different reports that the White House hasn't confirmed or denied about providing Ukraine with long-range ATACMS missiles. Specifically the long-range [inaudible]. And I don't need you to confirm or deny that. But a simple yes or no -- do you think that providing Ukraine with those longer range ATACM missiles presents an unacceptable risk of escalation?

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General Brown: Here's what I would tell you. As we've gone through, over the course of the past couple of years, we've had to continue to reassess based on escalation throughout, and you don't know what you don't know at the start. You do that based on your analysis but you also based it as this conflict transpires, the reaction in each one of these. So it's something that we're always taking a look at.

I do sense that the risk of escalation is not as high as maybe it was at the beginning of the process. That we understand a bit more over time and based on what the Ukrainians are being able to do not only there in Ukraine, but you've seen that they've struck into Russia as well. And just watching the reaction. Those are the things that we pay attention to from actions but also sensitive intel to determine what is the likelihood of escalation based on different capabilities and different actions.

DWG: In the event that the supplemental remains frozen for another four months, say four months, what do you feel is the worst case scenario for Ukraine and what are you, what can you tell us you're doing about it?

General Brown: We've talked about the defense industrial base. It's just getting them the capability not only through our supplemental but what the other nations are able to do as well. The conversation I've got with many of our NATO countries is they're also looking at how they increase their defense industrial base and capacity as well. So all those drive additional risk to Ukraine. And not just Ukraine, but to NATO as well. That's why this supplemental is so important.

DWG: Worst case scenario looks like?

General Brown: Here's what I'd tell you. Ukraine has been able to do a couple of things that folks probably early on didn't give them credit for. The fact that they took back about 50 percent of their territory that Russia gained initially, and they've been able to defend fairly well. So they'll continue to defend [throughout] the strength of their defense, but the challenge will be, because there's quite a bit of artillery that goes back and forth. That's going to be the challenge. And then I would say also air defense. That's also a key capability that's important to them as well.

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Moderator: Luis Martinez, ABC.

DWG: Thank you, again.

Looking forward to how Gaza ends potentially, is there potential -- I know there's no boots on the ground for the United States. Is there potential the United States would support having UN nation peacekeepers there or maybe even Palestinian Authority [force]? And would the United States be willing to subsidize something like that? Because it would make it, it would seem as more of a realistic what comes next than the United States [inaudible].

General Brown: That's more a policy decision. It's kind of outside my purview. But in Gaza there's going to have to be some level of security or some sort of governance. That is something that we have talked about. Who does it and how it's done, those are policy questions that have to be addressed, but there's things that we need to be thinking about now. You don't want to get into a situation where you don't have some of those things kind of laid out and in place, or at least options to put in place.

DWG: Can I ask you an operational follow-up then?

General Brown: Sure.

DWG: With the Houthis, how stretched is the US right now, the US Navy? And will you have a carrier gap potentially in the future? And do you feel that what has been done so far has been enough to actually deter [inaudible] situation?

General Brown: One of the things, as I look at this in not only the near term but the long term, is looking at our approach so that a carrier is not required there. Part of that is, with a carrier, access basing and overflight becomes less of an issue because we can operate out of international waters and international airspace, so part of this is a dialogue we have with our allies and partners in the region to get our partners in the region, to get access to basing and overflight to be able to execute. And we have some of that but we'll have to continue to work to do that.

I think any one of these military conflicts requires some type of diplomatic solution to get forward. I just met with the US

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Ambassador to Yemen and the Special Envoy to Yemen as well, to talk to them about those particular things of what options they're working. At the same time we're doing our piece as well from a military aspect.

Moderator: Nick Schifrin, PBS Newshour.

DWG: Thanks very much.

I want to ask a specific one on Ukraine, the kind of worst-case scenario. Zelenskyy actually said specifically yesterday or this morning, he said without the supplemental they are not prepared to defend against another major Russian offensive expected by May. Is that how you see it? Without a supplemental they will not be able to defend against a major Russian offensive.

General Brown: Firstly, I don't know if the Russians can generate a major offensive. If you look at what's happened over the course of the last year, the Russians have actually thrown a lot of capability and personnel and weapon systems and vehicles to gain what they have gained. It's almost a meat grinder the way they've actually done this. So does it make it more complicated, more challenging for the Ukrainians without the supplemental? Yes. But they've been able to defend fairly well, particularly in the north and the east and at the same time still have access to the Black Sea. So they've been able to do things.

It's not only what the US does, but it's also what the rest of the UDCG does. The Ukraine Defense Contact Group. What they do. I've done five of them. Two of them in person. The most recent one was about a week ago. So as I sit down and you listen to the various nations and their contributions, our contribution is important, but theirs are important as well. What we've got to do is continue to all work together to make sure Ukraine has the capability to defend itself.

DWG: And on Gaza, zooming out a bit from Rafah, the Senate Intel Chairman Mark Warner [inaudible] public recently, in 155 days or whatever it is, the IDF has only taken out 35 percent of Hamas and penetrated less than one-third of the tunnels. Do you believe that Israel's goal of eliminating Hamas' military capability is impossible?

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General Brown: It's challenging. And really, I think one of the things, the tunnel network as I think you've heard, is pretty complex and so it is a challenge. I realize that's what their goal is, but it is challenging. They've had some success in certain areas, but it's something not only what they're doing in the near term, but there's a long term piece that they have to be thinking through as well.

DWG: Challenging but possible? Or --

General Brown: It depends on how you look at how much they tamp down Hamas. Think about Hamas. Not only does it have a military arm but it also has a political arm. So we'll see.

Moderator: Shinichi Akiyama, Mainichi Newspapers.

DWG: Thank you for the opportunity.

[Inaudible] come here in two weeks. There is ongoing discussion about the command and control structure in Japan. I mean the US Forces in Japan. What kind of restructuring do you think needs to, for the continental Japan [inaudible] policy? And are you supporting this idea to establish a new joint task force in PACOM led by the [inaudible]?

General Brown: I won't get into details of command and control structure, but here's what I will tell you. The ability for us to continue to grow our relationship, be more operationally-focused between our US Forces, the Japanese Self Defense Forces, and be able to move forward, and just overall command and control is important. Part of that I will tell you is based on my experience as a Commander of Pacific Air Forces where we worked very closely with our operation center as the JASDF, Kōkū Jieita, was building out their air operation center.

And the most recent exercises of Keen Edge was another opportunity to increase our operational back and forth. As a matter of fact last night I was on a video teleconference with General Yoshida and Admiral Kim from the Republic of Korea talking about the trilateral relationship and the work that we do from an exercise standpoint. As you do that, that actually helps to strengthen our command and control as well as our relationships to be able to be operationally prepared to deter but also to operate together.

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So I do know there's dialogue about how to continue to improve that, and I don't have specifics to share with you but I do say that the capability relationships are all improving.

DWG: And there is a trilateral [inaudible] between Japan, US and [inaudible]. And what is the expectation for the next step to improve the trilateral cooperation.

General Brown: I will tell you, every time we have these types of engagements I feel that we find great alignment in certain areas because we're able to talk about our various capabilities but also where we see the threat or the challenges and how we can better work more closely together. That was a conversation last night was a great example of that. And having served in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the Republic of Korea a couple of times and then as Commander of Pacific Air Forces, what I am actually seeing is a lot more tighter relationships and the willingness to have some of these trilateral type of engagements to build our capabilities, deterrence, assurance measures, and then look at interoperability as well across our forces.

Moderator: Next is Noah Robertson of Defense News.

DWG: I'm wondering if you can talk to what you said at the beginning about deterrence being pretty good but it could be better. I'm wondering if you can speak specifically to the Pacific. Admiral Aquilino was in town last week testifying that the risk was high and trending in the wrong direction. Would you agree with that assessment? And how would you classify it yourself?

General Brown: I've known Aquilino for a number of years. The way I look at our deterrence, do we fully understand the PRC and what their intent is? And I don't know that we do as well as we probably could which is why again, why I wrote [inaudible] on competition, to better understand the PRC, decision-making, culture, those kinds of things. Again, you can't deter what you don't understand. We can't have the same playbook in every part of the world because all parts of the world are different.

I do think that the risk is high. If you don't know, then it's kind of harder to say it's low if you don't have a good appreciation. But we're going to continue to work to drive it down. What I talk to combatant commanders about is we've got to be doing things to drive down the risk. Every year when we get

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a new budget, new capabilities, we need to be ensuring we're doing all the right things. So part of that is also are there things that we're doing, are they a deterrent? Which requires some level of assessment, some level of intel to determine -- there's a lot of things you could be doing. We could be doing a lot of things and not have an impact. Some things you don't know and you may not know for a number of years based on some of the intel, so it's important that we are always doing assessments of the things that we are doing to ensure they're having the desired effect.

DWG: Could you be more specific on the things that would be better to understand, what you need to know to better deter, like you said.

General Brown: You can look at an individual action and go, did that have an effect? It's not just one individual action. I think it's a series of actions that happen. And as decision makers, particularly senior level political, there's military things they're factoring in. There's diplomatic things they're factoring in. There's an economic piece that they're factoring in. So can you say that this one thing that we do as a military had an impact to deter? It probably contributes, but this is why I think you've got to understand these other pieces and parts, to the question I got earlier about indications and warning. How do all these things come together to help deter? How do we make sure that we are working very closely together with other parts of the interagency so that we are doing things in concert. We don't want to be in a position where we're doing something to upset another area that's actually having a good effect. It's better we have that dialogue across the interagency, the better we can make sure that we align ourselves and we're working closely together.

Moderator: Josh Keating of Vox.

DWG: Thank you so much, General. I appreciate you making the time.

I wanted to ask about ISIS-K, the group that took responsibility for the attack in Moscow last week. It's also been linked to a number of plots recently in Western Europe. Is there any consideration of increasing the prioritization of ISIS-K [kinetic] operations, using some of the over-the-horizon capabilities that were discussed during the withdrawal from

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Afghanistan two years ago? How do you think about the threat of this group?

General Brown: I won't get into operational details about how we might respond, but as you're aware, it's a group that we've paid attention to for a number of years and we'll continue to pay attention to. I think our ability to warn others about potential attacks shows you that we're paying attention and we need to continue to pay attention to that threat.

The key goal for us is not only to be paying attention but to be sure we don't have an attack that impacts the homeland or one of our allies and partners as well.

I think as you look at all the things you have going on in the world, it is prioritized, but it's prioritized in a little different area. That's something that as the Chairman, going back to an earlier question, it's easier for us to focus on one and then miss something else.

What I purposely try to do, personally, is try to step back from a number of these and put these all in perspective and try to balance back and forth across these various threats.

Here's the one thing I would highlight. As I talk to our combatant commanders and we think about the Unified Command Plan, it defines the area of responsibility. I don't see those as dark solid lines. They're dashed lines and there's a bigger gap between the dash. A threat does not care which combatant commander has that part of the world. What we don't want to have is a gap or a seam because we are not stepping back from this and looking at it more holistically against whether it's ISIS-K or any other threat or security challenge.

DWG: There's an active mission of US troops in the Middle East involved in combatting ISIS [inaudible]. To what extent are these other ISIS affiliates, whether it's ISIS-K in Afghanistan, North Africa, Central Asia? To what extent is it actually sort of degrading or destroying these groups? Is it an active mission of the US military or is it more just sort of a monitor and addressing --

General Brown: You know by our current operations it's less active than it was over the course of the past several years. We still have some active, but it's also monitoring, regarding

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any type of attacks and helping allies and partners to disrupt the attacks if we get an indication that something's about to occur.

Moderator: Greg Hadley, Air and Space Forces Magazine.

General Brown: Hi, General. Thanks for doing this.

To your point about deterrence and understanding China as well as you can, the Air Force, as you know, is going through this reoptimization of great power [challenge]. I was just curious to hear your thoughts on that. Obviously you've had a lot of experience being the Chief of Staff, how hard are those changes going to be?

General Brown: I was just sitting down with Secretary Kendall recently to talk about, I was here at the beginning of the movie when he started the thought process for this reoptimization. Here's what I told him, what we talked about is change is hard. You've got to break folks out of the inertia of where we are. I felt that my three years as the Air Force Chief of Staff was to help us break out of the inertia, to acknowledge the fact that we needed to change. And then he was able to come in and do these other parts to move it to the next level.

I think the other part was having General Allvin, who was my Vice for three years, now become the Air Force Chief, and he heard him talk about follow through. It is following through on the change.

So any type of change is going to be, you're going to see some friction points but I think those friction points are good because those friction points actually help us to do a deeper analysis, take some hard looks in certain areas. Open your eyes to what the potential risks are.

I've also believed that when I get information like that it may not change my decision, but it opens my eyes a little bit wider to the risk and how I might mitigate that risk or the concerns of the force, or whether it's Congress or the Joint Force. But I think it's the right thing to do.

One of the areas that I've found and one of the things I was trying to work as the Air Force Chief is we are very stovepiped by capability. What I really wanted to tell our major command

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commanders, I don't want you doing what's good for your part of the Air Force, you be doing what's good for the entire Air Force. And this is the part of being able to step back and take a broader look and drive some changes that are going to increase our overall capability.

And there's some give and take there. I often said if I walked away and one side was really happy and the other side was really upset we're probably going to do it right. Everybody's got to give a little which means everybody's going to be a little bit upset because of driving change, and that to me is an indication of progress as well.

Moderator: A quick historic footnote. When General Shinseki was Army Chief during transformation and struggling, he said change is hard, irrelevancy is worse.

General Brown: Yes, that's so true.

Moderator: Next is Rio Kiyomiya of Asahi Shimbun.

DWG: Given the growing rift with China in the Indo-Pacific region are you hopeful that there will be a new [era] of change within Japan? Do you [repair] US [warships] in the Japanese private [inaudible]? And if it's [obstacle] how do you see [inaudible]?

General Brown: I'll kind of leave that to the Department of Navy to kind of work through, but I do believe more broadly that many of our allies and partners have great capability and capacity. Shipbuilding in Japan, and ship repair -- we do some of our repair work for some of our major ships there as well. I think those are opportunities where we can work more closely together. So it's not what we only do in the military but it's also in this case in our industrial base. That's something I believe in that we should pursue, that we continue to pursue across the board and how we work closely with our allies and partners on capability and ship, our ship building and ship repair is one of those opportunities potentially.

Moderator: That's the full list of advance questions. The first hand I saw from the floor, please.

DWG: Felicia Schwartz with the FT. Nice to see you.

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First, do you think it's tactically -- I think there's 1.3 million civilians in Rafah. Most of them are people who have fled there from the warfare in Gaza. Do you think it's tactically possible to move all or most of them? And if not, do you think you can find middle ground with Israel about what would be acceptable there?

General Brown: Moving that size of a population is going to take time, and that's, as we talk to Israelis, we've talked to them about taking the time they need in order to move the population out of harm's way. That's something we've talked to them in the previous, throughout the event since October 7th and we'll continue to address that with them to encourage them to the best of their ability to take into account for the civilian population and move them out of harm's way.

DWG: One more, if I may. Wednesday was the deadliest day of fighting across the Lebanese border since October 7th. How likely do you think it is that Hezbollah and Lebanon will go into broader conflict?

General Brown: Again, this is another area that we talk to them about as well. The fact that not to have a northern front that they have to deal with as they're also dealing with Gaza, but also what that does to the rest of the region as well. There are various diplomatic efforts at the same time as you're seeing this kind of back and forth at the same time.

I think with any one of these, there's always the risk of some miscalculation that actually sparks things much more broadly and that's the part that we continue to talk to the Israelis about as well. I know we're talking to our Special Envoy who's going back and forth. I've talked to a number of the Chiefs of Defense who are part of the UNIFIL. I've also talked to the Lebanese Chief of Defense as well, all about the things we can do to help bring down the temperature and some of the back and forth so it doesn't spark into something else.

DWG: How high would you rate the [inaudible]?

General Brown: Since October 7th it's a bit higher because there's a bit more back and forth than there was before October 7th.

Moderator: We're pushing the five minute mark. I promised the

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Chairman the few minutes left, but John Ismay of the Times, if you have a quick one.

DWG: General, we've mentioned three conflict areas -- Ukraine-Russia, Gaza, and then the Chinese [inaudible] in the Philippines, in the South China Sea. So you have an interesting opportunity at this point in time to look at other people's wars and what's succeeding and what's not. If we take questions of hardware, lessons learned, things that you're drawing from that, what are some of the most important conceptual lessons that you are telling your uniformed force that they need to now start doing because of what you're seeing from what's going on in the world? Sort of thinking not from the question of buy this missile or this tank, hardware, but conceptual operations.

General Brown: Conceptually, there's several things. First, the value of a strong non-commissioned officer corps. One of the areas I'm focused on is Joint Force development, and part of that development is how we do our professional military education for our Joint Force. That includes our NCO Corps. So filling out that force, that's something particularly withy Ukraine versus Russia, they have a fairly strong NCO Corps compared to what Russia has, which is why they've been able to do what they've able to do vis-à-vis the Russians.

The other is innovation, but being able to scale innovation. It's great to have innovation, to be able to be innovative, but can you scale it and put capability into the hands of our warfighter? And sometimes it doesn't need to be a highly expensive piece of capability. You think about the first person drones that are being used in Ukraine by both sides, but how quickly they're able to be able to do this.

Also think about the warning systems they use. [Acoustic] warning system to help characterize the various one-way UAVs and missile attacks so they can actually use mobile fire teams and 50 cal's versus using a Patriot because they're using this technology actually physically recognize what's coming at them.

It's very simple things which means you don't have to have a high-end capability that's very expensive. There's probably lower-end capabilities which have more capacity.

DWG: At the COCOM level, how are you directing -- you mentioned what if you don't get any more of this capability or that. But

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what do you tell the COCOMs that they need to start doing because of what you're seeing elsewhere?

General Brown: We have a Strategic Seminar series twice a year. We're building out towards a tabletop exercise. What I'm doing with this is to lay out scenarios and drive conversation. We just had a Tank on this recently where I lay out a scenario and then we start having talks about not just what's happening in one AOR, but more broadly, and if these things occur, how are we going to respond?

DWG: With a bunch of four stars in the room?

General Brown: Oh, yes. So it's all the Joint Chiefs and all the combatant commands. The last one we just did was on VTC. Combatant commands on the VTC and the Joint Chiefs in the room. When we get together here in a couple of months, we'll all be in person and we'll be together for a day.

The intent here is actually how do we start talking about these very complex issues -- if there's a major conflict we've got to be able to come together as a joint team and fight. I want to make sure that we're thinking through that as a joint team which means there is give and take between combatant commands, and making sure we have a ready force as we work with the Joint Chiefs and the services. All those factor into having these conversations.

Then you basically go -- we have what we say sometimes is the standard answer for how we would do this. Okay, what if you don't get that? Could you be more creative with a different option, with a different capability, with a different part of the force? Or if our allies and partners right now don't have that capability and capacity, what are we doing to get them there so they have it a year from now, two years from now, three years from now? You can't just sit back and go it's really hard. Well, yeah. It is really hard but we've got to start that process now to increase our overall capability.

In the past five and a half years I've watched just -- from July 2018 when I went to PACAF, the focus on the PRC and the threat from the PRC is much higher in the region and here in this country. Those are the kinds of things that, we may not have five years on some of these and we've got to be really thinking hard about this because -- I think about my responsibility as

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the Chairman to provide advice. I want to make sure that we've done a bit of our homework and analysis so I can provide the best advice possible, as many options as possible to the President.

Moderator: Mr. Chairman, thank you for a thoughtful and thought-provoking discussion. Thank you for your time. The last few minutes are yours, sir, for any final comments.

General Brown: Thank you for the opportunity to spend a little time with you today. These are I think valuable for a couple of reasons. One, you challenge me because you get me to think through what it is we're doing, but also how we communicate. I think the most important thing we need to do is communicate not only to the American public what we're doing, but also communicate to our allies and partners what we're doing, but just as importantly, to our adversaries. Personally and professionally, you're not playing for second place. I'm in to win. I want to make sure we're doing everything possible to make sure if called upon to do so we win.

Thank you, sir.

Moderator: 2:30 on the button. Thank you so much.

General Brown: Thank you.

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