JOHN HAMRE: Good morning. Glad to have you all here. It’s a nice way to start a Friday. And I always think every Friday is good. I always look forward to Friday mornings, especially this one, because it’s a real opportunity to have Jim Mattis with us, someone who’s been a mentor and a friend for so long. And I’m delighted he’s here.

First of all, welcome to all of you. When we have outside event – when we have events with people who are guests, we always start with a little safety announcement. I’m your responsible safety officer. I’m going to take care of you if there’s ever a problem. There’s not going to be anything. But if there is, please follow my instructions.

The exit is going to be – when you go to the back, take a left, because it will take us around and we’ll go right out to the street. And if there’s a problem out in the front, we’re going to go to the back. We’ll go over to the National Geographic and rendezvous over there. If the problem is in the back, we’ll go over front. We’ll go to St. Matthew’s, and Rudy deLeon will lead us in prayer. (Laughter.) We’ll be just fine. We’ll get through everything just, just, just fine.

So let me just say this is the second in a series that we’ve been hosting on trying to understand the new geometry, power geometry, in the Gulf. And the – you know, the nuclear agreement has changed the landscape, and we’re trying to understand what that means. We had Ambassador Otaiba here for the first session. I’m delighted that Jim Mattis is here in the second session.

On our third session, we’re going to have Lisa Anderson, who is the former president of American University in Cairo and is currently the dean of Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs. And so we’ll get the announcement out to you when that happens, and I hope you all will join us for that as well.

You know, you’re all here because you know Jim Mattis. So for me to take time to introduce Jim Mattis would be wasting your time and keeping you from hearing him; probably one of the most remarkable officers I’ve ever had the privilege of working with. He was the executive secretary at the time when I was the comptroller. And people don’t know, but the executive secretary, that’s the lymphatic system, you know, that parallels the circulatory system in the Pentagon.

It’s hugely underappreciated and really is that glue that holds us together so us civilians don’t look as dumb as we are when we have to get together. And Jim was the architect and the master of keeping the executive secretary working, both for Secretary Perry and for Secretary Cohen. And we got to meet at that stage, and then we’ve had many opportunities since then; so just delighted and honored that he’s here.

He’s on his way to the Gulf, and so he gave us the privilege of stopping off just for a little bit of time to talk with us to try to understand what is going on. I must say it feels very jittery to me to have kind of a certain – we’ve got this new kind of parallelism between Iran and Syria – Iran and Saudi Arabia – I mean, longstanding allies that are all of a sudden being put side by side with countries that have been opponents for quite a while. This is a very curious time. And I think we’re going to need to listen carefully to a man as wise as Jim Mattis to understand how should we be thinking about this.

So could I ask you, with your applause, say thank you to Jim Mattis for him coming to be with us today. (Applause.)
GENERAL (RET.) JAMES N. MATTIS: Thanks very much for – thank you, Dr. Hamre.

And to be here today with you ladies and gentlemen, with two deputies, former deputy secretaries of defense, in the room obviously can be a little bit intimidating, except Marines were taught to be intimidated by nothing. So tally ho. We’ll go through this.

Thank you. OK. Rebecca’s in charge here, as you all just noticed.

But we’re talking about the Mideast at an inflection point. And I would just point out right now that among the many challenges the Mideast faces, I think Iran is actually foremost. And yet, at the same time, it appears here in Washington that we’ve forgotten how to keep certain issues foremost.

You remember a few months ago you couldn’t pick up the newspaper without Iran in big letters above the fold. And today it’s like it just disappeared off the headlines. And you have to wonder how that happens. And I think that it’s important – I come from Hoover on the West Coast. Here we have CSIS; two think tanks that are quite capable of keeping focused on issues and coming up with good policy recommendations.

We only pray, the rest of us outside this town, that someone good is listening here to the good recommendations that come out of here routinely. I’m copying down things that CSIS puts out and finding a lot of value in my own thinking, shifting my own thinking. CSIS doesn’t just make assertions. It also includes discussions where you actually come out with something that is perhaps a little better each time you go through a cycle.

I want to speak to the challenge of Iran. And I’m going to put right up front what I hope to convince you of here today, if you need to be convinced of it. The Iranian regime, in my mind, is the single most enduring threat to stability and peace in the Middle East. For all of ISIS and AQI’s – AQ – al-Qaida’s mention everywhere right now, they’re an immediate threat. They’re serious. Certainly Assad’s Syria and what it’s spewing out is a very serious threat. The Palestine-Israel issue continues to bubble. But nothing, I believe, is as serious in the long-term enduring ramifications in terms of stability and prosperity and some hope for a better future for the young people out there than Iran.

Just a quick recall. Let’s go back to 1979, and the Khomeini revolution comes in and installs a militant Islamist regime. And the slogan “Death to America” is basically their call sign, as we would put it in the military. The takeover of our embassy; they hold the diplomats hostage for over a year. And somewhere it’s argued by different folks, with varying levels of, I would say, knowledge, that somewhere between ’79 and ’83, Iran declares war on the United States, for all intents and purposes. It becomes very obvious in 1983 when they blow up the embassy in Beirut. They attack the French paratrooper barracks and the Marine peacekeeper barracks there, killing hundreds. And it continues on.

In 1984, during President Reagan’s administration, Secretary of State George Shultz declares Iran a state sponsor of terrorism. And it’s interesting, without going through all the data that supports that since, that in 2012 the current administration’s State Department notes that Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran have achieved a level – a tempo of operations not seen since the 1990s. That’s the current administration’s State Department assessment of Iran’s support of terrorism, first established in our government in 1984 as a matter of fact.

You fast-forward now. Last July, 2015, in Vienna, China, France, Germany, the Russian Federation, United Kingdom and the United States rolled out the JCPOA, or the Joint Comprehensive
Plan of Action, otherwise known as the Iran agreement. And what I want to just talk about for a few minutes here is the purpose of that agreement. I want to characterize Iranian behavior since it went into effect and talk just a little about why we entered into it and about the way ahead.

The purpose of the agreement, I think, is pretty well understood, although at times I felt I could have made a better argument for it than the current administration was making. It goes back to 2002, when the U.S. administration determined that Iran’s nuclear-weapons program, not nuclear program – for all their denial and deceit, it’s a nuclear-weapons program – they decided back in the Bush administration that that program took precedence when they recognized the chances were increasing that Iran could actually develop a nuclear weapon.

The strategic goal then is quite simple. It’s how to make the world safer by preventing, delaying, that program. And starting in 2010, to jump forward again, Secretary of State Clinton orchestrated broad international economic pressure on Iran. And the goal was, to put it very bluntly, to force Iran to come to the negotiating table and to come under an internationally supervised non-military nuclear program.

In 2013, President Rouhani was elected; supposedly a moderate, I read in some circles. I’m hard pressed to use that word because I think it lacks definition when you talk about people approved to run for office by the supreme leader in Iran.

Basically, his government, though, Rouhani’s government, negotiated the interim nuclear agreement, and the JCPOA is the result. And formal implementation actually began in mid-January of this year. For example, they removed the enriched uranium, sent it out of country. We all know that. But at the same time, besides what Iran was doing, the United Nations rescinded seven prior United Nations Security Council resolutions that imposed economic sanctions.

Now, supposedly their removal was subject to immediate reimposition in the event of, and I quote here, “significant non-performance by Iran,” unquote. So the relief was given on those UNSCRs based on a pause in one program. But the money they were given could go into a number of other programs. And now we find why, in the region, from Tel Aviv to Riyadh to Abu Dhabi, we have a difference of opinion between the Arab and Israeli view of this agreement and the American view, because Iran has five military threats. One is the latent threat of the nuclear-weapons program. Another one is the counter-maritime program. You all remember we’re going to put mines in the water. We have coastal defense cruise missiles. We’ll board ships and impound them, that sort of thing.

The next is the ballistic-missile threat, which they’ve been very obvious about what they’re doing at this time in improving their ballistic-missile capability.

There’s the cyber threat, which if we’d talked three, four, five years ago, I’d have said it’s not a big threat. Today I will just tell you I would liken it to children juggling light bulbs filled with nitroglycerine. One of these times they’re going to do something really serious and force a lot of foreign leaders to have to take it into account.

Then there’s one that we call QMSP – and only the military could come up with something like that, OK – Quds Force, Jerusalem Force; in other words, Mois, the surrogates and proxies. You know them as Lebanese Hezbollah and others. Further, our country’s view of Iran was summed up in State Department’s 2012 report that I just mentioned to you earlier, that they’ve actually increased the tempo
of operations. So when we relieved them of their U.N. Security Council resolutions, economic sanctions, in a number of areas that money was not going to stop going to their nuclear-weapons program. They made very clear they would continue their foreign policy.

So the American administration’s argument was an Iranian nuke was such a dangerous game changer that we had to subordinate everything else to delaying the nuclear program. They have not changed the way they go about business on their side – the Israeli tourists who were murdered in Bulgaria here some years ago; the attempt to kill Ambassador Adel less than two miles from where we’re sitting right now on a Saturday night in Georgetown. And, by the way, they would have pulled it off but for one fundamental mistake. They made one mistake. And so they messed it up.

So basically, how do we delay it? It came down to two options. There was the military option; probably could have delayed it for a year or two before we would have to take more military action. Or there was the diplomatic option, where they were aiming to delay it much longer. We’re talking about a decade or more.

Without the pause, and despite Iran’s denial and deception, it was clear that Iran could get a weapon. This was what our intelligence agencies believed. And that would jeopardize our security interests. It would risk the global economic blackmail if they were to interrupt the oil lines of communication there in the Gulf. And it would endanger the survival of allies, both Israeli and Arab partners. So our objective was that we had to stop this.

The previous UNSCR’s rescinded also were stated in there that they couldn’t test ballistic missiles in the past, OK. Under the new wording, and a late concession in the negotiation for the Iran agreement, what we said was they could not test ballistic missiles developed expressly – designed expressly to carry nuclear weapons. Quite simple; they could say they’re not designed to carry a nuclear weapon, so we can now test them. So we were caught on that one.

Those ballistic-missile tests that occurred some time ago were characteristic of Iran’s response to the agreement. Iran has shut down its plutonium reactor. I think they poured cement in the core. They did send out its enriched uranium, 25,000 pounds. But it remains the single most belligerent actor in the Middle East. And as the commander in CENTCOM, with countries like Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, every morning I woke up and the first three questions I had were – had to do with Iran and Iran and Iran.

Their consistent behavior since 1979 through today shows no sign of changing. In fact, I think the State Department has characterized it well when they said they have actually picked up their tempo of operations, the ballistic-missile test being one. They have also conducted cyberattacks on the United States, resulting in seven U.S. indictments. They have doubled down on support to Assad’s murderous regime. And they are very much aware – they are keenly aware that if Assad falls, that’s the biggest strategic setback in 30 years for the mullahs there in Tehran.

They’ve increased the flow of arms, ladies and gentlemen, into Saudi Arabia, explosives into Bahrain, and arms into Yemen. In fact, in the last three months – February, March and April – the French Navy, the Australian Navy, and the U.S. Navy have all seized arms shipments each month. And if anyone’s ever flown over that area in the world and you see the hundreds of vessels on any given day at sea carrying commerce, smugglers – smuggling is legitimate out in that part of the world, as you know – and others going on, the idea that we’re catching all the arms shipments, that’s a flight
of fantasy. We certainly are not catching them all, and there’s nobody in the intelligence services or the navies, I think, that would say so.

The Republican Guard commander has openly boasted of Tehran’s control over four capitals: Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, and Sanaa. And I think he went “oops” on Sanaa because then Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates led the GCC forces in there, and clearly that has not gone according to plan. Hopefully, the U.N.-brokered negotiations in Kuwait that started today will put an end to that, but also ensure that Iran is kept out of there and the Bab al-Mandab – the chokepoint coming into the Red Sea.

Bahrain and Jordan have been specifically targeted, publicly targeted by the Quds Force commander, our old friend Soleimani, who’s openly calling for the annexation of Bahrain. And by the way, Bahrain, to many in Iran, is not just the island, it’s also the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. A Republican Guard general proposes erasing Israel off the map. Sounds familiar. It is, because it’s what they’ve been saying for a good many decades. And the supreme leader, I think, summed it up very well when he said those who say that the future lies in negotiation, not in missiles, are either ignorant or traitors. That is the supreme leader. I think we should take him at his word. That’s what he believes.

And when President Obama – trying to keep this effort alive, when President Obama characterized Iran regime’s responses to the JCPOA as respecting the letter but violating the spirit of the agreement, the chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces, General Firouzabadi, contemptuously said, “We studied the details of the nuclear agreement,” quote, “and we don’t have any information about its spirit.” That’s about as an abrupt a slap in the face to any effort on our side to try to be fair brokers on this as you could come up with. And I would say – I can go on, by the way. I don’t want to bore you here. But that ends, I think for now, any moderate Iranian response.

So where is the U.S. right now? The U.S. is in a strategy-free mode. Washington is confused, I believe, and not invested in strategy. We are shifting our focus from one region or subregion to another. Remember the pivot to the Pacific that left our friends in the Middle East and Europe very concerned? That kind of word is seldom used in strategy. It might make good operational thinking, but I don’t think it’s a good idea on a strategic level for a country with worldwide responsibilities.

You remember we were very concerned about Crimea? We’re not concerned about it anymore. Now it’s the eastern Donets basin in Eastern Ukraine. We have been attacking ISIS in Iraq a little bit, then we shifted to Syria, then we’re – a gradual escalation right now. The Senkaku Islands, then it was the Spratly Islands, then the Paracels. I’m not trying to get off-track here, but my point is that we’ve got to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time, and it appears that we are going with a hit-and-miss approach that has us constantly shooting behind the duck.

So the JCPOA, coming back to the arms agreement, that’s all it was. It was designed to increase stability and decrease proliferation to improve our global standing in the process. But the outcome is an increase in a regional arms race. Saudi Arabia just recently passed Russia as the third-largest spender on military weapons in the world. Our secretary of defense was sent out – some called it the secretary of reassurance – right after the agreement was signed to the Israeli and Arab capitals in order to make certain they knew that we were willing to sell them more weapons because we recognized the increased danger, as the money that had been released by the UNSCRs and the lack of economic sanctions, that money was now going to go in maybe not to one program – at least not for a
year or two, the nuclear one – but there was nothing to indicate that the money was not going to continue to flow to the other threats.

The impression in the region was that the U.S. was withdrawing. The best case – I was just out in the region a couple weeks ago. I head back over tomorrow. The best case, ladies and gentlemen, in the minds of many of the people in the region is that the U.S. is simply indifferent to the challenge of dealing with Iran if you live next door to it. The worst case is, in some people’s minds, that we have made actually common cause with Iran, Russia and Assad. And that you have to keep beating down, but in a region that’s rife with conspiracy it is something that has to be addressed, and it’s best addressed right up front: that’s not our intent.

ISIS right now – by the way, I consider ISIS nothing more than an excuse for Iran to continue its mischief. Iran is not an enemy of ISIS. They have a lot to gain from the turmoil in the region that ISIS creates. And I would just point out one question for you to look into: What is the one country in the Middle East that has not been attacked by ISIS? One, and it’s Iran. Now, there’s got – that is more than just happenstance, I’m sure.

I think, too, that with the U.S. Congress, there was a sense in the U.S. – in what the U.S. was doing where the Congress was pretty much absent. For all of their saying they didn’t like the agreement and taking steps to demonstrate that, they have done nothing to strengthen any standby economic sanctions that, should Iran cheat, that we could put in place. They’ve not touched that, maybe because they don’t believe Europe would be with us. But that should not prevent the Congress from passing a spirit of the Congress saying here’s where we stand. They have not increased the intelligence budget to collect on Iran, something which I think is necessary for us to do. And we have not seen any authorization for the use of military force against ISIS, which would again demonstrate American stability and focus on the region. If they don’t like the one that the president sent them, there’s nothing wrong with that; they can turn around and pass an AUMF that they believe in their heart is the right sort of thing to do and show the unity of the Congress. In fact, they appear to be more willing to sit outside and criticize the president than to put themselves on the line and say here’s where we stand.

The bottom line on the American situation, though, I think is quite clear: that the next president is going to inherit a mess. That’s probably the most diplomatic word you can use for it.

So you got to ask, why would the U.S. take such a gamble with this agreement? Number one, the president could be proven right. The mullahs may want it both ways, and they may find it doesn’t work that way. What do I mean by both ways? If you look at the control North Korea has over their people, they’d like to be North Korea. If you look at, like, the economic vitality the South has, that could help keep the mullahs in power, they want it that way. There is a built-in contradiction there of opening your country to the world and at the same time trying to keep close control that the mullahs are trying to maintain, and so they may lose that. And over the mid-term to longer term, then you could see Iran moving more into the actions of a responsible nation and not just a revolutionary cause as is written into their constitution.

But as revealed in Jeff Goldberg’s recent interview, by his own admission President Obama is a very different sort of president. He sees his actions in a very different light. And certainly some people in the administration have a remarkable ability to absolve themselves of responsibility for anything. I would just say that for a sitting U.S. president to see our allies as freeloaders is nuts.
And you know, what is happening – I was telling Dr. Hamre upstairs I was working out one morning. I was on my machine, and I saw this Goldberg article come across and I saw it was long, so I hit my print button. Went back and got on the machine, was working out a little bit, went back and I was going through my emails, and I pulled the stuff off the printer, and I started reading just real – you know, the kind of scan you do before you do something with a highlighter and all. And at first I thought, doggone it, there’s my administrative incompetence that was demonstrated so clearly to Secretary Perry and Secretary Cohen long ago: I somehow got something that Trump said stuck inside something that President Obama said. And I thought, how did I do that? And I went back through it. And it wasn’t Trump; it was the president saying that our allies were free riders and that sort of thing.

And I would just tell you that I’m going to be surprised if Prime Minister Cameron would ever speak to our president again, but I would also say I’m going to be surprised if President Obama is proven right in his trying to make this effort work with a regime that’s holding hostage the Iranian people. And I think that somehow people – we all live on hope. All men and women, we all hope for something better tomorrow, better for our children. But I think that thinking or hoping that Iran is on the cusp of becoming a modern, responsible nation is simply a bridge too far. And if nothing else, we need to have an insurance policy here.

But why would we sign up? Another reason would be, maybe it’s the best we could get. I was in a meeting late one night in – with one of our partners in the Gulf. And when it was done, he asked for the staffs to leave. And he and I sitting alone. And he said to me – ladies and gentlemen, he said: It must be a very long table. And I’m looking at him, wondering what he’s talking about here. He said, well, General, I keep hearing that the military option is on the table. This is a couple years before the agreement. And he said, it must be a very long table, because I was squinting and I couldn’t see it on the table. So I got my binoculars out. So it must be a very long table, because I cannot see the military option.

He was joshing me. And I knew him well enough for many, many years in the region that we could – we could be that open with one another. But the bottom line is, I think from Washington to Brussels, from London to Tehran, from Abu Dhabi to Tel Aviv, the idea that the U.S. would go into one more fight in the Middle East at this point in time was probably just not in the cards. And so maybe just if we were in that kind of a situation, maybe this agreement was the best we could come up with.

A third possible reason is maybe the folks in the American administration think that the moderates can win. I think you have to be careful on that. It goes back to whether or not the economic self-interest can grow strong enough. But remember, at the same time, the security forces are going to be getting stronger as well, with the infusion of money. And they have proven themselves quite capable, the coercive forces, of keeping the people in line there using beatings, imprisonment, rape, and other things that we have witnessed them using here in the recent past.

And I think too that the time it would take for the economic policies to take root and to turn over kind of a new mood in Tehran amongst the leaders may take quite some time. So, again, why do we need an insurance policy to get through this period? I think that the imperfect, yet intrusive, U.N. IAEA inspection regime – it’s not perfect, but it is intrusive. And I’ve read the agreement twice. It’s 156-pages long, 159, something like that. But 30-some pages of it are just names of people who were pulled off that sanctions list, not all that intimidating actually.
But if you read through that, it is very clearly drawn up with the expectation that Iran will cheat. I mean, when you read this, that’s the sense you get from the other nations that forced those issues. So if nothing else, we’ll have better targeting data should it come to a fight at some point in the future. But I think that in terms of strengthening America’s global standing among European and Mideastern nations alike, the sense is that America becomes somewhat irrelevant in the Middle East, and we certainly have the least influence in 40 years.

So on a way ahead, we’re just going to have to recognize that we have an imperfect arms control agreement. Second, that what we achieved was a nuclear pause, not a nuclear halt. We’re going to have to plan for the worst. The old military adage of hope for the best but plan for the worst comes to bear. And in light of the other three – other four threats I mentioned, and a 12-year delay of the nuclear program, each is going to have to be addressed in action and planning.

In other words, if we’re going to have to do something about missile defense. We’re going to have to do something about cyber monitoring that costs ARAMCO millions of dollars – tens of millions of dollars, maybe hundreds of millions of dollars. We’re going to have to do something about their maritime efforts. And the U.S. 5th Fleet is critical to that. And we’re certainly going to have to counter the terrorist activities. We do have some time, I think to get our act together. I think Iran has a lot to gain for the next 18 months to two years of playing it by the rules and not taking too many chances, if any significant chances, as they try to get the economic benefits.

At one point, I thought Secretary of Treasury Lew was pretty firm that there would be no access to the American financial institution. And now I hear that’s not as firm, perhaps. And so I don’t know where that stands. Obviously that would have a big impact on slowing Iran’s benefitting economically if we were to hold the line on that. There is nothing, by the way – I reread it – there is nothing in the agreement forcing us to do that. That, again, is the spirit of the agreement. But if they’re unwilling to live up to the spirit of the agreement and go by the letter, I think we should take some counsel from that and be slow to give something for nothing based on an alleged spirit that we cannot see operant from Tehran.

I think too that we’re going to have to be very careful about redlines in the Middle East. If we give one in the future, we’re going to have to make good on it. So let’s be careful what we’re going to do, and ensure that we keep Israel in its overmatched situation, that in the region we work with our partners in the GCC whether it be on ballistic missile defense integration which Secretary Clinton tried very hard to get initiated some years ago, certainly to work on the – on the other efforts. And the Navy should be maintained at a very robust strength in that region because navies can be very stabilizing in what they’re doing. And they carry fewer of the – of the penalties of having ground forces stationed out there, which is challenging in itself.

We’re going to have to work better with our allies too. We can’t have the leaders of our partners out there picking up newspapers and reading about what it is that we’ve been doing diplomatically in private talks with their adversaries, and actually our adversaries as well. We would never do that if it was in Europe. I don’t think we would do that with Japan or South Korea when dealing with North Korea. And yet, our partners out in the Middle East too often have had to pick up the newspaper to find out we’ve just done something else that put them in their idea – their mind in a more difficult situation.

I think one point I want to make, though, is there’s no going back. Absent a real violation – I mean, a clear and present violation that was enough to stimulate the European to action as well – I
don’t think that we can – we can take advantage of some new president’s – Republican or Democrat – and say, well, we’re not going to live up to our word on this agreement. I believe we would be alone if we did, and unilateral economic sanctions from us would not have anywhere near the impact of an allied approach to this.

I think too we’re going to have to hold at risk the nuclear program in the future, in other words make plans now of what we do if in fact they restart it and, again, go back to Congress, saying we need an oversight committee. It should have people from the Intelligence Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee, and the Armed Service Committee together. And it should be something that maintains oversight of this agreement and keeps the issue high and under the oversight of the legislative branch to make certain that the executive branch is, in fact, maintaining the priority it deserves.

And I think too we have to broaden and deepen our links to the anti-Iran spy agencies in the region with all of our friends, and make certain we’re all working together to keep an eye on what it’s up to. A cyber monitoring center I think could catch Iran red handed because, again, they’re not that good at it. And we can catch them when they – when they try to mess around in the cyber arena. We’ve caught them before.

I think too Radio Farsi has to be dusted off and we need to go back at it. The Iranian people need to know right up front every day, we have no argument with you. Our concern is with the mullahs and this revolutionary cause that does not have your best interest in place. If you go back to Radio Free Europe and the Cold War, it was very, very effective. And it’s as if we don’t know how to take our own side in the fight on radio, TV, Twitter, Facebook, and others right now.

I think in our future talks with Iran, they should be like our talks with the USSR before Gorbachev. In other words, keep our allies fully informed, recognize Iran as not a nation-state rather it’s a revolutionary cause devoted to mayhem, and also make certain that we don’t – we don’t end up with real high expectations from any talks with Iran. Just keep it a little modest there.

It’s going to be a – the Middle East, the future is going to be ghastly. It is not going to be pleasant for any of us. And we’re going to have to return to a strategic view, such as we had years ago, because we know that vacuums left in the Middle East seem to be filled by either terrorists, or by Iran or their surrogates, or by Russia. Recognize that the violent terrorists, two different brands. The Sunni is the al-Qaida, OK. That’s one. That’s clear and present. We’ve hit them from the FATA in Afghanistan, Pakistan, to where the French are treating them roughly down in Mali. And there’s a lot of effort focused on them. But so far to date, the Iranian brands have basically been left untouched by our counterterrorism efforts.

So in the future, just recognize that in order to restore deterrence, we’re going to have to show capability, capacity, and resolve. Recognize this is an international arms control agreement and not a very good one – although there are some advantages. Recognize the advantages as well. But it’s not a friendship treaty. And some people have tried to make it into a friendship treaty to say it’s worthless. Well, as a friendship treaty it would be worthless. But it’s an arms control agreement that fell short of a lot of hopes. But it’s not completely without some merit.

We have allies out there. We have allies who want to rally to our side. I don’t forget sitting with the king of Jordan one day. We were working on his refugee problem with the Syrian refugees. And I’ve seen refugees all around the world, from Southeast Asia to Africa to the Dalmatian coast. I’ve never seen – I’ve been up in the refugee camps. I’ve never seen refugees as traumatized as those
coming out of Syria. I was told by our ambassador to work with the king on what we could do to help in those camps, reduce the chance of cholera and that sort of stuff. I’d known him for a long time.

We were talking, just the two of us. We got done. And I asked him: I said, what’s it like to be a king? You know, I’ve never been a king. You know, just kind of interested in it. Don’t draw anything from that, by the way. And he said, well, you know, I’m working on this, I’m working on that. And he said, by the way, I hear the French and British had to pull out of Afghanistan. Yes, your majesty. I said they had domestic political concerns. They couldn’t sustain the campaign. He said, well, rest assured, General, there will be a Jordanian soldier in Afghanistan until the last American soldier comes home.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, you cannot buy allies like that. You cannot buy them. And if we’re going to want allies to stand by us in our time of trouble, then we’re going to have to stand by them when they face trouble as well. And when Iran says, Jordan, you’re next, we should take them at their word. And don’t patronize Iran and say, they don’t really mean that. Yes, in fact, they do mean what they say. My next stop, by the way, that trip was the country that we in Central Command call little Sparta because they stand by us through thick and thin – Desert Shield, Somalia, Dalmatian coast, Bosnia. They’ve always been there, the United Arab Emirates.

I was talking to the crown prince. And he said, I understand the French and British are pulling out. What are you going to do? And I said, well, I’m going to have to go back to the Americans and ask for people to backfill. We’ve got to – you know, we’re deep in the fight right now. And he said, well – he said, to reduce your demand on the American forces, I’ll send six more fighters in. I’ll send another reinforced special forces company of 150 special forces, well-trained, fully kitted out, ready to go fight under your command. Again, ladies and gentlemen, you can’t find allies like that if you don’t stand by them in their difficulties.

So they may not be perfect. If we’re waiting for perfect allies, we’re going to be awfully alone in this world. But from what I’ve seen in our own country we’re not perfect ourselves. So let’s figure a way to work together. Let me stop there, and open time for questions here.

JON B. ALTERMAN: Thank you. (Applause.)

General Mattis, thank you very much for that presentation. I’m Jon Alterman. I’m the senior vice president, the Brzezinski chair in global security and geostrategy, and the director of the Middle East Program.

I have a few questions before we go to the audience, which is already champing at the bit. One question, you talked about Iran’s asymmetric threats in the region, it’s activities supporting terrorism, supporting hostile states. Was it a mistake to make a nuclear agreement and seem to take the focus off the other activities in the region because, as you know, many of our Gulf allies say the nuclear issue isn’t our issue. As a former foreign minister in the Gulf’s told me, if somebody already has a gun pointed at your head it doesn’t matter if they have a cannon pointed at your back. Was the whole approach, to put so much effort on the nuclear program and nonproliferation, a mistake for U.S. interests in the Middle East?

GEN. MATTIS: The short answer is, no, it was not a mistake. In this town, we seem to have forgotten the tremendous effort that went into nuclear nonproliferation in decades past. And to our – I’m sure it’s going to be to our regret, and especially to our children’s regret, we did not maintain that
focus. So I think in the case of Iran, it was not a mistake to engage on the nuclear issue, even if we were to give it primacy. That, I think, is debatable. But even there I wouldn’t say it’s a mistake.

The mistake would be to implement it in such a way that we appear to take our eye off the other balls. That’s the mistake. And that’s a choice. And that’s a choice we did not have to make. And so there’s a way to balance this in terms of creating more stability in the region. Unfortunately, we probably not have not executed in that manner yet. I mean, it’s still subject to a choice every day by our government.

MR. ALTERMAN: Bout eight years ago, a presidential candidate named Hillary Clinton suggested extending a nuclear umbrella to GCC allies against Iran. Do you think that’s something we should consider? Under what circumstances – if so, under what circumstances should we pursue it?

GEN. MATTIS: Yeah. You know, it’s interesting. I work with a gentleman by the name of George Shultz out at Hoover. And he calls us – he walks in every morning that we’re out there and he calls us younger officers in. And only at Hoover would I be one of the younger officers. And he talks about what it was like coming home from World War II as a Marine in the Pacific, and that generation looking around and 50, 60, 70 million dead, economic privation all over the world. And the greatest generation is called that for a reason.

They say: We’re part of this world, whether we like it or not. No more going back, pulling out on the League of Nations or something. They create the United Nations, so we can talk. They create Bretton Woods, so we don’t have economic conditions that are going to drive us into depression and war again. Three years after that terrible war against the Nazis and the fanatic Pacific war, the Marshall Plan is passed, and we are actually helping our former foes recover. I mean, could you do that today? I don’t know.

But most importantly, the United States makes what the Australian ambassador to Washington told me one time here a couple years ago, the single most self-sacrificial act in the history of the world. I’m trying to think, what is that? You have to look at it through a non-American’s eyes. He said: You could have turned your back on Europe after two world wars and said: We’re going with the Middle East and Asia. We’re going with South America. We’re done with you guys.

Instead, the American presidents – Truman, Eisenhower, Democrat and Republican – say – and the Congress, working together in a nonpartisan way – we are going to commit 100 million dead Americans and our nuclear war to keep Western Europe safe. Today, could we do that again over the Middle East? I don’t know that we have the political unity in our own country to stand up for something like that in the same way. So I’ll leave the answer to the question, Jon, to the audience.

MR. ALTERMAN: Along those lines, the number-one oil producer in the world now is the United States. And there are a number of people who say, well, that allows us to change the way we look at the world, the way we look at the Middle East. Do you think there’s anything about the way the U.S. looks to the world, the way the U.S. thinks about global security, is there anything that’s changed because our oil production has made us into a global oil superpower?

GEN. MATTIS: I would just give three imperatives for us to stay engaged in the Middle East. The first one is oil. We may not be tied to Mideast oil so much, but believe me from Washington to New York, from San Francisco to Miami, our economy is tied to the world. And if the world’s economy was to see the oil coming out of the Gulf disrupted, 40 percent of the globally traded oil of
this globally traded commodity, we would get a terrible impact not only on the world economy but it would immediately impact here at home.

So there’s an economic reason to stay engaged out there. There’s also a diplomatic reason. And that is, if we want these nations with us on so many other issues, we can’t ignore them when they’ve got serious issues. And a third would be security. Are we really so long from 9/11 that we’ve forgotten what it was like to look over at the Pentagon with smoke pouring out of it? And I’d suggest we’re not that far removed from it. No nation on its own can provide security in this world. No nation in a globalized world – actually ever, but certainly not today – can do this on its own.

So if we are going to have them stand by us, and we’re going to try and stop maniacs from attacking us again, like on 9/11, then we better be working with the folks in the region and look out for our own interests. Go beyond the moral to the strategic, again.

MR. ALTERMAN: All right. And there’s one last question before I go to the audience, so get your questions ready.

As you know, everybody in Washington is talking about budget constraints.

GEN. MATTIS: Yeah.

MR. ALTERMAN: Is there anything we’re doing in the Middle East now in the security field that you think we can afford not to do anymore? You’ve talked a lot about plussing up. You’ve talked about building relationships. Is there anything we can stop doing that we’re doing now?

GEN. MATTIS: You know, worth more than 10 battleships or five armored divisions is the sense of American political resolve, and I think the more resolution we show, the more unity we show with our allies, certainly we have to do some ourselves. Even a farmboy or farmgirl knows, if you want to pump water out of a water pump, you have to put some priming water in first to get an airlock to bring it up. The idea that we can tell others, here, you do all the fighting, and we’re going to sit back and be up above, we’ll give you intelligence, we’ll fly overhead with restrictive rules of engagement and all, and you do all the dirty work, probably isn’t going to work. So I think that we could probably get more from our allies instead of grudgingly or belatedly doing things that need to be done, but being more forthcoming on it and holding constant high-level discussions. Remember, any coalition against the kind of enemy we’re up against takes two pieces. It’s got a political piece and it’s got a military. The political is dominant. The military piece is subordinate, and hopefully, acting in accordance with that political agreement. And right now, I think lacking the kind of political coherence at the top, we’re having to do some things that we probably wouldn’t have to do if we could show more firmness and more conviction in what we’re doing. All the troops on the ground are – they’re just a front for what stands behind them. And without a unified Congress, a unified American position with our allies, that is a much weaker front than it would be with that sort of support.

MR. ALTERMAN: So is there a Syria – I mean, a way to apply that to our strategy in Syria right now?

GEN. MATTIS: Yes, I think get the political coalition put together up front and make clear where we stand on it.

MR. ALTERMAN: OK.
GEN. MATTIS: And that doesn’t mean 100,000 troops for 10 years are doing nothing. It means using strategy and figuring out how to go forward.

MR. ALTERMAN: Thank you. OK.

You, sir, on the right. Yeah, sir.

Q: Thank you very much. And thank you, General, for your remarks. I’m John Gizzi from Newsmax and Newsmax Television.

And I’ll – I guess I’ll point to the elephant in the room. General, you have been mentioned so often, very much like your fellow scholar soldier James Gavin was a generation ago, to run for president either as a Republican or as an independent. Have you given any thought to it, and how serious are the rumors about it?

GEN. MATTIS: No, I haven’t given any thought to it.

Q: How serious are the rumors?

GEN. MATTIS: I think people like you know that better than I do.

Thanks, Jon.


Q: Thank you very much, General Mattis. It’s the second time I listening to you. First I met you at Heritage. I am Dr. Nisar Chaudry with Pakistan American League.

There’s a lot of criticism inside USA, as well as there’s criticism about this nuclear deal, even inside Iraq – inside Iran. And could you tell us what was the compulsion or pressures on the parties which were negotiating, that they had to come up with a comprehensive deal with so many loopholes? And if this deal collapses, what happens next?

MR. ALTERMAN: If the deal collapses, what happens next?

GEN. MATTIS: I think if the deal were to collapse today, it would depend on whether or not the economic sanctions could be re instituted in a compelling manner. The amount of effort that the State Department put in to those many years ago was extraordinary. We’re now at a point where people are clamoring to get into the Iranian market. If you were unable to re impose the economic sanctions, then I think you would be basically on a road to perdition, because the lines of efforts inside Tehran are so contrary to the best interests of Israel and of the Arab states around it that it would lead to a collision. And how you would define the collision, whether it would be open war or a much higher level of terrorism, whether it would be economic blockades – I mean, as you know, Saudi Arabia has recently said that no ship that has made a port of call in its last three ports in Iran can carry any Saudi oil. So there are a number of things going on right now that might give us a little hint of what would be coming, but I think we’d be in uncharted territory at that point, with probably only bad things to happen.
MR. ALTERMAN: All the way in the back, next to the lights.

Q: Mohamed Elmenshawy with Alaraby Television.

Would you please tell us something about the military-to-military relations with Egypt? And do you recommend the resumption of the Bright Star military exercise?

MR. ALTERMAN: Relations with Egypt, and would you recommend the resumption of the Bright Star exercise.

GEN. MATTIS: Yeah, you know, Egypt is a very, very interesting case. One-third of the Arab peoples live there. It has been an ally. It broke with the Soviet Union. It has been an ally since. It has fought alongside us in Desert Storm. It has maintained the security of the Suez Canal, a vital waterway. You put all this together. And Israel has gone through very tough times, and they did have a democratically elected president, Morsi –

MR. ALTERMAN: Egypt.

GEN. MATTIS: Excuse me. Egypt had a democratically elected president, Morsi. He was basically thrown out, I believe, by a public impeachment, that the military then shouldered him aside, and then President el-Sisi came in. Obviously, we’re concerned about any political system has to have a counterweight, and whether or not there is a sufficient allowance for legitimate political dissent. But that said, right now the only way to support Egypt’s maturation as a country with civil society, with democracy, is to support President el-Sisi. We should have Bright Star reinstituted, perhaps not with tank battles but with counterterrorism-type training, that sort of thing. But I think that when a president comes out two years in a row at Al-Azhar University calling for a revolution and rhetoric in order to reduce the amount of negatives about the Muslim religion, I think it’s time for us to support him and take our own side in this. I’m a strong believer that Egypt is a critical nation in terms of the future for stability in the Middle East.

MR. ALTERMAN: Thank you. And on the aisle.

Q: General Mattis, I’m Colonel Mirogi (ph). I had the pleasure to serve under you as a command sergeant for the Office of Security Cooperation.

And I want to ask you a question, sir. Given what you mentioned about Iran and influence in four capitals, and given our engagement in Iraq, how do you see us walking the rope between supporting the Iraqi government with the significant Iranian influence in lieu of our fight against ISIS, sir?

GEN. MATTIS: Yeah, it’s a tough – it’s a very tough situation. When I was once complaining about my job, as I did routinely in the last job – matter of fact, I once – I was asked by the vice president jokingly, “You know why you got the job, Jim?” I said, “No, Mr. Vice President. I wondered.” He said, “Because we couldn’t find anybody else dumb enough to take it.” (Laughter.) So I was complaining about it one time, and a former prime minister in Europe said – he said, “Hey, Jim, if you can’t ride two horses in the circus, then get out of the Mideast circus.” You know, welcome to reality. The – one of my last visits to Iraq I heard the same message from a number of people in the government, in the Shia-led government, and it was help us avoid the suffocating embrace of Iran. So I think there is a way to work with Iraq where we do not decide to just cast Iraq off, because we’ve all
read about it enough, heard about it enough. It’s got enough complexity. Just be done with it. I think in this case what we’re doing right now in Iraq, while it may not be sufficient, is certainly on the right path.

MR. ALTERMAN: I saw a hand all the way on the aisle at the end. Yes, ma’am.

Q: Thank you. Leandra Bernstein, Sputnik International news.

A question about U.S. presence in the region. You seem to indicate that more of a naval presence would be – would be the way to go to reassure allies. I’d just like you to elaborate on that. And when you look at increasing a U.S. presence, whether at sea or on the ground, combined with more U.S. weapons going to allies in the region, where do you see that heading? What’s the – really, what’s the worst possible outcome?

GEN. MATTIS: Yeah, well, I – let me also at least address the best possible outcome, and I can do it with an example. Several years ago, I was reading again all the reports coming out of Tehran calling for mining the Gulf. Remember those days? We’re going to go put mines in the water. You all remember all of that word about we have coastal defense cruise missiles? We can board the ships? That was mostly about mining. And I’m flying back and I pick up the phone, and I called my fleet commander and I said, U.S. 5th Fleet, and I said I want you to put together an international anti-mine exercise – not an anti-Iran exercise.

So here’s where I want to point out why a maritime strategy is a way to actually stabilize an area, not bring it closer to crisis – if you have forward-deployed forces. If you don’t have those and you have to send them in there, that can be destabilizing. But we have the 5th Fleet out there. And I thought we’d get the usual suspects – you know, France, Britain, Italy, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, you know, something like this. In fact, the first year we ran it, we got 29 nations – 29 nations. They included nations like Estonia, Canada, Singapore, Japan, Djibouti. These are not all bellicose nations. Remember what I said earlier, that a coalition has two elements: political and military. Every one of those navies – as a matter of fact, I was even looking for Antarctica to see if I can get a penguin there, because I had said I got all the continents aligned here, you know? Basically, all those navies worked together under the command and the coordination of the only navy in the world that could have drawn all those nations together. And they all worked together practicing clearing mines from the Persian Gulf, Arab Gulf. The end result was that after a couple years, about a year later, they realized – I think in Tehran – they were actually creating an international coalition against them. How much have you heard in the last year, ma’am, about mining the waters out of Tehran?

Q: (Off mic.)

GEN. MATTIS: No, I haven’t either. And by the way, it’s gone up as high as 39 nations now involved in the annual international anti-mine exercise. I think there is a way – to answer your question, just use that example, and then you can apply it wherever, so long as what we’re doing is trying to stabilize the situation.

MR. ALTERMAN: I think we have time for one more question. Yes, sir. Right there. Yeah.

Q: Yeah, Mark Thompson, Time magazine. General, it’s been more than three months since Iran seized 10 of our sailors and held them overnight. A lot of Americans have forgotten. The Navy’s
report still is not finished. But the sailors came home safe. Iran of course has used it for propaganda purposes. So who won in that clash?

GEN. MATTIS: Well, I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t think it’s clear either way, and I think the question’s a valid one because out of such small incidents comes an image of either stability or instability, of compatibility, for – to be calling on, for example, our partners in the region to find a way to share the neighborhood with Iran when the United States State Department has declared Iran a state supporter of terrorism, I think it puts you in a very difficult position when an incident like this happens, to determine just where we stood at that moment and where we stand as a result of what came out of that moment. I think it would be just speculative on my part, but obviously, it was not something that I could just chalk up to a win on the United States’ side.

MR. ALTERMAN: Thank you very much. Please join me in thanking General Mattis and wishing him safe travel. (Applause.)

GEN. MATTIS: Thanks, John.

(END)