

After Soleimani: Crisis, Opportunity, and the Future of the Gulf

Event Transcript:

Keynote Address:

Great Power Competition in the Gulf

Featuring:

General Joseph L. Votel

February 24th, 2020

*This event was made possible by generous support
from the United Arab Emirates Embassy.*

CSIS | **CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES** | **MIDDLE EAST
PROGRAM**

Jon Alterman:

I'm really delighted to welcome General Joseph Votel for our keynote address today. He currently serves as the CEO and president of Business Executives for National Security. He joined there in January 2020 following 39 years of distinguished military service. He served for three years as the commander of the United States Central Command. Prior to serving as the commander of Central Command, he commanded the United States Special Operations Command and the Joint Special Operations Command. In addition to his current role at the Business Executives for National Security, he's also a distinguished senior fellow in national security at the Middle East Institute. And I'm happy to welcome Paul Salem, the President of the Middle East Institute here. He is going to talk about a theme that has come up throughout the discussion this morning, which we're all aware of but weren't exactly sure what to think about it. I think in about 30 minutes we'll know exactly how we should think about great great power competition in the Gulf. So, I'm delighted to introduce General Joseph Votel.

Joseph Votel:

Thanks. Thanks very much. It's great to be here. Jon, thanks for the invitation to be here. Thanks for your flexibility with scheduling. Welcome to all of you. It's great to be here. I know there's a number of former colleagues in the audience. I see representatives from the diplomatic corps here, fellow partners. Thanks for being here. Good to see you all. Of course, Paul Salem, from Middle East Institute and I know there's a variety of others, both from the Department of State, Department of Defense and other places here. I have to tell you right up front, I'm coming up on the 11th month anniversary of my retirement from the military. I've been thinking a lot about that. I had what I would say was a pretty good transition out of the military. I've got an association with the Middle East Institute

and that's really what's bringing me here today. I've enjoyed that. I'm engaged with Business Executives for National Security, BENS, which has really been a great opportunity to get to know the business world and meet a lot of businessmen and women from across our country.

One of my objectives as I retired was to somehow stay engaged with young people. And so I'm able to do that through a relationship with the Combating Terrorism Center up at West Point and the Belfer Center up at the Kennedy School and with the University of Pennsylvania, at the Center for Ethics and the Rule of Law. I also wanted to kind of give back. And so, I've been able to get onto the boards of a couple of veteran-oriented organizations, which includes one which really focuses in on helping young enlisted veterans get into our best schools around the country.

All in all, retirement's been a great opportunity for me to invest my time and energy in doing things that I think matter and are important to me. And if that's not enough, I would say that my wife also reminded me that marriage is for love and not for lunch. And so, I was invited after about three or four months of retirement to get busy and so, I have.

I think it's appropriate as I speak here today on this topic that we recall that it was about 75 years ago this month when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt met with King Abdulaziz ibn Saud aboard the USS Quincy in the Great Bitter Lake of Egypt, and initiated what would eventually become a long relationship between the United States and not only Saudi Arabia, but other countries in the region. As the story goes, they talked about many things during this, their only meeting.

They talked about their common responsibilities as heads of states. They talked about their shared view that at the heart of things they both longed to be farmers. And of course, they talked about the fact that their own personal infirmities were both obstacles that they had to overcome in their lives. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, FDR, even left one of

his wheelchairs for the king, which became an object of some pride for the Saudis. They eventually came to an agreement that centered around United States support and military training for Saudi Arabia—then a fledgling country surrounded by stronger nations—in return for oil and political support in the region.

All in all, it was a mixture of personal relationships and national interests that for better or worse has endured for over seven decades. I think a fair assessment can be made that FDR understood that he needed to engage and compete in this area to ensure our access to the critical resources of the region and to support our interests.

Today's topic is great power competition in the gulf and my specific job is to talk a bit about the military aspects of this great power competition. While I think people understand the general notion of great power competition, it—like many other conceptual military or security concepts or ideas—is oftentimes difficult to define or understand. Think of things like the War on Terror. Think of things like “by, with, and through,” and how we train partners. Think of irregular warfare and the soft doctrinal approach to competition.

Great power competition has replaced the War on Terror as the preeminent descriptive term of our principal strategic security focus.

power competition is clearly becoming the driving force, identification, and characterization of national interests, deployment of forces, budget considerations, capability development and international relations that support all of this.

I think it's fair to say that great power competition has replaced the War on Terror as the preeminent descriptive term of our principal strategic security focus. It certainly has within the Department of Defense. Great

But great power competition is more about prevailing than it is about directly confronting. Correspondingly, it is militarily more indirect than direct.

Great power competition is more about prevailing than it is about directly confronting.

An argument is often made in my profession on whether great power competition is actually warfare or not. My personal belief is that it does belong on the taxonomy of activities leading to open conflict.

Competition is often about diverging interests and objectives. Exhibit A, in my experience, is Syria. In this country, this is an area where four different countries—Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States, and others—came together for a common purpose to defeat ISIS. But as that was accomplished, we began to divert in terms of all of our interests and objectives and it turned much more into a competitive environment over our original

purpose for being there. Ultimately, great power competition is about a balance of power and the relationships that support maintaining influence. In today's environment, great power competition is also about domination of emerging technologies and domains, and the rules that guide ethical, moral, and legal employment activities of these emerging areas.

Great power competition is about a balance of power and the relationships that support maintaining influence.

And contrary to what we may be seeing in our policy and in our public communications, great power competition does not mean that alliances and partnerships are not important. They are more important, in my humble opinion, in successfully prevailing in a geostrategic setting dominated by great power competitors. Winning in this environment also

has different connotations. It is certainly about beating our adversaries or our enemies and we always try to do that, but more importantly in today's strategic context, it's a much more subtle approach. Winning implies several things, I believe. It implies maintaining a competitive advantage, outperforming our competitors—in business parlance, being seen as a greater value, higher quality, more desired and more reliable by our partners. Winning is about protecting our interests, those that are essential and those that are important.

Winning requires that we maintain our access

Winning requires that we maintain our access and relationships, and a level of influence and a balance of power that is more favorable to us than to our competitors and adversaries.

and relationships, and a level of influence and a balance of power that is more favorable to us than to our competitors and adversaries. An example is our preferential access to passage through the Suez Canal. We remain the only country that has head of the line privileges there. And that is a distinct advantage of

something that persisted even during the most difficult days of our relationship with the Egyptians.

Finally, winning means providing decision space for our leaders through strategic advantage, relationships, options, planning, available capabilities, and the capacities to go along with all of that. My main takeaway for each of you today is that we must compete militarily in this region to support our overall national security objective of maintaining competitive advantage against great power competitors.

It does not necessarily mean that we do this at the same troop levels or operations or locations that we have for the last several decades, but it does mean a level of policy and planning,

presence, relationships, capabilities, activities, and reliance that demonstrates our ability to maintain that balance of power that is more favorable to our objectives than to others' objectives. Any discussion of the gulf and the surrounding region has to just start with a discussion of our interests. I think there are five that are currently present and will be well into the future.

First, we have to ensure that the region cannot be used as a platform for terrorists or terrorist organizations to attack our homeland, citizens, or those of our friends or allies.

Secondly, we have to ensure that instability in this region does not impact our interests in other regions. One only has to look at the impact of refugees flowing from a place like Syria and the impact it has on Europe, on immigration policies, and ultimately on our country.

Third, we have an interest to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Fourth, we want to preserve access to the critical lines of communication and resources of the region for us and for our allies and partners.

And finally, we want to maintain an overall favorable balance of power. It's fair to question these interests, but I think the more important aspect is a discussion of where they fall on the scale of

criticality, from important to existential. I would argue that addressing terrorism, instability and perhaps access are probably important, but may not rise to the level of

being existential to our survival as a nation. I would also argue that proliferation and maintaining a favorable balance of power, if left unchecked, could be existential to our security

Proliferation and maintaining a favorable balance of power, if left unchecked, could be existential to our security or those of our close partners.

or those of our close partners. I think that the efficacy of an Iranian nuclear weapons program would manifest itself as an existential threat to the country of Israel and would largely be seen the same in our country.

My point here is this: there must be a robust discussion of interest in this region and their criticality as part of our national security process. And we have to communicate this better to not only the region and to our great power competitors, but also to the citizens of our country. And secondly, we have to recognize that interest in areas other than Eastern Europe in the Indo-Pacific are critical components of our overall national security strategy. This is an area where great power competition has, and will continue to, take place, whether we want it to or not.

To not recognize the geostrategic implications and opportunities of this region to the overall idea of competitive advantage against great power competitors, is a mistake.

Some would argue that an equally critical contribution to winning the Cold War played out in the mountains of Afghanistan with our support of the mujahideen against the Soviets, just as it did on the central plains of Europe with our large and long-standing military alliance.

Today, the waters of the Middle East see a constant presence of Chinese naval vessels. To not recognize the geostrategic implications and opportunities of this region to the overall idea of competitive advantage against great power competitors, is a mistake in my view.

It's also important to look at current and emerging threats and influences affecting our approaches to the region. Most of these will be familiar to you, but there may be a little different twist here. I would briefly highlight six areas for you. The topic of the day is great

power competition, so we have to start there. Russia, while not economically strong, still poses a significant military threat to the United States. They now possess long-term access in the Mediterranean through intervention in Syria and continue to look for opportunities to supplant our influence and play a role as a deal maker and peace broker in the region. When we step back from a partner, we should expect Russia to step into that void. China is the more significant challenge. Their long-term, centrally driven plan to dominate emerging technology, expand markets and create military parity and where possible, superiority, poses a direct challenge to the United States that must dominate our security strategy.

Across the region, they are increasingly military present, with their influence and activity principally as an extension of their belt and road initiative. And you only have to look at the China-Pakistan economic corridor, the linkages into the Port of Gaudier, and the routes to the port in Djibouti to see an example of this.

A second threat influencing our approach to the region is Iran. I view Iran as an injured animal protecting itself, but capable of lashing out. Given the recent loss of Qasim Soleimani and the tragic events surrounding the shoot down of a Ukrainian airliner by Iranian Forces, we should expect the Iranian leadership to be looking inward and consolidating their power. This may limit their regional adventurism in the short-term. In this is an opportunity to keep the pressure on the regime, which is still reeling from losing its most prominent military commander and their own incompetence in shooting down a Ukrainian airliner during their response.

The new leader, Esmail Ghaani, despite being Soleimani's deputy for many years, will not immediately—and may never—carry the same gravitas and throw weight as his predecessor.

deputy for many years, will not immediately—and may never—carry the same gravitas and throw weight as his predecessor. I think it can also be argued that the Quds Force itself, as an institution, may exercise more introspection on their part, and this may be an opportunity for us.

We should expect that Iranian proxies, however, will not likely de-escalate and may for the most part test their independence from Iran. We can especially expect to see this in Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq. The maritime environment will continue to be an area where Iran will continue to exercise considerable layered capabilities, coastal defense systems, fast boats, mines, and other soft light capabilities. And it appears by all accounts that Iran is steadily moving forward to restore components of its nuclear weapons program that may have been delayed under the JCPOA. We should expect their missile capabilities will continue its long-term trend of qualitative and quantitative improvement in Iran.

Finally, I think it's important to note that the Arab Gulf states have come to understand that in a conflict between Iran and the United States, they stand to lose the most and are not eager to see this escalate beyond the stages that it has recently and would likely prefer to see an overall trend of de-escalation. A third threat, of course, is terrorism. "Back to the future" is a phrase that comes to mind here. Jihad is going

The Quds force today, while possessing the same capabilities that it always had, is not the same Quds force as under the leadership of Qasim Soleimani. The new leader, Esmail Ghaani, despite being Soleimani's

local, exploding local seams, using local fighters, impacting local populations and creating local successes. ISIS will continue to exploit seams where it can, in and out of the region. The Sahel is a particularly vulnerable location. Al Qaeda will attempt to use the instability of the region to reconstitute its external plotting capability.

A fourth threat is a festering instability. The longstanding underlying tensions of the region—corruption, poor governance, disenfranchisement, economic disparity, and toxic sectarian narratives, among others—are ever present. Iraq remains in a difficult position. While there is not yet a national push for a U.S. departure, the protests continue under a new prime minister and a weak government. Some have surmised that it may be difficult for the Kurds and Sunnis to block a concerted Shi`a push for a U.S. departure. In this political sphere, Iran will likely remain patient as we have at least temporarily replaced them as a principle point of contention on the Iraqi street. Syria is also at a difficult juncture and there should be significant concern about whether the regime could control an ISIS resurgence.

While the conflict intention in the northeast part of the country seems to have subsided and perhaps even stabilized to some degree, the outlook in other areas is not good.

Idlib is a significant disaster. In the last six months, somewhere between 400,000 and 800,000 persons were displaced, more than 1,200 had been killed, and only a relatively small percentage of the de-escalation area recaptured. Progress is extraordinarily slow and bloody. And there is now an open conflict between Turkey and Syria in this area, with Russia playing the supposed referee. Al Qaeda linked, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, continues to gain power and influence and appears to be

Iran will likely remain patient as we have at least temporarily replaced them as a principle point of contention on the Iraqi street.

growing into a Syrian version of the Taliban. Al Qaeda grows more dangerous by the day. Attacks against regime forces in southern Syria have returned to 2011 levels. And in this vacuum, Hezbollah is increasing their recruiting and ISIS will likely take advantage of the situation to grow their capabilities, membership and influence. This poses serious concerns about spillover into Jordan and along the Israeli border. And we are all aware the situation in Lebanon is not good either and will likely continue to get worse before it gets better. In this turmoil, we should expect that Hezbollah will take advantage of the situation to consolidate their position. And while currently unaffected, the Lebanese Armed Forces stands to lose as instability continues.

A fifth aspect impacting our approach in the region is other unresolved regional conflicts. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is attempting to resolve the self-created situation in Yemen and is now at least focused on rebuilding regional cooperation impacted by the nearly three-year-old fallout with Qatar. Neither of these will be resolved quickly but they must be resolved.

We are on the precipice of an initial agreement in Afghanistan that could lead to further agreements on U.S. presence, and more importantly, inter-Afghan discussions aimed at ending the

We have to consider the view here at home. It matters.

conflict. Finally, we have to consider the view here at home. It matters. We are less dependent on the resources of the region. The United States is now one of the larger exporters of the resources upon which we depended on from this region. There is fatigue on the home front brought about by lengthy engagements across the region that have expended significant American treasure and highlighted the intractable problems of the region that oftentimes seem unsolvable. It would be a mistake for our friends in the region to underestimate how powerful this fatigue is. Not

only on our policymakers, but in fact, on the broader American public.

And as mentioned earlier, there is now a strategic imperative to maintain our competitive advantage against a revanchist Russia and a rising China. As many of you are aware, the United States National Defense Strategy makes it very clear that maintaining our competitive advantage against these states in particular is our overriding objective. Recent guidance from the secretary of defense—as recent as the last couple of

There is now a strategic imperative to maintain our competitive advantage against a revanchist Russia and a rising China.

weeks to our service chiefs and our combatant commanders—makes this clear. So where does this leave us strategically? In my view, all of the interests I highlighted earlier remain relevant to one degree or another. Maintaining a favorable balance of power, however, remains highly relevant to our current national defense strategy of maintaining competitive advantage against great power competitors. Said more simply, we need to compete in this region. If we don't, our great power competitors undoubtedly will do so.

Our competitors are filling in the voids and replacing our influence and using that influence to support their broader strategic objectives.

From a military standpoint, we will need several categories of force to pursue our objectives. We will need a security cooperation component that works with our partners to develop their capabilities and assure integration among

We need to compete in this region. If we don't, our great power competitors undoubtedly will do so.

themselves and with us. This should ultimately be our military's main effort. We will need rotational ground, air, maritime, and special operations forces to demonstrate resolve, exercise with our partners, protect vital United States assets, and ensure sufficient access and basing to meet contingency requirements.

We will need a level of sustained counterterrorism presence in the region to carefully watch and understand the evolving threat, train our partner counterterrorism forces, and where necessary address threats beyond the capabilities of our partners.

And we will require response forces based outside the region that can deploy and respond to emergency and contingency operations. The mixture of these forces must be determined through careful staff work, but I do believe there is a sustainable and affordable level of military presence that we can achieve in the region to protect our interests and directly contribute to maintaining our competitive advantage. More importantly, however, is not just what we do, but in fact, how we do it. Building and sustaining relationships is absolutely critical to this approach. Looking at Iraq, our critical military task right now is to return our relationship to where it was during the height of the ISIS campaign. That of a strong, largely behind-the-scenes partner focused on specific and mutually agreed-upon military tasks. This can best be done by returning to what has worked for us in the last several years: a laser focus on the defeat of ISIS activities, clear and direct communications to our Iraqi interlocutors, affirmation of our expectations that Iraq protects the United States and coalition forces pursuing these agreed-upon missions, and continued respect for Iraqi sovereignty.

Secondly, we need to normalize our operating methodologies in the region. In other words, we need to ensure we have measures in place to reduce miscalculation. Let me use Syria as a brief example. Despite a highly complex and crowded operating environment during the campaign against ISIS, we were able to achieve

our military objectives largely because we normalized how and where we were conducting operations and backed it up with the,—albeit an imperfect, but an adequate—mechanism to communicate with the Russians. I am absolutely 100% convinced that this not only saved lives but prevented further escalation. The news and the media have recently carried stories of tensions between U.S. forces in Syria and Russian forces in the northeast part of the country. Making sure expectations are clear and having the ability to communicate directly are incredibly important mechanisms to maintaining influence and preserving interests, and I suggest in the future this must eventually include Iran.

Finally, we should understand the significance and the advantage of small but highly focused and impactful programs to directly help our partners. A good friend of mine, a foreign officer, once told me that one of the best ways for us to help Israel was to double down on our relationship with the Lebanese Armed Forces. I still believe this to be the case and over the last 12

We should understand the significance and the advantage of small but highly focused and impactful programs to directly help our partners.

years of engagement the Lebanese Armed Forces have increased their capability, become more independent and professional and have become a more respected institution in Lebanon. This was accomplished through a very small presence on the ground, in many cases less than 50 troops; very modest and targeted foreign military sales programs; and strong support from our country team despite concerns in the administration and Congress about Hezbollah influence. There's a long way to go with the Lebanese Armed Forces, but this is a very clear area where we should continue to compete. Small, focused programs work.

They keep our footprint small, our mission well-defined, they are sustainable and affordable, and they are overwhelmingly popular with our partners in the region.

Let me close by returning briefly to my main point. We have to compete in this region. This is how we maintain the competitive advantage that our security and defense strategies call for. I think it's a strategic imperative for us to do so and I think Franklin Delano Roosevelt saw this 75 years ago. I assess we have enduring interest in the region and will well into the future. I also

Maintaining our competitive advantage against China is an existential requirement for the United States and for many of our partners around the world.

acknowledge that these interests, for the most part, will not likely eclipse the interest we have expressed in other areas. Maintaining our competitive advantage against China is an existential requirement for the United States

and for many of our partners around the world. I do believe maintaining a balance of power that is favorable to the United States is a good approach to this region and it supports our overall approach of prevailing against great-power competitors.

It does not mean that we need to be endlessly and substantially engaged military. It means the following: we need to have a sustainable presence over time that is predictable for our forces and our partners in the region; and that demonstrates our intent to protect our important interests; and is affordable and understandable by our citizens.

And secondly, we need to exercise patience. None of this will be accomplished quickly. We have to wind down ongoing conflicts, adjust our posture and communicate our strategy and approach to our partners in and out of the region. Admittedly, my time today is probably

too short to do proper justice to this topic, one that grows more complex by the day, but I hope I've offered you some food for thought from a former

United States military commander who spent a lot of time operating and thinking about this region. I don't expect that everyone

here will agree with my assessment or my specific suggestions, but I do strongly believe that we have to compete in this region to continue to preserve our important national interests and support our vital national strategy of competitive advantage. Thanks for your attention.

I look forward to your questions.

Jon Alterman:

Thank you very much. That's a lot to chew on. I think one of interesting problems we have is the President's been very vocal that, in his view, we've wasted \$8 trillion in the Middle East. Even the Obama administration wanted to rebalance its efforts away from the Middle East and toward Asia, and you're talking about competing effectively. What we're essentially doing—in the view of two administrations—is reducing our presence while the Chinese and Russians are increasing their presence. Are there ways that we can compete effectively while that balance is going on? In absolute terms, if we go down in absolute terms, will they go up? Even if in relative terms, we remain the preponderant power? The sense is that we're in some ways on the way out and they're on the way in. How should we think about that?

We have to compete in this region to continue to preserve our important national interests and support our vital national strategy of competitive advantage.

Joseph Votel:

I think that's a great question, and I think it's a real challenge for our people that operate in the region. I think we have to stop talking about what we're going to do in this region and what we're going to do in that region. I think we have to express our strategy in a much more wholesome manner, a much more fulsome manner, I should say. The strategy is about maintaining our competitive advantage against great power competitors. We have to recognize that that means that we have to compete in the regions where our great power competitors are located.

We have to paint a picture that competing has to take place on a global scale and not just in particular regions.

But it also means that we have to look at the other regions where they also can compete. My point here today is that the Middle East, the Gulf, is an area where great powers are going to compete. That's always been the case, and it will probably always be the case going forward. And so, we have to figure out a way to compete there. I've offered a couple of thoughts in terms of how you might do that militarily, but I think when we say things like "we're pivoting here" or we articulate our strategy only in terms of one particular geographic area, I think we sell short the role that that competition and other areas plays. And so I think we have to paint a picture that competing has to take place on a global scale and not just in particular regions and I think a lot of our strategic communications works against us in terms of that.

Jon Alterman:

But one of the challenges is in some ways we're trying to cover the waterfront when we compete, while our competitors are very selective. The Chinese are very assiduously now trying to replicate what we do. They're trying to

pick targets both in terms of countries and in terms of activities and countries. As John McLaughlin and Christine Wormuth talked about earlier today, they're careful not to be drawn into the Middle East militarily. In some ways, we're trying to meet the Chinese and then some—for example in the Middle East, and in Africa, and in Latin America. And we see the Chinese making inroads into Europe, which keeps the EU from making consensus decisions the way they we might want them to. I wonder if it all becomes a little bit Sisyphean to do everything we think is important and to combat everything we see them doing in order to compete. I mean, what can we afford not to do?

Joseph Votel:

Well, I think first of all, I think one of the key things we have to do is we have to unwind ourselves from ongoing conflicts. I think the efforts towards trying to create some kind of political agreement in Afghanistan is a good way to begin to draw down our presence there. I recognize that, like many things in this region, is an imperfect approach to what we're doing. It's not going to satisfy

I think the first thing we do have to do is begin to extricate ourselves from these ongoing conflicts.

everybody, but it doesn't get better if we don't try to move forward on this. And so, I think the first thing we do have to do is begin to extricate ourselves from these ongoing conflicts. The situation in Iraq and Syria here is an opportunity for us to begin to draw down forces there and get them to a more sustainable level.

The numbers there are not comparatively all that high frankly, but it probably could be lowered there, and that may be a way to do that as well. I think our focus needs to be our focus needs to be much more heavily into the

security cooperation area with a lot of our partners.

Jon Alterman:

It's a "by, with, and through."

Joseph Votel:

Well, to some extent, it's "by, with, and through," but it's also about having capable, well-connected security cooperation officers around the region that work with our leading

One of the big challenges we have in the Gulf states is the integration of our missile defense capabilities.

partners to develop their capabilities and to make sure that they're integrated with each other. I think one of the big challenges we have in the Gulf states is the integration of our missile defense capabilities.

We have a lot there.

There's a lot the United States brings. There is a lot that our partners bring, but it's not effectively integrated either with us or among themselves. That's a difficult thing, and we've begun the process of trying to do that. And I suspect my successor is continuing to move in that direction. But that's, I think, how you begin

There are a number of special operations forces with a number of partners that are very capable, very capable of handling the situations in their own country and doing it in a manner that adheres to the law of armed conflict.

to reduce the physical reliance on our forces and they can take on more of the burden themselves. And I think we have to look for opportunities to do that.

The special operations capabilities that we've developed are a good

example as you look across the region. There are a number of special operations forces with a number of partners that are very capable, very capable of handling the situations in their own country and doing it in a manner that adheres to the law of armed conflict. That's an example where in the longer-term investments in these things can yield capabilities where people can take care of their own problems with a level of support from us that is sustainable and doesn't require a huge presence on the ground.

Jon Alterman:

Are there security tasks that we should try to get other countries—either from in the region or outside the region—to take on? Are there red lines that we obviously should prevent other countries from taking on?

Joseph Votel:

Certainly. We already talked about one of them. One of them is combating terrorists and terrorist

organizations. I think we've made a significant investment. I think looking at the maritime environment, particularly in the Gulf, is an area where we should be putting more focus on our

The maritime environment, particularly in the Gulf, is an area where we should be putting more focus on our partners and developing their capabilities to take on the lead.

partners and developing their capabilities to take on the lead for this. This is an area frankly where we don't have to be the lead in the combined task force. Others can do this, other Western powers can do it, and eventually probably people in the region could.

Jon Alterman:

Should we encourage the Russians and the Chinese to get involved, or should we insist they stay out?

We have to look at leveraging the capabilities of some of our very best partners.

Joseph Votel:

I mean, we've seen some instances where the Chinese have stepped up. I mean some of the counter-piracy efforts that took place several years ago, they stepped up and provided some

assistance in that particular area. I think when we can figure out a way to try to cooperate on common things, I think we probably should. We never really achieved that in a place like Syria. We were prohibited by our own laws from collaborating, cooperating, coordinating with them, and the most we could do was deconfliction, but deconfliction being the kind of the lowest level of things that we can do. We should certainly try to do that.

Jon Alterman:

The Wall Street Journal had a story this morning about the Russians using essentially mercenaries to advance Russian foreign policy. We're often fighting actors that use asymmetrical tools, and we're keeping within the boundaries of United States law, often within conventional warfare. You've come out of the special operations community, you've done some pretty creative things. Are we too hidebound as we look at this series of challenges, do we need to be even more creative, even more outside the box? What are some directions you think we need to think about that we're not in order to deal with a very complex threat environment?

Joseph Votel:

Well, I think the idea of contracted security organizations is out there. I mean, that's

certainly something we've looked at in the past. My personal view is I don't think we've kind of come to a conclusion on how we actually manage the command and control over those types of activities or where they start, and where they end, and where policy and our objectives fits into that. So, I'm not yet completely comfortable with taking that approach. I do think that contractors can help offset the physical presence of military forces in doing some of the training, some of the supervising, and establishing some of the more institutional aspects of helping our partners develop their own capabilities. So, I think those are things we ought to look at. I also think we have to look at leveraging the capabilities of some of our very best partners.

The 79-member coalition that we assembled to defeat ISIS contained a lot of small contingents and I think we have to look for ways that we leverage them better. The other thing I think we have to look at is at leaders in the region and how they can bring others along. I look at a country like the Emirates for example, and I look at their special operations capabilities. They're very well developed. They do function as a leader. They can bring others along with them. I think we have to look at how are our strategy and plans incorporates that into this.

Jon Alterman:

We have about ten more minutes and I want to open this up to the audience. Barbara has another question about Iran? Okay. Barbara has a question about Iran right there. Do we have microphones? The microphone is coming. There it is. Thank you.

Barbara Slavin:

Thanks so much. Barbara Slavin from the Atlantic Council. General Votel, always a pleasure to see you. You use the verb compete, not contain. So, I want to push on that in terms of how the U.S. should deal with Iran's influence, it seems when we tried to contain Iran, it just becomes more influential. So, what advice would you give to U.S. Policymakers

about how to compete rather than contain Iran?

Joseph Votel:

Again, I'm not sure I'm excluding the idea of containing Iran's activities here. When I talk about competing, I'm really talking about our interaction with great powers. I recognize that

I think one of the things we have to do is we have to be very clear in terms of what our objectives are and what our expectations are in the region.

means we don't we try to contain them. I think one of the things we have to do is we have to be very clear in terms of what our objectives are and what our expectations are in the region. I think my personal view is as I look back over the last 18 months of activities in the region, certainly during my time in service, and since, and it seems to me there has been a constant struggle back and forth between the United States and Iran to understand what each player wants out of this and where we're going with this.

And I do think it is extraordinarily important that we try to clarify this in practical terms as soon as we can. I think in many cases, we are talking past each other on this and taking the hardened positions in this. While I do recognize that in some cases, we have to do that, the lack of flexibility in some of that I think impacts us. One of the things I was almost always concerned about as a CENTCOM commander was an interaction in the Gulf, a miscalculation in a maritime environment and I do think I was never sure if that would be--I was almost certain it would not ever be caused by our forces, but I wasn't as certain on the other side and I never understood if that would be the

certainly, Iran is as a regional power and has a historical and cultural role in the region that it must play, must be responsive to. But I don't think that necessarily

actions of a rogue commander or if it would be the actions of an orchestrated Iranian strategy if you will.

And so, I was very keen to try to look at ways that we could establish a communications channel with them. I am heavily influenced by my experience in Syria, and I can't overemphasize to you how important that channel was to us. It wasn't actually anything I orchestrated myself. It was actually done above and below me. But I had the ability to be a big player in the-

Jon Alterman:

Channel with the Iranians.

Joseph Votel:

No, the channel with the Russians. And I'm using that as an example of why this is so important that we have a communication channel to do this. I

mean a key way, and this is a point I tried to make in my remarks, is that a key way to reduce our presence and other things in here is to establish a norm of activities in the region. A very clear articulation of things that we are after and clear mechanisms that are

in place to communicate about this. And I think we have to press for those types of things.

A key way to reduce our presence and other things in here is to establish a norm of activities in the region.

Barbara Slavin:

In the aftermath of assassinating Soleimani, how can you possibly get there?

Joseph Votel:

Well, I don't know. Maybe there is--I think, one thing's for sure on the assassination. I think the Iranians are now very clear on where our red lines are and what we're willing to tolerate and

what we're willing not to tolerate. I'm an observer to this. I'm not in the process and in the discussions right now, but I don't necessarily exclude that that situation makes it prohibitive for us to try to figure out a channel to communicate to the Iranians, and I believe it is an absolute imperative that we have some reliable mechanism that we talk to our adversaries over. And I think it's critical for controlling the situation, for preventing miscalculations and perhaps for creating a platform upon which other things can ultimately be established.

Jon Alterman:

On that issue of red lines, I mean there's a school of thought that says we should have very clear and bold red lines. So that there are no misunderstandings. There's this school of thought that advocates acting in an unpredictable and in disproportionate ways in response to what are clear violations, but acting unpredictably and disproportionately is a way to deter your adversaries. Do you come down one way or the other on that?

Joseph Votel:

I am more for clarifying expectations and being clear in terms of, particularly at a tactical or operational level, being very, very clear on things that we will and will not tolerate in the region and where things will trigger a reaction with us.

us. In my view, and again I'm very heavily

Yeah, I am more for clarifying expectations and being clear in terms of, particularly at a tactical or operational level, being very, very clear on things that we will and will not tolerate in the region and where things will trigger a reaction with

influenced by my own experience, I just think this was a better approach for us and it allowed us to have more control over a situation that was ultimately not all that controllable. And I think being clear with things is very, very important. As again, as we tried to be with the Iranians, with Shia militia groups, with the Russians in Syria. Look at the little enclave down the Southern part of the country around al-Tanf. I mean very clearly articulating where our presence went and the extent of it was a very important measure for us to protect ourselves and to communicate very clearly to others what would trigger a reaction from us. I think we have time for one more question. Right there. Yep.

Jim Larocco:

General, Jim Larocco, adjunct professor at NESAS and NDU. I know from your own work, how hard you worked to bring together country teams and to work with them. Your predecessors did that; your successor is doing it now. You talked about competitive advantage, which I think for many of us is a bit of a fuzzy concept, but how do you see the role of diplomacy in keeping our competitive edge?

Joseph Votel:

I think it's absolutely essential to this. I think it's always important. I didn't necessarily do it in these remarks today, but what I often do is remind audiences that I speak with that in many regards, the military instrument of power is almost always a supporting element to the diplomatic aspect. And I think we have to recognize that. I think on the diplomatic front, the idea of public information that supports this, of being very clear and demonstrating unity across all instruments of U.S. power, I think, is absolutely

The military instrument of power is almost always a supporting element to the diplomatic aspect.

critical. And I think it always starts with our diplomatic partners, whether they're ambassadors or whether it's coming out of the Department of State. And so, I think it's absolutely essential.

As we confronted ISIS and as we look at confronting now great power competition, I think we are missing a great component here in the information aspect of this. And it's not an information aspect that the military is going to be particularly effective at, but it is an information aspect I think the Department of State can be very effective at. I think we ought to have a United States information agency-like capability here that is orchestrating our ideas and information out there in the environment. I mean I've done a fair amount of reading on this and I do recognize that the height of the cold war, we had that capability and we could respond very agilely almost on a daily basis to things that were happening in the environment to put truthful information out there and to address misinformation that was coming out.

I think this is an extraordinarily important aspect. I think ensuring that in countries around this region, and perhaps much more broadly,

We're swinging with on one arm tied behind our back if we don't fully engage our full diplomatic capabilities.

having confirmed ambassadors sends a very clear message to our partners. When I left CENTCOM last March, 20 countries, 18 have diplomatic relations, seven of them had confirmed ambassadors. All of them, the ambassadors, chargés, to a person were excellent, dedicated

Americans doing the very best for their country. But a chargé does not, unfortunately, carry the same weight as an ambassador. And I think this puts an unfair burden on them and it puts unfair burden on the military, frankly. And we need to make sure that that's in place and we need to make sure that our back offices in the

Department of State and others are manned with professionals, a diplomat or professionals to provide that. I wish I'd come up with a really catchy slogan like Jim Mattis did here.

"Well, if you're not going to fund them, give me more money for bullets," kind of thing. I can't, but the sentiment is exactly the same. We're swinging with on one arm tied behind our back if we don't fully engage our full diplomatic capabilities in this. And in many ways, this is a competition for ideas, frankly. And I'm here to tell you I'm not sure that the military is in the position to play the leading role in that or shouldn't be playing the leading role. Somebody else has to be. And I think it has to come back much more on our diplomatic side than perhaps some others.

Jon Alterman:

So, I'm not sure if we should take solace from the fact that our secretary of state is a fellow West Pointer like you. So, we have at least somebody with a West point background trying to resurrect the state department. They talk about swagger, but I think I agree with you that there seems to be a disproportion in the sense of who's supporting who.

Joseph Votel:

I think we have to understand the realities of the region, the realities of this region we're talking about today is that the military does carry an outsized impact with a lot of our partners. I've recognized that as I traveled around the region and I think we always tried to use influence and access that we got just by being military leaders to help diplomats help others as well. So, I think we have to recognize that.

Jon Alterman:

As your predecessor, General Abizaid, used to talk about, he used to have a private jet. He used to take the assistant secretaries, to take the diplomats along with him because he had so much more ability to show up with fanfare than

the diplomats did. This is not a new challenge in the region.

Joseph Votel:

There's a lot that comes with resources, and I think we have to look at how we leverage those to help the bigger team. I don't want to be all mom and apple pie here, but it really is about that team approach in terms of this and getting behind our diplomats and using our resources at the very best of our capabilities.

Jon Alterman:

Excellent. General Votel, thank you very much for joining us. Thank you all for joining us. We appreciate it.