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Bill: Okay, my name is Bill LaPlante, I'm a Senior Vice President for National Security at the Mider Corporation. I'm also a member of the Fence Science Board. I'm thrilled to introduce this next session. A conversation with John Rood. John is the Undersecretary for Policy for the Department of Defense and is a critical policy player of course. I'm a techie and I always think problems are technical, no most of them are policy so it's a very important job he has and what he advises Secretary Mattis for. And we have a lot of significant issues here as this forum said, that are policy issues. And when choosing a moderator for this session, she doesn't want me to talk too much about her and I won't, but I will say it's only fitting that the duty falls to CNN's Pentagon corespondent, Barbara Starr.

As everyone knows, Barbara is one of the most informed and thoughtful journalists on national security issues, period. During my time at the Pentagon as the Air Force Acquisition Executive, I interacted with many folks in the press on joyful issues like F-35, doing the new bomber and getting off the Russian engines. And let's say it wasn't always fun. But I did learn to respect the work that these folks do, the Pentagon reporters and media and the attempt that they always put in to try to get the story right. So, I really want to talk to many ... shout out to them, many of them in the room today and help explain the complex national security issues we have. And as somebody said earlier today on a panel, get the truth out as quickly and effectively as possible.

So, to thank everybody in attendance today but especially but especially our journalist moderators. To all of you, thank you. So, now without any more, the floor is over to you Barbara.

Barbara Starr: Thank you, we're told the mikes are on so we're going to assume they are. And everything we say, you can hear. So, thank you much very much, I'm going to try and avoid saying what I really want to say so, but I'm going to go ahead and say it anyhow. There is [crosstalk 00:02:07] thank you.

There's a long history of the ladies of Pentagon press corp taking care of business so that's why we're here today. And my friend Courtney Cubie. So, John of course, I don't think he really actually needs much of an introduction. Very well respected, 20, 30 year career including at the agency working in missile programs, a variety of jobs in the national security community. Recently returned from a trip to Syria which very few people do and we'll ask him to talk about that. He and I both got to Syria, we were on different trips but we both got to Syria the same way, with General Votel. Because pretty much if you're going to go to Syria, you want to go with Votel's guys.

So we'll ask, we'll start, you know, let's just have you run though it right now. Talk about Syria, talk about ISIS, talk to us broadly for a minute about the issues that are capturing your time and attention in your portfolio.

John Rood:

Well first of all, let me just say, it's great to be up here with you Barbara and great to be here in Aspen. I haven't had the chance to come out before, I've always wanted to be a part of the forum. Now as I sit and look around in this tent, I don't think I've been in a tent this big since I went to a Ringling Brothers Circus or something as a kid. Here I thought I'd leave the three ring circus that is Washington and bam, I'm right back in the tent here in Aspen. But, all joking aside, it is a serious time and I've listened to some of the panels, really good discussion going on here.

For us in the Pentagon, my duties involve trying to oversee policy development which is to say strategy development, what is the character of the force that we need in the U.S. Military, what are the challenges we regard most seriously, how do we prioritize those things and how do we work as part of a whole of government effort and with our friends and allies around the world to deal with that. I feel very lucky that we earlier this year rolled out a new national defense strategy. For those that haven't seen it, one of the things that would be a topic at a forum like this, and this is a very serious place. But usually when these strategies are talked about there's a sort of thought that they talk in general terms, they talk about all the challenges. They don't set a clear vision that there isn't a clear prioritization of what we care about and that hard choices aren't made.

Well, I think if you look at this national defense strategy, you'll see the opposite is true. There's a very clear characterization of the world, that a return of great power competition is upon us. That the Russian government and the Chinese government are competitors who seek in a revisionist way to change the international order in a way that favors them. And to challenge the rules based international order that the United States has put in place since World War II. I think you also see a prioritization that the next major challenges that we confront are from countries like North Korea and Iran. Then there's an articulation in the document that while the fight against violent extremism is going to be with us for a long time, that international terrorism is not the greatest threat to the United States and is not something that can change our way of life in the same way that the great power competition that we're engaged in can.

It sets up three lines of effort to address that. One to build a lethality of the military that the United States operates. Secondly, to work very closely with friends and allies to reinforce existing alliances and to build new partnerships. Then there's the third line of effort to talk about reforming the Pentagon so that we can do that in a more affordable way.

So, that's what I spend a lot of my time doing in the national defense strategy implementation in working with friends and allies around the world and looking at the lethality of our force and the character of the force that we need. So just a little bit of an overview to start.

Barbara Starr: Okay, thank you. So, you spoke right away about the new national strategy and near peer competition and when you read that report, of course, it is all about Russia and China. So this is not just some, pardon, typical Pentagon report that goes on the shelf. This is the real deal and it's both timely and timely. It couldn't be more timely. So let's just get right to it. Let's just go through the list.

Russia, okay, the President has come back from Helsinki, we've had the NATO summit, Russia is unsettling to eastern Europe, it is unsettling to NATO. There is no question of some potential mixed signals out there in the world from the United States. So for you, when you look at Russia right now as that near peer competitor, what is your view about what needs to be done in a practical level to push them back from that capability?

John Rood: Well, as I mentioned, when we look at the broad strategic landscape, China and Russia come to the top of the list. China is the greater long term strategic challenge facing the United States. But in many ways, Russia is the larger near term threat because of the overwhelming lethality of its nuclear arsenal and also because of some the behavior that the Russian government has exhibited. We've had serious concerns, as you know, about some of the activities Russia has undertaken in terms of invading the [inaudible 00:07:48], the illegal annexation of that area, that part of Ukraine. It's activities that are threatening to our NATO allies, exercises, overt threats, cyber activities, the assassination or I should say the attempted assassination of Mr. Scripall in the U.K. In response, the Trump administration and the President has announced a series of things that have been taken to respond to those attacks. Things like expelling 60 Russian diplomats or intelligence agents from the United States. Imposing sanctions on more than 180 Russian entities and individuals including 24 for cyber aggression.

So one of the things we have to do, is one, stand firm in defending the ideals and the values of the international rules based order that we have put in place and that are for the benefit of all. Secondly, we've got to work very closely with allies. We can talk more about it, but I think at the NATO summit a lot of very good results there in terms of capability improvements for the alliance, changes in the command structure arrangements and really steps to make NATO fit for our times. And the European deterrence initiative also getting some greater momentum. So, we've got to work closely with friends and allies, we've got to defend the rules based order and we also have to open to opportunity for collaboration. Where there's an opportunity, where our interests align, where we have an opportunity to do something together with the Russians, we should look for those opportunities as well going forward.

Barbara Starr: Well, let's start there. We know that you engage in de-confliction but not cooperation with the Russians in Syria. What do you envision, what areas can you envision, since you're at the Pentagon, for military cooperation with the Russians as their posture stands today?

John Rood: Well as you mentioned Barbara, we have our forces engaged in Syrian conflict, our mission there is the defeat of ISIS and that's going well by the way. One of the things I'll announce is that today, we announced that we have completed, we being the Syrian democratic forces backed by the United States have completed the clearing of Dshesha which was one of the few remaining areas that ISIS continues to control. If we'd been sitting her a year ago or two years ago, ISIS and the so called Calafate existed, since that time frankly we've shattered the Calafate. There are some remaining pockets that exist but Dshesha was one of the last remaining pockets and we're very pleased that they Syrian democratic forces have fought very bravely to clear that area. I had the chance when I was in Syria to meet with the head of the Syrian democratic forces to talk about our partnership in the defeat of ISIS.

Now with regard to what we might to with Russia, in Syria we de-conflict our activities. The Russians have a military presence there we do as well. I think some other areas where we've had exchanges between our parties, we would like to talk more about strategic stability. We would like to talk about making sure there are clear understandings between us, the United States and Russia about these terribly lethal weapons that we both control, nuclear weapons. Talk about the future of the international non-proliferation regime.

Barbara Starr: Do you see a new round of arms control talks beginning at this point and can the proposal for a low yield weapon still be a credible deterrent if you go with a new round of arms control. I mean what are we really talking about here?

John Rood: Well, the arms control agenda's been one that the United States and Russia have worked on for a number of years but one of the starting points for a fruitful conversation about that will be our concerns about Russia's lack of compliance with a number of their arms control agreements. Like the INF treaty. Nearly five years ago, the United States government formally declared Russia to be in violation of that agreement. Through the deployment of an intermediate range nuclear missile. That's something that for those that believe deeply in these sorts of agreements, we've got to get past where we have an ability, the Russian government, to adhere to those agreements to assure us of that. I think it is an area though that we are willing to have a conversation with the Russian government, we've had that before and we'll have it again.

Barbara Starr: Make sure I understand what you said, because I don't. Are you saying that U.S. security policy right now is to hold firm to the notion that the Russians are in violation of INF or are you saying there's flexibility and maybe we just have to get past the INF violation? Which is it?

John Rood: We're not going to show a lot of flexibility on agreements, other parties to agreements with the United States should live up to those agreements.

Barbara Starr: Okay.

John Rood: And I think that is a principle that we're going to continue to adhere to. Now are we willing to have a conversation with the Russian government about strategic stability, about all the things that are entailed there, absolutely. And there are potentially other areas that we collaborate with them. As I mentioned, we have a shared interest in the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery. It's an area we've had a lot of good cooperation with Russia in the past. I've spent time in that, this is another area that we can collaborate on, if there's enough of an alignment of interests.

Barbara Starr: So, was any of this then what was actually agreed to in Helsinki, that the Russians have been talking about?

John Rood: The President's discussed as you know, things like nuclear arms control, strategic stability, a whole range of security topics.

Barbara Starr: But what's on the ... I mean, they put a statement out, everyone in this room knows that. So, can you tell us anything about what the next steps will be with the Russians. What is it that has been more specifically agreed to talk about?

John Rood: Well as was discussed yesterday, I guess at this forum, President Putin will be coming soon to Washington for a visit to the White House.

Barbara Starr: And how do you feel about that?

John Rood: It's a very normal thing I think for the President of the United States and the President of the Russian Federation to have exchanges. Over the years as I've worked in government, past presidents, President Obama met regularly with his Russian counterpart, President Bush met regularly with his Russian counterpart. I think the fact to have a meeting, after all this is a very important country in the world stage. There are a number of things that are critical to our security that are important to talk about. I think having an exchange and having a frank discussion amongst our leaders is something to be done. I think it's a very normal and practical thing.

Barbara Starr: Is any of it interesting to you, the notion that he would come to the United States?

John Rood: Not especially, President Putin has visited the White House before, he's visited the United States before. For instance when I served in the White House under President George W. Bush, he came to president Bush's home in Crawford, Texas, he also went fishing with him in Kennebunkport, Maine. Went to what, George H. W. Bush's home, the Bush compound at Kennebunkport. So, no it doesn't especially, isn't especially noteworthy to me.

Barbara Starr: So how to you view Putin these days? We are now, the difference of course is we're post Crimea, what is his goal visa via the United States and visa via NATO and Europe, what is it that he's trying to do?

John Rood: Well, as I mentioned, we've had significant concerns about the direction of Russia under President Putin and this attempt to revise the international rules based order in a way that is concerning to us. So, respect for the sovereignty of other nations, clearly a concern at NATO. Part of the reason why you saw the European deterrence initiative again this year in the President's budget. President Trump requesting additional money to reassure the European allies of his commitment to their security. 6.5 billion dollars that the United States will now set aside for the European deterrence initiative, up about 1/3 from last years commitment.

So, I think one of the things that we are concerned about, and it's inherent in that statement that I just made, is the potential concern about Russia not respecting the territorial integrity and the sovereignty of NATO nations. So that's why we're doing things like deploying on a rotational basis, troops in four counties along NATO's eastern periphery. Why we're doing things like the four thirties initiative. This was agreed in Brussels. For those that aren't familiar with the four thirties initiative, it's the idea that we will have 30 combat air squadrons, 30 naval vessels, 30 mechanized infantry battalions as well as able to assemble in 30 days to respond to a threat in NATO.

Barbara Starr: But what's the analysis here, you've got that. Is that a deterrent to Putin, you suggest, you said that you worry he might not respect the sovereignty of all NATO nations. Is there an actual, credible, not credible, is there an actual sense that he could move against a NATO country? Is this totally hypothetical?

John Rood: The European deterrence initiative is aimed at deterring territorial aggression from any party to include Russia. Why are there legitimate concerns about this? Because Russia has violated the territorial integrity of other countries in the area, like the Ukraine.

Barbara Starr: And do when you look at places like Kaliningrad and there's all this discussion that they're actually beefing up there which puts them right against NATO's eastern flank, can you bring us up to date on what you see there. Do you believe that they're aiming to have Kaliningrad be a potential jump off point, if you will. What is their goal in Kaliningrad right now.

John Rood: I can't speak to exactly what their goal in Kaliningrad would be but one of the areas that has concern ...

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John Rood: ... what their goal in Kaliningrad would be. But one of the areas that has concerned us is the large scale exercises that Russia has done, in some cases with very little notice or transparency along NATO's periphery. And so, there are a number of reasons to be concerned about the behavior, but what you saw I

think in Brussels is substantial, real, actual commitments by the allies for things that they can do together in collective security at NATO to A) Reassure their publics about their ability to collaborate together, to respond, to make NATO fit for our times, fit for its purpose. Other things that were done: command structure adjustments, additional commitments by allies to do that. All part of being prepared to deal with contingencies to include any sort of adventurism on the part of the Russian Federation.

Barbara Starr: Let's move to North Korea for a minute, if we can. And start with, you oversee the Return of Remains program. I wanted to get your view right now. Do you think there is a good chance that the North Koreans will live up to that promise and conduct a return of remains of what they believe or say are US personnel killed in the Korean War? What's the latest you can tell us on that.

John Rood: Well Barbara, as you mentioned, part of my duties at the Defense Department involve overseeing the activities of the Defense POW MIA Accounting Agency. This is a very important mission as you know for our ... And it's part of our solemn obligation to those that serve in uniform that the nation bring closure to the families for those that have fallen. And here in North Korea as part of the discussion that President Trump has had with Chairman Kim Jong-un in Singapore, part of that agreement spoke about collaboration on the return of remains from the Korean War. It's about 5,300 Americans who are unaccounted for still from that conflict all these years later.

In the past, for those that have been involved in Korea discussions before, we have had other POW MIA remains returned. We've conducted missions, we being the United States, the Defense Department, in North Korea for the recovery, those missions. Here we're optimistic that we will see some additional remains returned.

We had a meeting last weekend, representatives from US Forces, Korea, The Defense POW MIA Organization. Under the UN command, and that is the organization that handles these activities under the UN command with the North Koreans, and we're encouraged that there could be a return of remains in the new future. And that's just so important.

As an example, I read a report just in the last week from General Brooks, who will speak here tomorrow, about the return of one set of remains from South Korea to the United States. His description of the scene, I thought was very moving to me, talking about a person that once the ceremony got underway with the casket with the remains of her father. She was 11 years old when he was killed in the Korean War. And the scene of her rushing to the casket and crying, it just kind of gets your heart that it was like yesterday for her.

Barbara Starr: And you now face the extraordinary prospect for the first time since 2005 of a real possibility that they could agree to let US military teams back into North Korea to conduct additional searches?

John Rood: We're hopeful. And that is one of the things that we've had discussions with the North Korean representatives that have given us a feeling of optimism. And again, bringing this closure to the families, and meeting this solemn obligation to the people that have served is just critical, so we are going to go the extra mile to try to get that agreement, to continue that activity, and to bring closure to so many families. Again, over 5,300 that are still waiting for that closure all these years later.

Barbara Starr: What's your assessment when it comes to North Korea? Why ... Well, let me put it this way. The President has often talked about we haven't had a missile launch or a weapons test in many months now. Do you believe that they ... Do you assess that they are continuing with their production program and stashing things away, or are they just sitting there all ready to comply with whatever folks want? What are they up to?

John Rood: Well in North Korea, of course we've had very good discussions of late to try to move this situation to a more productive area. One of the things from President Trump's summit in Singapore with Chairman Kim Jung-un were his commitments on denuclearization, the complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program is what we seek, and their ballistic missile program. So, I'm hopeful that we will continue to see progress there.

One of the things that ... I saw a number of people that have been involved over the years in North Korea discussions. For me that began in 1994 in supporting the Agreed Framework negotiations with North Korea. And over the years, I've supported or participated in different roles in the government in being a part of those discussions.

What gives me some hope this time around because, well, there is some familiarity in the North Korean positions that they have taken, to me, from those in the past. Kim Jung-un is a different leader than his father, and is a different leader than his grandfather. His focus, for instance, if I'd been sitting here during Kim Jong-il's rein, his father, we would have talked about North Korea having a military first policy. Today, Kim Jong-un's policy is economy first. It gives you some hope, and based on his behavior with President Trump and others, that the commitment for denuclearization, that we can achieve that. I am very conscious of our history with North Korea, and of course I retain a deep skepticism of their intentions, a deep skepticism of their activities, but there have been some hopeful steps. And as you mentioned, we have not seen another nuclear test in quite some time. We've not seen the missile tests that we were seeing with great regularity before. And we've seen other steps the North Korean government take.

So for me, I have some optimism that this has the potential to be different, but I retain a healthy skepticism about are we going to ultimately be able to achieve our objectives.

Barbara Starr: What do you think in North Korean view is holding it up now? Why hasn't it moved more since Singapore?

John Rood: Well, Singapore was not all that long ago. And if you look at the history of our previous negotiations with the North Koreans, I would not describe them as nimble dance partners who respond with great regularity. I don't know that it's out of family the behavior that we're seeing in terms of the speed of response, or the ability of their negotiators to be agile, on their feet, at the table.

Barbara Starr: Before we get to questions in about five minutes, let's talk about Iran, if we might. Because this is an area that Secretary Mattis of course has a long held view that they need to ... It's separate from the JCPOA, just from a military point of view, and their potential for military operations in the Gulf, plus what they're doing in Syria, plus, I suppose, their support in Yemen. That they need to be watched, and watched carefully, I think would be a fair assessment of his view.

So give us an update right now when it comes to Iran. And there have been some recent statements by their officials about the potential of operations in the Persian Gulf against oil shipping. What's your view on this? Are they interested in trying to cause more trouble in the Gulf? Do we have to worry about them operating against commercial shipping in the Gulf in this day and age? What are they up to?

John Rood: Iran remains a substantial concern of ours. As I mentioned, the national defense strategy talks about Iran as a major challenge for us that we face. Their behavior is very concerning as well.

Barbara Starr: Can you talk a little bit about ... Give some examples.

John Rood: Well, obviously we retain a longstanding concern about Iran's nuclear program. Their ballistic missile program continues at pace, long range missiles. That is also of concern, not only to the United States, but to our allies in Europe, to our allies in the Gulf. Iran's support for terrorism. And then this malign influence that Iran seeks to extend across the Middle East where you see, not only in places ... If you start in Iran and extend in an arc across Iraq, Syria, in Lebanon, the supply of arms to the Houthis militants in Yemen, the destabilizing actions Iran is taking in that area, we have a number of reasons to be very concerned about their behavior.

Now in response, we've made it clear that we will meet our commitments to our allies. We're working very well with partners in the region, whether it's the Saudi government, or the UAE ambassador, for example, was here yesterday talking on this subject. That's another key relationship for us. In Syria, we are trying to counter the Iranian influence there. Elsewhere, working closely with the Israeli government. So, we have a lot of reasons to be very concerned. You're right, their behavior does bear some watching.

You asked about the Iranian statement, threatening to take action to close shipping in the Gulf. One of our missions for the United States military is, if called upon, to continue to continue the free flow of commerce in that strategic waterway, whether that be vital oil shipments, whether that be other commercial goods, but to allow for the free and open navigation in the Gulf. Therefore, I'd really discourage the Iranian government from thinking about trying to interrupt that free flow of commerce. That would not be in their interest.

Barbara Starr: From a policy perspective actually, at this point is it serious enough for us to look for a potential increase in US military, naval, and air presence in the Gulf? Or is it not at that point yet?

John Rood: We haven't adjusted our force posture in response to any of those statements, and I don't think that's warranted. I wouldn't recommend that.

Barbara Starr: And when it comes to Israel, you mentioned Israel, the Israelis are not shy about striking Iranian targets inside Syria and pushing them back from what they believe is a threat to them. What can you tell us? You mentioned cooperating with Israel, so what can you tell us about that level of cooperation with Israel because you know where the Iranians are inside Syria, clearly, but yet it's not your mission to go after them. The Israelis perhaps don't feel the same way.

John Rood: We've had a close and longstanding relationship with Israel, and the defense of Israel is one of our key concerns. We collaborate very closely, as you know, with the Israeli government across a range of activities. The United States military and Israeli military exercise together. Israel operates a lot of equipment that we collaborate on. Our defense industries are very linked. It's an area that, that we have a lot of those things. And Israel has legitimate concerns about the encroachment on its territory in the attacks that it's faced recently.

And so, the Israeli government, again, we back them. We work very closely with them. And these are not new concerns, but obviously in the highly complex melding pot that is the Middle East, sometimes I think-

Barbara Starr: But they do seem to be stepping up their operations against the Iranians. You'd think the Iranians in Syria would kind of like get the message that they can't really just hang out there. They've got to go.

John Rood: I would hope. If you can deliver that message to the Iranians, I'd appreciate it, Barbara.

There's a lot of messages the Iranians in Syria may not be receiving these days, but clearly Iran's presence and malign activities in Syria are a real concern of ours. And they're not ... They're a shared concern that we have with the Israelis, with a number of countries in the region, whether that Jordan. I was in Jordan

recently. This is one of the things that the King of Jordan highlighted to me as a substantial concern of his.

And it's not just there, the Gulf states, the Europeans. There is a lot of concern about the activities the Iranian government is undertaking. Indeed, I think there's a lot of concern in Iran, by the Iranian people, about the activities of their government. This is not a regime that is in tune with the wishes of its people.

Barbara Starr: All right. Let's get to some questions, and bear with me because the lights are in my eyes. I'm going to start with [Courtney Cubey 00:31:24] right here, and then we'll come right back. I'll go this way because I can see, and then we'll come back over here.

Courtney Cubey: For starters, Secretary [inaudible 00:31:32], I wanted to just thank you for being what I believe is the first Defense Department official to appear at [Aspen 00:31:37] this week, so thank you very much for being here.

Going back to what you were talking about, about potential for additional cooperation with Russia. Do you think that could include Secretary Mattis meeting with his Russian counterpart, Defense Minister Shoygu? There's been some reports that the secretary might be considering it. Do you think that would be a productive relationship?

And coming out of Helsinki, the Russians said that there was some talk about Syria. Do you know anything about that? Do you know if there is any potential for the US to work more with Russia to help push Iran back from the borders with Jordan or Israel? Is there anything you can enlighten us on where the US might be cooperating with Russia on that? Thank you.

John Rood: Syria is an area that obviously the Russians are present in. Our forces are present there. And as I mentioned earlier, we've enjoyed a professional relationship that is productive for deconfliction. We don't collaborate with the Russian government in the activities of our military forces there. We certainly do have concerns at times about the behavior of their military forces, but we have a very professional, ongoing exchange that occurs on a very regular basis with the Russians. And that kind of [mil to mil 00:32:51] collaboration is one of the things that you hope in a relationship can be a ballast, if you will, in the ship.

In the other military areas, other people in our joint staff, The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and others, interface with their Russian counterparts. And while I don't have anything to announce with respect to Secretary Mattis' meetings or travel, certainly American defense secretaries have met with their Russian counterparts over the years. This would certainly be something that could be, potentially in the future.

Barbara Starr: And even with Crimea, still you can ... Crimea is not a showstopper right now in the US, Russian relationship.

John Rood: Yeah, but Barbara, meeting does not constitute agreeing. In the case of Crimea ... I mean even President Putin in his description at the Helsinki Summit said President Trump had made clear the US position is that Russia's annexation of Crimea is an illegal act which does not respect the sovereignty of another country, in this case Ukraine. So, the fact that we would meet and have a discussion certainly shouldn't be taken to, in any way, constitute agreement with the actions that the Russian government has taken there.

Barbara Starr: I think there was a gentleman right back there.

Guy Swan: Mr. Secretary, Guy Swan. I'm from the association of the US Army, and a proud member of the Aspen Institute Homeland Security Group. You, thankfully, gave us a good update on Isis in Iraq, which has been essentially taken out. Pretty good success in Syria. But as we all know, these terrorists tend to migrate to other places, one of which is Sub-Saharan Africa, and North Africa. And we all recall the unfortunate attack on special forces troops there not long ago that garnered a lot of attention and a reassessment of our force posture in Africa. Could you bring us up to date on that?

John Rood: The fight to defeat Isis is ongoing, and it's a global one. As I mentioned, if I'd been sitting here a couple years ago, we would have talked about this terrible concern that we had about the growth of the so called [caliphate 00:35:09], and worried about the stability in Iraq, worried about the stability of Syria in that area. But we've also saw activities outside that theater elsewhere in the world, in Asia, in Southeast Asia, places like the Philippines.

But sticking with Iraq and Syria. Isis' caliphate is no more. We have shattered the caliphate. In Iraq, the Iraqis government: You don't see stories. You're not reporting that the Iraqis government is on the brink, facing an onslaught from Isis. We have a great collaboration there. We are in support of partners on the ground.

In Syria, again, the liberation of the Dasheda area is just the latest in a strong of that. Over 98% of the physical caliphate has been cleared from Isis. We still have some remaining work to do. But for instance-

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John Rood: We still have some remaining work to do. But for instance, I walked the streets of Manbij in the north, an area that about a year ago was liberated from Isis. And it was really remarkable to see. First of all, I walked like this. No need to wear helmets or body armor or other things. Secondly, to talk to people. The children, the local shopkeepers, people in the area. And to see the stability that has returned there, and the life and the economic activity, is really gratifying.

And just think, just a year ago, this place was under the brutal rule of Isis. So, there's a lot of hope there. But this is a global movement. And we have to keep in mind, there is a movement that seeks to attract adherents to this brand of violent extremism.

We've made some progress there as well, that I'm happy about. For example, you saw in Afghanistan, 2,700 members of the religious Ulema meet in a Loya Jjirga in a tent bigger than this, and agree on a religious statement saying things like committing suicide acts, suicide bombings, was violative of the tenets of Islam. Calling for peace in Afghanistan. Calling for the Taliban to lay down their arms and to seek peace with the Afghan government.

You see that elsewhere as well. Very heartened, and the Saudi government has been a good partner of ours. President Trump, as you recall, his first summit. He had a Riyadh summit with the Saudi government. But then he had a meeting of over 50 countries to talk about ... 50 Middle Eastern, in many cases, majority Islamic countries, to talk about how you deal with this global movement, this challenge that we face. Saudi government taking some steps. Religious Ulema in that country, the organization of the Islamic conference. The Grand Imam of the mosque in Mecca releasing statements saying this kind of terrorism is not consistent with being a good Muslim. In Indonesia we've seen statements like that. Pakistan. And this is one of the areas that in this global movement we've got to be working with friends and allies, and we've also got to pay attention to the ideological underpinnings.

But I'm very pleased to say the physical caliphate that was such a draw for jihadists from around the world is no longer. And that draw, we're not seeing that number of foreign terrorists, fighters and others flock to Syria to fight in the way that they were before.

Barbara Starr:

But you ... To follow up if I may on the question, on Africa you are seeing some growth of radical extremism is Africa. And that's very tough operating environment for US special forces. They have to operate in small teams, they don't have a lot of logistical support, a lot of Medevac, a lot of fire support, a lot of air cover. And Niger showed that, if nothing else. So, what is your ... Where are you headed right now on keeping these small special ops teams out there on the front edge of this fight against Isis-related groups in Africa? Or do you need to pull back and regroup on this?

John Rood:

Al Qaeda and Isis and a number of other similar groups remain a serious concern in Africa. But part of our national strategy is to work ... the national defense strategy, is to work by, with, and through partners. And to work very closely with allies. So your discussion about Africa and the growing concerns that not only the United States, but our allies have, is very valid. We're working very closely, as an example, with the French. French have made a major commitment of their forces. United States, in a lot of ways, we are acting as enablers, as support to our colleagues there. We're working very closely with

the British, with local forces. And with indigenous forces. So it is in a by, with, and through approach. It doesn't require the kind of large-scale commitment of numbers of US troops because you are working in a partnership with others.

Barbara Starr: Sure. But Niger showed the risk of that. So, let's just ... If nothing else. So, I think Americans probably want to know, is that still military policy. By, with, and through, we get it. But still to have small teams out there. By, with, and through, and working with locals, but six hours away from Medevac. No air cover. I mean, is that still, are you still going to have small teams out there facing the potential of combat? Or do they stay in larger bases and troops come to them for training and advising? Or do your guys go out there right to the front edge?

John Rood: The loss of four Americans in Niger certainly underscores the danger of these kinds of operations and the risk we face. Now, as you know, in that particular case there was a very substantial investigation done after the fact. And a number of corrective actions have been undertaken to try to address some of those shortcomings. And there were some. One of the things that's the beauty of our system, we don't seek to hide those things, to hivy them off, to disregard them. We take them pretty frontally full-on in the defense department. And so, while we weren't pleased in hindsight to look at how that unfolded, serious actions are being undertaken. And I don't want to, for obvious reasons, go through all of the tactical adjustments we've taken in Africa-

Barbara Starr: No, no. I think we want to look forward. Do you still keep these teams, small teams, out there, village by village? Or do they stay in a base, an encampment, and have other troops come to them for training and advice? Or do you continue to put them out there, village by village?

John Rood: For training, and again it depends on the circumstances. We do a lot of training for our partners and capacity building that we're going to continue to do. I think in terms of when we choose to deploy special operations teams, and in what scenarios, again I don't think you're going to see a fundamental reevaluation on our part. Because again, we're doing that not just in Africa. We're doing it in the Middle East, we're doing it in Asia, elsewhere in the world. That's part of their long-standing mission is the SOF. Advice and assist missions, working with partner forces. So that, Americans should expect that that will continue. And the specific modalities, exactly when and where, is just not something I want to get into in the public domain.

Barbara Starr: Okay. Let me see some more questions. I ... Ah. Michael. That's you. Okay.

Michael Gordon: Michael Gordon, Wall Street Journal. Following up on Barbara Starr's question on arms control, you indicated sir, that you are open to strategic stability talks with the Russians. The Russians have said exactly the same. Do you now have an understanding with the Russians to resume these strategic stability talks coming out of Helsinki? When might that, when will these talks, might they occur? And

what do you plan to discuss when the talks resume? What are the issues you intend to raise?

John Rood: Michael, I don't think ... We have not settled on a specific date for the next exchanges that we would have with the Russians on strategic stability talks. That's one of the things that still remains to be worked out. In terms of the second part of your question, what would we talk about, obviously things such as clear understandings of how we regard nuclear doctrine, under what circumstances ... Let's start at the basics. What are you signaling when you undertake certain actions. A transparency. An understanding of what messages, how we think about the use of our forces. Very important for stability, and to avoid any kind of misunderstandings.

Also, what's the future direction of the Russian strategic force. President Putin gave a very well covered, I read about it, including in your newspaper, press conference in which he talked about some of the new capabilities that Russia's pursuing. Understanding the intent behind those, understanding how the Russians see those, would be some of the things that I would put on the agenda. Certainly the Russians have indicated some of their concerns. You're not just going to talk about, at a bilateral exchange like that, the things that Americans have concerns about. The Russians, they will obviously bring some of their concerns to the table as well.

So that's the kind of thing that you ultimately want. And you want a result where you understand each other better as a minimum. And ideally, you can take steps to manage that. And some of the activities the Russian government has taken with some of their nuclear exercises and others have been very concerning to us, to our NATO allies. Now, that would be another area that I would want to delve into.

Barbara Starr: So, what you're saying here tonight is, the date remains to be decided, but there will be these talks.

John Rood: Well, it takes two to tango, and I know that we have proposed some dates to our Russian colleagues, and we hope that they will respond and accept those.

Barbara Starr: Since Helsinki ... I just like to go for accuracy here. So since Helsinki, the US administration has proposed dates to the Russians for a resumption of talks on strategic stability. This is post-Helsinki.

John Rood: Well, for us at the defense department, we had proposed these discussions before Helsinki. And the ones that we are involved in are the sort of discussions that would include the State Department, certainly our National Security Council colleagues. I don't want to get into specific timings of exactly when we offered what to the Russians, but suffice it to say, we're in the process of trying to arrange a period of time, a date and a place to meet to have strategic stability talks.

Barbara Starr: Began before Helsinki, as you said. You said the department proposed it before Helsinki. And it's certainly still in play post-Helsinki.

John Rood: These are always, and by the way, it's a natural thing, when you're scheduling these meetings with other parties, that you have some back-and-forth on them. But we strategic stability talks in the past. We would like to have them again. And so we're just, again, trying to work out the schedule. And-

Barbara Starr: Okay.

John Rood: ... exactly when they'll happen, of course, that's partly dependent on the Russians' actions.

Barbara Starr: Let me go back to over here please. And we just have probably five, six minutes left, let's say.

Speaker 1: Mr. Secretary, it's David Ignatius from the Washington Post. President Trump, some weeks ago, said publicly that he wanted to create a space force, separate from the Air Force. Chairman Dunford was standing near him, and he said, "Got it?" and Dunford said, "Yes, sir, got it." So I want to ask, first, do you think this is a good idea? Second, what is the Pentagon doing now to prepare for the creation of this force? And third, assuming that this is going to happen, how are you going to minimize the bureaucratic chaos, the transitional problems which just are going to be enormous by everyone's account, in the process of creating this new force?

John Rood: Well, first of all I wanted to compliment you on the panel you chaired earlier on China. I thought that was a very good discussion. With respect to your comments on space, first let's start off with, space is an increasingly contested domain. And there are significant reasons why we in the United States are more concerned about the threat that we face in that domain, and the need to have a very vibrant, capable set of not only physical capabilities, but obviously the way that we organize and train and equip our force to respond to that. On of the things that we have a legal requirement to do is to submit a report to Congress by August 1st that lays out some of that organizational thinking that we have. Thinking about how we might speed the development and fielding of capabilities to that force, and how that force will operate, doctrinally and organizationally. So, when you said what are we working on right now, well that's one of the things earlier in the week that we were working on. And when I left the Pentagon yesterday, and were going to continue that work obviously as we go forward.

All the specifics in the latter half of your question there where you talked about exactly how that will operate, and minimizing bureaucratic inefficiencies, that's still something that's a challenge for us that we're working through. But the goal is to have the ability to move capabilities to the field sooner. To do that obviously in a more cost-effective way. And also to have a force, because after

all, across the joint force, there are equities of the space force. And that joint force with different equities and different needs faces a very contested environment in space right now. So these are hard questions that we're still working our way through. But we're on track to submit a report to Congress on August 1st. And so, you know, touch wood, we'll ... This is not wood, I guess. But touch wood, we'll be able to get there.

Barbara Starr: And in the second row ... I'm sorry, in the second row over here, that'll be our last question.

Speaker 2: Thank you. Turkey's been a stalwart friend of the United States for a long time, but given the political changes that are going on there, do you have any thoughts, concerns, about Turkey's role in the Middle East? And further, their role in NATO?

John Rood: The short answer is yes. Clearly, NATO ... Turkey's been a good ally of the United States, and we've had a 70-year relationship in NATO. That's important to us. We're trying very hard to continue that relationship going forward. We have a range of collaborative activities with the Turkish government. They participate in our various defense programs. We have US bases there. But there are strains, and there are areas that we are trying to work through in that relationship. We're concerned about things such as the detention of Pastor Brunson as was mentioned by President Trump this week. We're also trying to work through, and I'm optimistic that we have ... are making a lot of progress, in Northern Syria. We had concerns when the Turkish government moved into Afrin, that area of Syria. So we negotiated, Secretary Pompeo and his Turkish counterpart a roadmap, in which we are doing things like working towards joint patrols in the area. Working towards other arrangements that we hope will be a very productive way to manage that area that, in the past, had some friction.

We are concerned about other areas. So one of the things that we've talked to our Turkish colleagues about is the fact that we would not want to see them acquire the S-400 air defense system from Russia. That system is not, cannot, and never will be interoperable with the rest of the NATO alliance. And so, we've offered alternatives. American-produced equipment. It's something that we have engaged with them to discourage them from doing due to the effect on the interoperability alliance. So these are things we've got to work through as friends and allies. But fortunately, we've got a 70-year history to draw upon. We have a lot of people with personal relationships with their Turkish counterparts who have worked over the years together at various ranks. Who've served together in different parts of the world. So, you know, hopefully we can draw upon that foundation to work through some of the topical issues, I guess, or current issues that we have in the relationship.

Barbara Starr: So I'm going to give myself the last question. So, what ...

Speaker 3: Sounds good to me.

Barbara Starr: It's my prerogative.

John Rood: I love it.

Barbara Starr: So you just said something very interesting, which we know, that you don't want them getting the S-400, you're offering alternatives. But what happens if they just say, we're going to do it? We're going to get ... What happens to the NATO interoperability there, you know, air defense operability, on that southern rim. What happens if they go ahead with the S-400?

John Rood: What happened to asking yourself the last question?

Barbara Starr: I'm asking you.

John Rood: No, look. Obviously the future is to be written in this area. For our part, in the United States and throughout NATO there's a shared concern about that potential acquisition, it's something we've had very frank discussions with our Turkish counterparts about. And so obviously we would not want to see that acquisition move forward. And in terms of, you know, what would come next, I don't want to speculate about the future. I want to remain optimistic that it can be resolved in a way that's very favorable for us.

Barbara Starr: All right. Well, on that, we are going to thank John for his time today. And I would like to take a minute to thank actually our hosts at Aspen for their very gracious hospitality to the news media. We really do appreciate it. Thank you.

PART 3 OF 3 ENDS [00:53:21]