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TRANSCRIPT  
HTK Series

**“Epic Fury: The Campaign Against Iran’s Missile &  
Nuclear Infrastructure”**

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Kari A. Bingen      In the early morning hours of Saturday, February 28th, the United States and Israel began a major military campaign in Iran – Operation Epic Fury by the United States and operation Roaring Lion by Israel – targeting its national leadership, including the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, military forces, and intelligence networks. To date, Iran has retaliated against Israel as well as U.S. bases and partner countries in the region using its ballistic missile and drone arsenal. Let's take a look at President Trump's announcement.

President Donald J. Trump  
(from video):      We are going to destroy their missiles and raze their missile industry to the ground. It will be totally, again, obliterated.

Ms. Bingen:      The president then outlined several objectives for the campaign that include destroying Iran's missile and nuclear infrastructure, naval assets, and proxy forces. So six days in, let's take stock of where the campaign is at and specifically examine the strategic forces-related dimensions of it. What has defined the campaign thus far? What are the prospects for eliminating Iran's missile and nuclear threats? What does a prolonged campaign mean for U.S. munitions, inventories, missile defense capacity, and force readiness? And what are the broader regional and global implications of the conflict?

I'm Kari Bingen, director of the Aerospace Security Project. I'm joined by Heather Williams, director of the CSIS Project on Nuclear Issues, and Tom Karako, director of the CSIS Missile Defense Project, to answer these questions. Welcome back to the HTK Series, devoted to talking about strategic forces issues of the day. HTK stands for Heather, Tom, and Kari, but for the defense wonks out there it also stands for hit to kill. We will take audience questions, so please submit those online via the event page.

OK. I'm actually going to kick it off to myself this time. And, Heather, it's great to see you remotely. I know you're up in Boston. You've had a lot of snow and other events there. So thanks for joining us virtually today.

Let me start with a brief battle space update, because I think it's important to provide a bit of the scene setter for folks that maybe haven't been tracking all of the developments and, frankly, some of the press conferences that Secretary of War Hegseth and Chairman the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Caine have done. We're now in day six of major combat operations, as they've called them. Several rationales have been provided, as I hinted at the outset. The president has talked about preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, dismantling proxy forces, destroying missile capabilities, providing freedom for the

Iranian people to set up basically regime change. And he's also said that this could be a campaign that would take weeks, or longer.

It started off over the weekend with a stunning takeout of Iranian leadership, including its supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei, and several other key military and government leaders. They targeted – the military forces, our forces, Israeli forces – targeted leadership, command and control nodes, nuclear and missile infrastructure, drone bases, naval assets, and intelligence infrastructure. At a Pentagon press conference yesterday, General Caine outlined the specific military objectives for this campaign, that focused on dismantling Iranian power projection today and into the future, including eliminating ballistic missile systems, destroying naval assets, degrading Iran's retaliatory capability and ability to rebuild their combat forces.

He mentioned – and I'll pull this up here in an image – he mentioned that U.S. operations were focused on the south, the southern flank. And we'll see if we can get this working here. U.S. operations were focused on the southern flank against ballistic missiles and air defenses. And then Israeli operations were focused largely in the north, against ballistic missiles and air defenses. U.S. forces, predominantly through air power, have struck over 2,000 targets, over 20 Iranian naval vessels. And I wanted to give a few examples of some of those strikes here. Nuclear infrastructure. Natanz. Here's a perfect example of the Natanz nuclear production facility struck in Operation Midnight Hammer in June of last year. Additional strikes happened over the last few days. And so you can see some of the damage at that site. I'll do another image here. Additional damage.

On the missile front, one of Iran's key missile bases at Khorramabad, it's a major underground missile base believed to house many missile silos. This is a before picture. And then another image. Thank you, Vantor, for providing us these images. You see after, the tunnel to that underground facility was struck. And then finally I'll show an example here of a drone air base, Konarak Air Base. You see destruction of a hangar and support building, as well as cratering of the runway – making any drones – making it difficult for any drones to be able to take off – one-way drones to take off and strike.

So with all of that firepower, General Caine mentioned yesterday that Iranian theater ballistic missile shots have been reduced by 86 percent, and then one-way attack drones shot down – shoot downs have decreased about 73 percent from some of the early days. So significant. But we've also seen significant retaliation too on the Iranian part, with over 500 ballistic missiles and 2,000 drones overall striking U.S. bases,

civilian infrastructure in the region. We've seen the loss of six servicemembers killed in action in Kuwait.

And then here at home, our reactions are divided. You're seeing most Republicans support this operation, framing it as necessary to weaken Iran's military and deter future attacks. You're seeing Democrats divided, more skeptical, concerned about the rationale, escalation risks, and then done without congressional authorization. And then the domestic reaction also has been polarized as well.

So with that scene-setter maybe, Tom, I can turn to you here and ask you what have been your observations on the campaign and the responses thus far? What has defined the campaign for you thus far?

Tom Karako:

Well, it's, obviously, an historic undertaking. The size and the scale of the joint force that's been deployed there is just remarkably impressive. At the same time, from a historical perspective, I kind of see it as Operation Midnight Hammer Part 2.

And I was recalling we were talking earlier that, you know, last summer I remember kind of being critical of the administration for throwing the Iranian regime a lifeline at the end and calling for peace as opposed to kind of continuing on to basically regime change or further destruction of their facilities.

And so I think that's kind of where we're at now. I remember saying at the time, you know, if you don't keep going and finish the job, the Iranians are going to be able to rebuild and then we're going to be back here a year - a year later and I think that's where we find ourselves now.

And, Kari, you alluded to the many different explanations for what it is we're trying to do here. The one that I find quite compelling is the one from Secretary Rubio right after he came out of the meeting with the Gang of Eight, or one of his meetings with the Gang of Eight, where he basically contrasted the production rate on the part of the Iranians recently since last summer of a hundred missiles a month or something like that, relative to, frankly, our missile defense interceptor production rates.

He said six or seven interceptors a month. It's actually more than that. He was probably thinking of one particular missile defense system. I'm guessing THAAD in that statement.

But, regardless, they're building a lot more ballistic missiles and tons more drones than we're able to build interceptors, and so that's why I

think this makes sense militarily as a preventive war, as a preventive action, recognizing that time is not on our side and that it was going to be in our interests and, perhaps, necessary, to arrest this trend – that time is not on our side and neither was the production rates on our side, and we just can't afford to sit and catch the ballistic missile attacks over and over again.

And, you know, this – and Heather may get into the nuclear things. I'm not – I'm just kind of struggling to see some of the nuclear angles here. But, you know, back to the Iran deal from the Obama administration, you remember kind of the debating point about the time was, hey, the missile program is not out – it was not included in that. And I think we're kind of paying the wages for that right now.

Whether you think it's good or bad or necessary or whatever, I see this as, largely, about the missile program. So I think the crack research team of the Missile Defense Project updated the Iranian missile map this week, which we can pull up here, just to give you a quick snapshot of what we're talking about in terms of the range.

And this includes the Shaheds, of course, which, you know, have all kinds of fancy names of UAVs and such like that, but they're essentially cruise missiles. I mean, we're talking 900 – over 2,000 kilometers for these things. I'm sorry, but that's – that, to me, is a cruise missile.

And then so how have we done? Kari, you alluded to the numbers fired. I want to pull up another graph here, which is not ours – it's from Reuters – about the number of ballistic and cruise missile and UAVs that have been engaged not by the United States but against those fired against some of the other Gulf states, if we can – if we can pull up that table.

And actually the intercept rate is looking pretty good. Now, there is some discrepancy in the reporting and so don't take this for gospel, but in terms of the ballistic missiles intercepted it's pretty dang good.

And back to Rubio's point, it's not that we can't intercept those, it's that we don't have enough to keep doing it every summer as a kind of pastime. But it's the cruise – well, actually, the cruise missiles are catching them but it's the UAVs that are getting through, at least in greater numbers anyway.

They're launching more of them but it's just a harder problem to intercept – to intercept those things because they're low and slow. They may not crest the horizon until they're pretty close. But,

fundamentally, because they are maneuverable you don't know exactly where they're going.

And so for counter UAS, for cruise missile defense, you have to have your defense – your guns, your Coyotes, or whatever – you have to have it relatively close to your defended asset. And that creates the dilemma of it's impossible to have defenses everywhere, and so you're going to have a lot of things undefended. And that may be partly why there were some things – there were those casualties, for instance, and a number of different especially drones getting through, not so much the – not so much the ballistic missiles.

So that's the big picture. I think there's some broader historical and kind of executive-congressional relations things to get into, as well as, frankly, the discussion about, OK, what do we do on replenishment of all this kit. But back to you – or, maybe over to you, Heather.

Ms. Bingen: Can I –

Dr. Karako: Yeah.

Ms. Bingen: Sorry, Heather. I'm going to jump in on this because I wanted to echo the comment you made about Secretary Rubio. And you know, I do think there's been discussion on what is our rationale or what is the administration's rationale for Operation Epic Fury. And I do believe for our military forces, for the American people, there does need to be clarity of mission: What are we asking our servicemembers to do?

At the same point in time, we can have more than one objective. And I think Secretary Rubio's comments really hit to the heart of, you know, an argument that hasn't been spoken as much, which is, you know, this really was a strategic move, or I like your framing of a preventative move. Iran, it is at its weakest point right now. There is really no better window to make general change in the security landscape in the Middle East than at this moment. Operation Midnight Hammer and Rising Lion last summer degraded much of their military infrastructure, although, you know, we continue to do that now. Air defenses were crippled. Their proxies – Hamas, Hezbollah – have been devastated.

I actually thought as we were wrapping up last year and doing a bit of a reflection, I thought this would be a quiet year for Iran. They'd be focusing on licking their wounds, rebuilding. But, you know, there is a strategic window here, and I think – I suspect this administration thought: Hey, we don't want them to rebuild. If we're going to have a chance now – and I imagine, you know, Israel, it seems like, is,

obviously, a big influence in that. But if we don't act now, Iran will rebuild. Perhaps they will be motivated to race to a nuclear weapon as its ultimate form of protection and regime survival. You know, successive administrations – Republican, Democrat – have long said as a matter of policy Iran can't have nuclear weapons. So it's was this that moment or not? And I think that's a discussion and a debate to put on the table.

Dr. Karako: And it depends, I think. It depends on whether it continues to the end.

Ms. Bingen: Yeah. Yeah, that's a great point.

So, Heather, what's your take on the campaign so far?

Heather Williams: Yeah. Picking up right where you left off, Kari, in terms of the potential justifications, there have, obviously, been a host of potential justifications suggested, and the nuclear angle, but they're pretty consistent. For this round, it was that we cannot allow Iran to have a nuclear program, and supposedly because there was no progress in the ongoing talks between the U.S. and Iran this was the moment for the Trump administration.

What was actually going on in those talks? We still don't know a lot. There were a lot of leaks. They were one-sided leaks. They weren't always totally clear. I don't know how trustworthy some of that leaked information was. My best bet is that the breakdown of those talks was specifically over the right to enrich. So, technically, any member of the – any state party to the NPT has the right to enrich as long as they are in compliance with their obligations. And there was – one of the rumors coming out of the talks was that the U.S. might provide some nuclear material to Iran specifically for medical research, and this would get after that question of does Iran have the right to enrich at all based on its history. But you know, the talks, those are – you know, we've moved past that at this point.

But a big point of confusion for me is the narrative coming out of the Trump administration on this nuclear justification, because on the one hand Midnight Hammer was supposed to be perfect. It was supposed to have completely eliminated the nuclear program. If that's the case, it's kind of hard to make the justification for additional strikes on the nuclear program only six, seven months later.

So, you know, let's look at what has actually changed in Iran's nuclear program in the interim. Like the Missile Defense program, the Project on Nuclear Issues has been doing a lot of in-depth research looking at some satellite imagery of different nuclear sites in Iran. What we saw

was that there was some evidence of rebuilding, like putting in perimeter fencing, maybe trying to dig out some of the tunnels, maybe some new tunnelling activity, but nothing that was really all that significant, at least from what we and others saw. There were some remnants going on it – what was left after Midnight Hammer, there were some remnants left at Isfahan and at Natanz. But I also want to stress what wasn't hit in Midnight Hammer, because that's one of the things I'm watching most closely. Some of the things that weren't hit in Midnight Hammer, we don't think that we got Iran's stockpile of 60 percent enriched uranium, which is believed to be 400 kilograms if not higher. Also, right before Midnight Hammer, Iran revealed that they have a third enrichment site. We don't think we got that in Midnight Hammer. There are also explosives, weaponization sites. And some of those were hit more recently. For example, Parchin, which is an explosives testing site where it's believed that a lot of Iran's weaponization work was done in the early 2000s.

So what we've seen hit now includes Parchin. There have been a lot of targets around Isfahan. And, Kari, you showed that really great satellite imagery of Natanz as well. There are two sites that haven't been hit that I want to stress. The first of these is Pickaxe Mountain. We have been monitoring Pickaxe Mountain really closely because we know that this is some – this is a site where some nuclear activity is going on. It wasn't hit in Midnight Hammer, but also it hasn't been hit yet in this operation. I find that a little strange. The second site that I'm watching really closely is the Bushehr reactor. We have had strikes around Bushehr, at the port. There have been some strikes around the reactor. But the reactor itself had not been hit. Now, this is a good thing because you don't really want to hit the nuclear reactor and risk having some sort of, you know, nuclear radioactive incident. The other reason, though, is that there are 637 Russian staff at the Bushehr reactor because of an agreement between the Iranians and Russia's state-owned nuclear energy company Rosatom.

So, but just circling back to the potential justifications for this, and that kind of paradox that I see between, well, if you hit everything why do you have to hit again, I think there's three possibilities here to just put on the table. One of them is that there was evidence of significant Iranian rebuilding, so that this was a preventive strike. Another option is that Midnight Hammer wasn't as effective as we were told. And another option might be that these strikes are not about nuclear. That this is about preventing other capabilities, as Tom outlined. Or, I mean, there's so many options out there for what this was about. But curious what you guys think about the different possibilities and justifications for this.

Ms. Bingen: Yeah. Great.

Tom, what's your take on the justification with regard to Iran's missile threat? You know, obviously, the threat I posed to the region, but then also the U.S. homeland. And you showed those missile range ring charts earlier.

Dr. Karako: Yeah. I tell you, the dog that's – or a dog that hasn't barked, thankfully, you know, is the potential, for instance, sleeper cells in the United States. We don't have to worry about ICBMs from Iran but, you know, there's other things, as we were reminded with Operation Spider Web in Ukraine. Other folks are capable of doing those things as well. But thankfully, so far, we haven't seen anything like that. That's probably an intel and that sort of an undertaking.

In terms of the broader sweep, I think I want to – I want to take – I mean, actually, as I said before, I thought the Rubio explanation for them is important. That's what I think this is about. That is what I think is the forcing function for, essentially, the urgency. There may be some urgency on the nuclear sign as well. I don't know. But when time is not on your side on the production rates, that's where I see it as not a good piece to prolong, as it were. And then I also can't help but think, you know, as you said, you know, in some respects it was in Israel's interest in particular to go after Iran. And it's just important to repeat again that this is all in the shadow of October 7th.

October 7th was a massive tactical success by Hamas and other proxies of Iran, and that sort of thing. But it absolutely changed not just the military but the political dynamic and the political willingness to kind of continue to just, basically, mow the lawn on a periodic basis by Israel. So it's really hard. I think it's deceptive not to keep this in that context that Israel has been moving from Hamas, to Hezbollah, to Iran. It's a maximalist approach. And, by the way, so far they've been doing pretty dang good at it.

Ms. Bingen: Well, and you're right on Israel. I mean, it shifted the discussion there. And it really shook them to their core. But they ended up concluding that even though this was Hamas, all roads lead back to Iran. So eventually this was going to have to be settled in the capital of Tehran.

On the missile defense side, you highlighted the intercept rates of both missiles and drones. That is stunning. But it's happening against two backdrops here. One is just this ongoing challenge and discussion we've had here on surging our industrial base to address these munitions shortfalls. But then also, second, there's an international piece to this. So many of our allies in the gulf states have Patriot and

other missile defense systems. So how is that working? And how are they – are they all working together? I know this has been a longstanding issue for how you work in integrated missile defense and air defense architecture in the gulf.

Dr. Karako:

Yeah. Well, look, I struggle a little bit to understand the tactical utility of Iran, their spasm of attacks against just about everybody in the region, including Turkey, you know. Another dog that hasn't barked here, and I can't help but wonder what is the other big thing that's going to come, according to the president, according to Secretary Hegseth, is I wonder if other gulf states might get involved. You see a couple of our NATO friends sending some forces to the Mediterranean, for instance. And so I think there is the potential for others to kind of pile on. So I think that's going to be something to continue to watch.

In terms of the missile defenses, ye, verily. You know, look, the Saudis, the Emiratis, lots of other folks with Patriot. But in the scheme of things, not enough, and certainly not enough that can be sustained. And here you talked to the production thing. So we had hundreds and hundreds – a scary number of missile defense interceptors – employed last summer. I'm kind of dreading finding out what the number is that we've done over this past week. I suspect it's going to be an uncomfortably big number. It's great. We have to – you have to do it in the moment. But, you know, missile defense buys you time to end the threat by other means. And it is now incumbent to see the job through and to, no kidding, end the threat by other means. Because, again, we can't keep coming back to do this.

But the discussion that you're alluding to, the munitions ramp, the Munitions Acceleration Council, all this kind of stuff, by the way, all that was put in place before Operation Midnight Hammer, before the 12-day war. The U.S. Army quadrupled its objective inventory number for PAC-3 MSE in the budget request from last April. That was before any of this kicked off. So there's a couple things going on. One, the Ukrainian conflict and the engagements in the Red Sea and the Middle East over the past couple of years has really kind of driven home that, oops, our estimates of what our inventories need to be for our various contingencies are dramatically too low. Dramatically too low. That's one thing.

And that's independent of the next thing, which is we have to replenish what we used last summer and we have to replenish what we're doing right now. And this is why there's a meeting. There's been a number of press releases about strategic framework agreements for up to seven prioritized munitions so far, probably a few more to come. And there's a meeting in the White House reportedly tomorrow, Friday, with the

heads of a couple, and specifically I think two, defense companies who are the main producers of – who are the only primes for these prioritized munitions.

And, you know, this is independent of the current problem. They want to go from about 96 THAADs a year to 400. They want to go from 650 MSEs to over 2,000 MSEs a year – factory MSE. They want to go from – I think we requested 57 Tomahawks last year. Fifty-seven. Like, that's what we use in an afternoon on just sort of mowing the lawn with terrorist strikes sometimes. Secretary Feinberg wants to go to over 1,000 Tomahawks per year. That is the munitions ramp that we have been waiting for. That's the good news.

The bad news is those strategic framework agreements are not contracts. I can't tell you the number of reporters I talked to who were, like, well, there were these press releases and everything's under contract. No. The situation is worse than meets the eye because every day that goes by without an actual contract for these prioritized munitions endangers the whole enterprise. And that is – it worries me. And this is why, A, the '26 appropriations – Congress acknowledged when they passed them in January that they were \$28.8 billion, with a B, short of what the of what DOD had requested just for munitions. And that's because the request came over late, but regardless.

Start with a \$28.8 billion deficit just on munitions, and then you go and you're spending at least a billion dollars a day for jet fuel and all these operations. This leads me to say, A, even if we weren't doing this undertaking, we would need a munitions supplemental. And the combination of that shortfall, that very significant shortfall just on munitions, combined with our current expenditures and combined with our operational expenditures, I think it's going to be imperative to get a big supplemental. And by big supplemental, I mean triple-digit billions.

Ms. Bingen:

No, that's a really great point.

If I can go back to – I wanted to answer my own question earlier on observations on the campaign and just offer three points here.

One is just on the air campaign and air superiority. I mean, our largely Air Force and Navy air presence – the bombers to the strike aircraft to the tankers, I mean, all of the enablers – it has been an awesome display of American airpower. There has been a race to achieve air superiority in targeting Iranian air defenses, radars, and missiles. Those are the things you need to take out in order to be able to fly – basically, fly anywhere you want in the country. And General Caine

discussed this yesterday, and we've now – we've had this – we've been able to achieve localized superiority; we're now looking at expanding that air superiority to greater parts of the country that will enable deeper strikes.

That also enables a shift in munitions strategy. So when you don't have air superiority and you haven't rolled back the air defenses, you're relying on standoff weapons, which, you know, I mean, there's a limited inventory there.

Dr. Karako: Can I just say, I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard General Caine say the words “munitions transfer” – or, “transition” –

Ms. Bingen: Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Karako: – from all the standoff stuff that we need to save for a rainy day with China to stand-in weapons like gravity bombs.

Ms. Bingen: Gravity bombs.

Dr. Karako: Thank you.

Ms. Bingen: GPS-guided. We have a lot of those, so that's good.

The second piece here I'd be remiss if I also didn't talk about the space dimensions. And General Caine, in the first press conference he did over the weekend, talked about Cyber Command and Space Command having a role in – having a first-mover role in layering on cyber effects and space effects to create a pathway similar to what we did in Venezuela with Operation Absolute Resolve for follow-on forces. We're also, though, seeing the use of counterspace weapons. So the Iranians have long used jamming devices – GPS jamming, satellite jamming, GPS spoofing. We're seeing that here. They have long held – had very sophisticated cyberattack capabilities, so we should expect to see that here as well.

And then just lastly, on intelligence, I would just say, because I want to commend the intelligence community that I've been fortunate to work with over the years, you know, this very much was an – has been an intelligence success, particularly I'll say at the tactical and the operational levels – so Central Command, DIA, others, others in the community. We've had a longstanding intelligence relationship with Israel. They have tremendous capability against Iran and their proxy forces. We saw it with Hezbollah and the pager operation. Last year we saw it with Operation Rising Lion and their ability to precisely go after military leadership and command and control. The U.S. military,

obviously, has had longstanding operational plans, so the intelligence community has – I mean, they prepared for this day in terms of the target development, assessments on Iranian military capabilities, order of battle, leadership, how Iran would respond, what the regional responses would be. So, you know, there's still a long way to go here, but I do just want to call out the tremendous work of our intelligence community to enable I'll say successful military activity, but also to keep our forces protected in the region.

Heather, what's your take on the broader regional reaction and international perspectives? What are you hearing from allies, for example?

Dr. Williams:

From allies I'm actually going to Europe next week, so I'm – this is one of the many topics I'm really eager to engage with the Europeans on.

But this is probably the number-one thing that I'm watching, which is who else gets involved. As I said, looking at Bushehr, the reactor there, and because of Iran's close ties to Russia, I'm really curious to see what the Russians do here. And I know that that's what a lot of our European allies are also pretty closely watching. So in the short term, that's the main thing. We've already heard a bit about how China might be getting more involved in terms of cooperating with Iran to some degree. But watching Russia is one that I'm really keen on, particularly after Midnight Hammer where there were reports that senior Iranian officials went to Moscow asking for help and didn't really get all that much. And the takeaway from that was Moscow isn't that great of a partner. You know, you can have a defense agreement with them, but when you're in a time of need, they might not necessarily be there for you.

But nonetheless, waiting to see who else gets involved in this in terms of much wider, potentially longer-term implications. I am really curious about how states will interpret this in terms of pursuit of independent nuclear programs.

One could be forgiven for thinking that Kim Jong-un took the better path compared to Gadhafi or the Ayatollah, and for anyone who follows nuclear Twitter, there have been some great memes about this and Kim Jong-un's decision to pursue a full nuclear program rather than going slowly, talking about it, and going to the brink and trying to use it for leverage purposes.

So what will this mean in terms of the desirability of not just getting a nuclear weapon, but moving fast to get a nuclear weapon? And that has regional implications, right? If Iran had been successful in its

development of a nuclear weapon, Saudi Arabia had indicated that they would quickly follow suit.

So it seems like the Iran nuclear program is off the table for now, but a lot of it depends on what comes next in the conflict. But, again, those bigger nuclear implications about the desirability of a full-fledged nuclear program I'm really eager to see how that's interpreted by allies and partners as well.

Ms. Bingen: OK. Let me shift gears. I want to hit two more topics.

Tom, war powers and AUMF. What's happening there?

Dr. Karako: Yeah. You know, it's a comment attributed, I think, to Charles de Gaulle, falsely, the comment, "Magnificent, but is it war?" I think there's been an interesting chatter over the past week of, is this war?

And it's interesting to see the president referred to it as a war, to see the secretary, Hegseth, refer to it as war, and the folks on Capitol Hill, or at least leadership, Republican leadership are saying, well, no, it's – this isn't war; it's something short of that.

And so, look, you can – you can fully agree with this from a policy point of view that this is a very useful and perhaps necessary thing to do. But there is this thing called the U.S. Constitution. There is this thing called Article I and the war powers of Congress.

Now, the White House can't want Congress to be a jealous guardian of its prerogatives more than they do and so there is that dilemma. But, you know, we were talking pretty candidly a minute ago about this as a preventive war, which is a war that you elect so as to avoid something later on.

I find that compelling, unless you say that we've been in a state of war with Iran for the past 40-plus years, which you can get there. You can get there. But I think that's a – it's a little bit of a – little bit of a stretch. And I would say, you know, look, Alexander Hamilton, who was no slouch on presidential war powers, you know, he said in the Pacificus-Helvidius debates that "It is up to the legislature alone to move the nation from a state of peace to a state of war," end quote, and it kind of looks like we're doing that.

And so it's not that this is the wrong thing or the bad thing on the policy point of view. But I think that the – let's just say the leadership in Congress might want to recall that the previous high watermark, I would say, for the assertion of Article 2 constitutional presidential war

powers – the previous high watermark was Obama’s Operation Odyssey Dawn, which was going after Libya in 2011.

And that was kind of controversial at the time. This, I would say, seems to eclipse that in terms of its magnitude and that is – it’s a pretty interesting milestone. Irrespective of the policy decisions it’s a pretty interesting milestone there.

Ms. Bingen: OK. So I want to incorporate a few questions here from the audience and, Tom, you and I were talking about this beforehand so I’ll lump two together.

One is what are the implications of the U.S. military’s first use of the PrSM missile in combat? How significant is that development? But then also, when we talk about the use of drones in this conflict on both sides, you know, there is algorithmic warfare now at play. There’s been a lot of discussion in the Pentagon now on the use of AI for warfighting. I believe we’ve seen reports of algorithms being used in this operation. So you want to reflect on PrSM and then reflect a bit on algorithmic warfare as it applies to the battlefield?

Dr. Karako: Yeah. Well, look, I’m barely smart enough to spell Claude, but there are news reports about Project Maven and Claude being used, at least for target selection and coordination, that kind of stuff, and it’s hard to know quantitatively or qualitatively kind of the impact of that. At the same time, it’s hard not to see the – just the remarkable success in Venezuela and so far in this – in this operation.

And then, look, on the PrSM thing, I think it was CENTCOM that tweeted out a video of HIMARS launching what was pretty identifiable as a PrSM missile. This is the missile that is the follow-on to the ATACMS. Now that we’re out of the INF Treaty it can be longer than 500 kilometers in range, and we’re going to be pumping those out like sausages. Anybody who wants – anybody in the world, our friends, who has a HIMARS launcher is going to want to stuff some PrSMs into it to have longer reach than the previous ATACMS, which, as you may recall, is kind of the thing that we were just so eager to give to the Ukrainians to give them a little longer reach.

Now, we don’t know where the PrSM was launched from. It presumably went over the Gulf and somewhere into Iran. The map you showed show a lot of strikes that were kind of on the southwest portions. But I think that’s pretty interesting. It’s at least an experiment.

There’s another, of course, munition that has to be mentioned here. This is the LUCAS drone, which is, I think, mostly poetic justice, that we

basically reverse engineered some Shaheds. We built them, reportedly – an American company – cheaper than the Iranians were producing them for and then we kind of shot a bunch of them back.

And there's a third munition that I want to mention here and that's the Mark 48 torpedo that, I guess, took out that Iranian frigate – Iranian ship – from a submarine. That's significant for a couple things.

One, we always kind of beat ourselves up about the cost-exchange ratio on our munitions versus their effect, especially on the defense side. But, you know, the cost-exchange ratio between a torpedo and an Iranian ship it ain't bad.

But the other thing is that that video just ought to be replayed over and over and over again because it's a reminder to our friends, the Chinese, that we do have a bit of an asymmetric advantage there, and I loved the ambitious goal that we're going to sink the Iranian navy. Not, like, degrade it; we're going to destroy the Iranian navy.

And I remember the comment from – I think it was Michèle Flournoy – in the kind of 2016 timeframe, she wrote an article with – you know, it says, we ought to be able to have the ambition to sink the Chinese navy in 72 hours, and I think that's something that might be resonating in some – in some brains this week.

Ms. Bingen:

Yeah, and I'll just tackle the Maven point, because I worked with that team when I served in the Pentagon, and when I was there, I mean, this was the department's pathfinder on AI.

But the whole idea, at least when it started was, you know, you're taking, say, full motion video from drones, and up until that point we had had young men and women literally staring at video screens and manually marking objects in a scene.

So a certain production facility, tanks versus trucks, you know, women and children, et cetera. So the whole point was to minimize collateral damage and fratricide and focus in on the right thing. So classification of a lot of data at machine speed and using the talents of our service members elsewhere.

So, you know, fast forward now, you know, seven, eight years, when you have these mass drone launches you need to be able to operate at machine speed to quickly classify objects that those drones are seeing and ensure that you're minimizing collateral damage and striking or targeting the right things.

And then also, when you think about AI from a defensive perspective as well as we are trying to – our military is trying to orchestrate intercepts of masses of drone raids, masses of missiles, all going at different objects.

How do you do that in mere seconds to minutes? You cannot have people manually sitting at computers doing that or, you know, you need to have the machines helping you do that orchestration in a very efficient way, particularly given our inventory challenges.

OK. A last question here, and this also incorporates some more questions from our audience. It is really – you know, as we look forward here, what should we be watching for? What are the implications and risks over the next days, weeks, and longer?

And tied to that, there was a – there's some questions here on, you know, will there be a need for ground forces in Iran.

So maybe, Heather, I'll start with you. We'll go to Tom and myself.

Dr. Williams:

Yeah. In terms of what to watch for on the nuclear side, I am watching for strikes on Pickaxe Mountain. I am watching to see if there are additional strikes on Natanz, Isfahan, and if there's any news on whether or not we have hit any of the remaining Iranian nuclear facilities.

But the other thing, which is a bit of a catastrophic thing to watch for, but it is whether or not there is a serious nuclear incident. Nuclear material can be pretty fussy. It's not something that you want getting released. It's not something you want being spread. IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi has already said that that's something that the agency is watching closely for. I think the only other thing to flag that I'm watching for, as I said, it is Russia's next move. And there is a risk of accidentally pulling Russia into this war before we would want them to be, if at all. And Bushehr looks like – to me, Bushehr seems a risk in that sense.

In terms of boots on the ground, this is also something I'm watching, it has these reports coming out that the CIA is encouraging Kurdish forces to get involved, but also statements from President Trump for the Iranian people to get involved in regime change and change of government. And my concern, I mean, the IRGC is still pretty powerful. And so seeing how they respond to that. And there may come a point where it's hard to see, whether it's Kurdish forces or the Iranian people succeeding, without some sort of support from U.S. or other ground troops. But, again, that's just another thing that I'm watching for.

Dr. Karako: I'll just say real quick, on the Russian thing, that may well be, of course, why they're avoiding the reactor. At the same time, I can't help but think – remember the Chinese diplomats in Caracas the day before we got Maduro, the way in which, you know, Russia wasn't there for Syria. They weren't there, so far, for Iran. And if you're the ayatollahs, I mean, like, any promise of future help is kind of too little too late at this point. So I kind of think that the combination of these activities might suggest that, you know, Russia and China are sunshine friends, but they're kind of a paper tiger for some of their partners, or their rogue partners. And so folks have to perhaps think differently about just the utility of partnering with those guys.

Number two, in terms of ground forces, I think you're going to have to have somebody there on the ground to basically do battle damage assessment. If your job is the missiles, you got to figure out if that missile city has been collapsed and taken out. Scud hunting is hard from the air. And it's, it's going to – I think it's going to be almost necessary to have something – special forces, ours, somebody else's. It's really hard to think you can just do it. But, having said that, it's going to depend a lot on the Iranian people and what's going on in Iran politically, as to, frankly, the urgency of whether there is the same Iranian regime that is still directing these military forces, or if somebody takes over and kind of alleviates some of the urgency to get in there.

And then, frankly, what am I – what am I looking for? I'm looking for contracts. I want to pull up a chart here. This is our breakdown of the reconciliation funds, all of which is going to be into the 2026 expenditure. And what you see here are the numbers of kind of extra missiles, the quantities that are going to be procured out of the reconciliation funds. And I would say this is good, but it is nowhere near enough. In fact, if you look at the number of SM-3 or LRASMs, or Tomahawks, for that matter, I would not be surprised if a comparable number of these things were used over the past couple days. And so, you know, we'll see – in the coming days we'll see probably some additional discussion about this supplemental and about this. But, for goodness sakes, get stuff on contract and get it going fast, because the clock is ticking.

Ms. Bingen: Yeah. I'd agree on the ground forces piece. I mean, history has taught us, you know, wars cannot be won by air power alone, as good as our air power is. You know, there is a myth that wars are short, that wars can be won from a distance. And Libya is a great example of that. As you mentioned, Tom, 2011 – yes, it was NATO air power used, but it

was paired with Libyan ground forces. And, frankly, we had worked with them ahead of time, so we knew which ground forces, you know, were coming in. So there will have to be a ground component to this, whether it's to inspect those nuclear facilities, ensure the security of nuclear materials, the missile sites. Just governance writ large, just something will have to happen here. It doesn't necessarily have to be U.S. forces. Maybe there's a SOF or an intel component. Other regional actors could also have a role. But there has to be some ground component to actually Institute lasting change.

The risk, though, is – I mean, this is an IRGC and a regime that has been in place for almost 50 years. They are structured. They are engineered to survive. So we will likely see an insurgency. So this is not going to be short. I mean, we are going to be talking about what happens for months and years to come to in order to see that lasting, I'll say, change. The other piece that I'll – two other pieces I'll just mention that I'm watching for is we were a bit late on the NEO, the Non-combatant Evacuation Operations. You know, that's really kicking into gear now. I know State Department is leading on that front. But we have a lot of American citizens still stuck in the region trying to get out, and with airports closed and whatnot. You know, we have an obligation to our citizens there.

And then lastly, Tom, you hinted at this earlier, is we have to also mind the homeland. And that was the top priority in the defense strategy and the security strategy. There are homeland risks. Iran has the reach to the U.S. homeland. I mean, there have been assassination plots in the past, you know, against the president, against the Saudi ambassador, threats against other senior U.S. civilian and military leaders. So I do worry that, you know, there could be activity stirred up here. And meanwhile, all this is happening while Department of Homeland Security is in shutdown mode. Now, there are some big policy issues, so I don't want to downplay that for a moment, but we absolutely have to be minding the homeland here as well.

So with that serious and somber conversation, you know, Heather, Tom, I want to thank you once again for sharing your expertise and your insights. I'm sure we'll be revisiting Iran quite a bit as we go forward.

Dr. Karako: It's not done. Don't worry. (Laughs.)

Ms. Bingen: It'll be just like – it'll be long. We'll be here a while, too.

So with that, I do want to thank everyone for tuning in. I want to thank our PONI, our Missile Defense, and our Aerospace teams who do phenomenal work supporting us and doing research, and also our

streaming and broadcasting teams for making this event possible. Keep your radars tuned to this channel so you don't miss future HTK discussions on strategic forces issues.

(END.)