Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

2026 Global Security Forum, America at 250: A Defining Moment for American Statecraft and Military Power

Principal Military Advisor: The Role of the Chairman and Joint Staff Through Strategic Change

DATE

Tuesday, June 30, 2026 at 10:00 a.m. ET

FEATURING

William "Mac" Thornberry
Former Chairman, House Armed Services Committee

Admiral John C. Aquilino, USN (Ret.)
Former Commander, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command

CSIS EXPERTS

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Seth G. Jones: All right. Welcome, everyone, to the second panel of the day. Sounds like we've got a lot of volume in the room, which means people are talking, which is great. So welcome, everyone, both online and in person, to the second panel for the Global Security Forum.

We're going to shift now from what was a fascinating discussion, a little scary, on the homeland and homeland defense to the unique roles and responsibilities and relationships of the chairman and joint staff, including those with the civilian leadership, Congress, and combatant commands.

They're also going to touch on a range of issues including the changing strategic environment including China, the evolution of warfare, so a number of critical topics.

It is an all-star panel led by General Joseph Dunford, the CEO of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, former chairman of the joint staff, U.S. commander in Afghanistan, and then also commandant of the Marine Corps; Congressman Mac Thornberry, former chair of the House Armed Services Committee; and Admiral Aquilino, former commander of U.S. what's now Pacific Command, but of Indo-Pacific Command.

And then to help guide us through this conversation, I will turn the mic over to Kari Bingen. She is the director of CSIS' Aerospace Security Program and has been an institution in everything that we are seeing today. So thanks, Kari, for all your work on GSF, in addition to moderating this great panel. Over to you.

Kari A. Bingen: Well, thanks, Seth. And good morning, everyone. It's wonderful to see so many folks in the room today.

So since the Joint Chiefs of Staff were established in 1947, presidents and Congress have wrestled with the same enduring questions of civil-military relations. What does it mean to provide military advice and what form should that advice take? How strong should the Joint Chiefs be and what role should the joint staff play? How do military leaders and civilian policymakers work together in practice? And ultimately, how are consequential decisions about the use of force actually made?

These questions feel especially relevant today. As we mark 250 years of our great American experiment, it is a good time, I think, to reflect on the foundational principle of civilian control of the military and the state of civil-military relations in our country.

Today's discussion will also explore the distinct roles, responsibilities, and relationships of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Joint Chiefs of

Staff, the joint staff, including how they engage in their relationships with civilian leaders, with Congress, and the combatant commands.

So I can think of no better assembly of leaders to help us navigate these issues than this distinguished panel. These are leaders who have all served at the highest levels of government and sat in each of those seats that we'll talk about, and I, on a personal note, am fortunate to have worked for or worked with all of these gentlemen here on stage.

So we'll leave time at the end for audience questions so please go ahead, think about those now, submit those via the QR code you see here, or if you're joining us online via the event website, and we'll get started.

The first question, though, I want to ask each of you – you're all now out. You can say a lot more, maybe say more candidly, but, you know, as you think about that time and distance, all the things that you're doing now, what do you wish you knew then that you know now?

And, General, I'd like to kick it off with you.

General Joseph F. Dunford, Jr. (Ret): Sure.

Kari, that's a long list of what I wish I knew then that I know now. But I would say at the top of the list – the first panel mentioned the defense industrial base. That'll be a theme throughout the rest of the day.

From my perspective, I wish I knew more about the private sector when I was on active duty. I wish I understood better how decisions are made in the private sector, how risk is managed in the private sector, the pressures that are on CEOs in the private sector.

I would have been a better customer in uniform had I had that appreciation in the private sector, and I've advocated, and I hope we can do this, to close that gap a bit in our professional military education system so that we have exposure as uniform leaders and senior executives growing up so we have exposure to the private sector, and, again, not to make us chief executive officers in the private sector but to allow us to have a dialogue that's constructive and leads to the capabilities that we need for our men and women in uniform.

And I feel like that that was a gap in my own professional development.

Ms. Bingen: You, Chairman Thornberry?

Congressman William "Mac" Thornberry: This may be a cheap answer, but I wish I had known how much and how fast things would change, especially technology and the security environment and so forth.

Every time John Hamre would come up and testify in front of Armed Services Committee he would encourage us to look at the big picture and not get down into fights with all the majors in the Pentagon, but to see the bigger trends because only Congress could help bring all of that together.

And so when I became chairman, we had a readiness crisis brought about partly by sequestration. Both Caine and I wanted to make acquisition – improve our acquisition system as a top priority.

General Dunford would come up and talk to us about some of these bigger trends, but I think we could have been a better partner looking at that bigger picture and the changes that were coming and, hopefully help prepare the military and the nation to deal with them a little better.

Ms. Bingen: Admiral Aquilino, I think you're the newest out of these three gentlemen.

Admiral John C. Aquilino: Yeah, Kari, thanks.

Thanks to you, CSIS, Dr. Hamre, Chairman, Chairman. I'm the only chairman-not up here. (Laughter.)

You know, I'm in the same camp as General Dunford, right? One of my key themes at PACOM was urgency – deliver me the capabilities that allow me to deter the greatest adversary that we're facing, which is China, and to do it at speed, and I would always give the example of, you know, we're losing service members to IEDs.

We cranked out MRAPs in record time to save those lives and my ask was let's deliver these capabilities before the crisis as opposed to after. This country works faster than any nation in crisis.

So understanding the constraints of industry. You know, working to push it out of the department and the uniform side for delivery, I underestimated that. That's where I learned the most, understanding how industry does business and what they need to deliver.

Ms. Bingen: Yeah.

And having gone to a startup after I left the Pentagon, it really was getting an MBA in business and startup and emerging tech, so I absolutely agree with all of those points. Let me now shift to civil-military relations.

And, General Dunford, I'm going to start with you and Admiral Aquilino first. But back in 1999, actually, military historian Richard Cohen described civil-military relations throughout U.S. history as, quote, "sometimes smooth, sometimes awkward, but always shaped by the issues and personalities of the moment, characterized by consultation but also negotiation, tension, and conflict."

So what do you make of the state of civil-military relations today? And, you know, we say that the military must remain nonpartisan, nonpolitical, but that's really hard in practice.

So how as military leaders do you navigate that role of advice but then also policy and politics? Sir?

Gen. Dunford: Sure. Let me – let me maybe start with through most of my career, polling said that about 80 percent of the American people had confidence in the U.S. military and that's 62 percent plus or minus today.

Just in 2016 and '17, Republicans had an over 90 percent favorability rating of the U.S. military. It's now somewhere in the 60s (percent) – overall, about 62 percent.

So we can put aside what our own personal judgments are. The data would tell us that there is a decline in the confidence in the U.S. military, which reflects challenging times overall. We live in an incredibly hyper-partisan environment. And in the first panel it was mentioned – I'm sure it'll come up several times today – there is in many corners a declining trust in institutions broadly and one of those institutions has been the U.S. military. I think we can't be complacent about that.

Why is it important? Number one, for recruiting and retention. The American people need to see the U.S. military as their military. It can't be – it can't be partisan.

Number two, when we're sending men and women into harm's way, they have to have the support of the American people and it can't be seen as a Republican or a Democrat decision to send people to war. These are Americans. They've got to be supported by the American people.

And you mentioned a separate issue but it informs military relations and that's this idea of advice versus advocacy. I think that uniformed military leaders provide advice on the military dimension of broader strategic problems, and I'm now talking in the context of the national security decision-making process.

It is incredibly important, both in public and in private, that they not become advocates for a particular policy but merely highlight the options that are available to our political leadership, fully informed by the opportunity costs and risks associated with those, and to be able to walk political leadership through what are the likely second and third order effects of each of the options that are lined up.

But I would just say this. We shouldn't be complacent about the nonpartisan ethic and ethos of the U.S. military. It's incredibly important, and we ought to occasionally look in the mirror – and I'm now talking about senior leaders and senior political leaders – and realize that maybe sometimes their actions can adversely impact the nonpartisan ethos, and that's something we ought to try to protect.

And I am concerned about the trend in that regard.

Ms. Bingen: Admiral?

Adm. Aquilino: Yeah, Kari.

So first of all, the U.S. military has to reflect what our society looks like, right, for the people of the United States to see and understand, to the chairman's point.

Second, we really did a lot of work to remain purely apolitical. It was – from the headquarters down to components and all throughout, this was about providing options to the civilian leadership to meet political objectives and providing a well thought out understanding of the risk, depending on which option was chosen. That is our job.

The chairman said it last night. He's navigating that space very impressively. But the uniformed soldier, sailor, air, Marine, Coast Guardsman, cyber warrior, space warrior has to understand the criticality of an apolitical military. It's just – it's foundational in our country and it has to remain that way.

MS. BINGEN: And then, Chairman Thornberry, I'm recalling back to my time on the Hill as a staffer and, obviously, your role as chairman, you know, we'd often bring up military leaders and we'd ask them for their best military advice, and sometimes that would put them at odds, potentially, with their civilian counterparts.

So how should they navigate the politics of the Hill in providing military advice? And then also back to that initial question, taking a step back, what do you make of the state of civ-mil today?

Rep. Thornberry: Well, it is challenging sometimes, but just to reinforce what they've said, it is the nonpartisan professional nature of our military that is, largely, responsible for it having the kind of support it has had historically and it's important for the stability of the country. Anytime you got a bunch of guys running around with guns in a democracy, there could be problems there.

And so our Constitution deals with that by dividing the responsibility. One branch is responsible for raising and supporting, providing and maintaining, approving all the money, declaring war, and the other branch for the operations of the military. So we divide the authority.

We have civilian control of the military, which is an important principle, but we make sure that it's a professional, nonpartisan, not taking sides, and all the work that Admiral Aquilino talked about is essential. And so it's important for Congress to hear from that professional military and to hear directly.

Now, sometimes that'll need to be behind closed doors in classified sessions, and you can get franker that way. But it's not just Congress hearing, it's the American people hearing from the chairman or the combatant commanders or whoever.

I've got to say, I think today there's a strain between civil-military relations. Part of the professionalism in the military is that it's a meritocracy. It's based on who does their job well, can excel, and there have been some universally respected officers who've been fired recently with no explanation, and I think that leads to questions about what's really going on here; is it still a meritocracy.

We were concerned – you may remember this, Kari – that about using the military for law enforcement responsibilities, especially on the border, during my time and now it's more broadly. I think that creates tensions, too.

And so maybe this 250th anniversary is a good time for us to kind of remember, OK, what are the protections in our Constitution and in our system, and do they need – do we need to remember and maybe refresh some of them to make sure that the military continues the sort of respect that it has.

I agree with General Dunford, it's gone down but it's still – it and small business are still at the top of the list of all the institutions in the country and so that's an enviable place to be.

Ms. Bingen: And this is such an important conversation to have and just to remind people of that non-political, non-partisan role that the military plays, and just the trust in the institution.

Gen. Dunford: Kari, just one point, though, I think it's just important to highlight. My own view – you know, the chairman and Admiral Aquilino may disagree; I don't think they would – is the civilian control of the military, there's two separate issues here. There's civilian control of the military and then there's civil-military relations. And when we talk about – and maybe we need to just pay attention to civil-military relations. We need to look at the trends.

Even though it's 62 percent high today, and as you pointed out, Chairman, other institutions are single digits and in the teens, so 60 percent, 62 percent looks good, except when you look backwards over the last two decades and you see that it's in decline. But it's the civil-military relations and it's – and I would summarize that in one word. It's the trust in the U.S. military that we're really talking about here and the fact that it's a meritocracy.

There's been no issues, in my professional experience, on civilian control of the military.

Ms. Bingen: And I think this is a great education, too, especially for new folks coming into our ecosystem as well.

And there's another piece of this that I think has been important education for folks, and it is the role of the chairman and the Joint Chiefs.

So, General Dunford, I'm going to keep it on you. In statute, the chairman was designed to be the president and the secretary of defense's principal military advisor, so principal military advisor responsible for providing independent military advice and strategic direction, preparing military options, and analyzing risks and trade-offs across the joint force.

So how did you approach that job of chairman? Has that model worked as intended? And then we'll ask the other gentleman, how do you view it from the perspectives of oversight and as a combatant commander?

Gen. Dunford: Sure.

When I look back, and General Goldfein was on the Joint Chiefs – he's sitting here – when I was there, first, it's important to point out I can't think of a time when I was participating in the National Security Council where I was dealing with a military problem.

We were dealing with strategic problems that had a military dimension, and that's really important because in that capacity you are providing advice about the military dimension and how the military dimension can best support the political objective that's been articulated by the president.

And so earlier we talked about this issue of advocacy versus advice. It's not the chairman's role to go to the National Security Council and advocate for a particular policy that involves much more than just the military dimension.

It's the chairman's role to represent the other Joint Chiefs and provide military advice, again, in a way that's integrated with all the other elements of national power to accomplish a particular objective, and I think it's really important both in public and private that we be seen as advisors and not advocates.

And to the tension on the Hill, without going into great length, several times, and I can think of one example where we were directed to go after ISIS in Syria and, of course, there were Russians in Syria, there were Iranians in Syria.

And several times I went to open hearings and I was asked, do you find it acceptable that the Russians are in Syria? Are you condoning the Russian behavior in Syria? Are you condoning the Iranian behavior in Syria?

And I would say, no, I'm not doing that. Then why aren't you advocating for us to, you know, change our military operations and deal with the Russian-Iranian problem? And I said because the policy that I've been given to support in the military dimension is the ISIS problem.

And that would be a very tense exchange and oftentimes, you know, certain members would see that as a copout that I wasn't willing to talk broadly about what we should be doing strategically in Syria.

But that went well beyond my mandate of providing advice to the president for the clearly articulated political objective that he had at the time.

Ms. Bingen: Well, can you also talk just on the advice piece? I mean, there's often this desire – and you have to balance it with transparency with the American people, with the political overseers, but then having that channel to provide the advice to the president, to the secretary.

How do you balance that? How should we understand that advisory role and the private nature of it, I guess?

Gen. Dunford: Yeah. First of all, you know, I tried to protect that. In my own view, discussions that take place in the National Security Council ought to remain private, and most often they're very highly classified. And so, you know, whether it was at the time or even today, I don't feel at liberty to discuss what went on inside the National Security Council or what I specifically recommended.

But then when I would go over to see the chairman, obviously, you know, the legislative branch of our government has a need to be informed about these issues, and so the way I would approach it is less would I address specifically the advice I gave to the president or, again, advocate a specific – even in the military dimension, a specific option to be adopted.

More often than not, what I would try to do is highlight the interdependent variables that went into the recommendation, talk about the risks, perhaps walk the Hill through each of the options that might be available from a military perspective and the pros and cons of each, but then not be in a position publicly to say it should be this option or that option.

And there's an important reason why that's the case. Number one, it's the elected official who gets to decide, and number two, the best military option, in other words, the option that I might have offered that would provide the best military outcome, may in fact not be the best option for the president when he looks at it from a broader strategic perspective, and that's really important.

So were I to go out in public and say, OK, this is the military option I think is best in dealing with Iran or dealing with North Korea or dealing with China, that may or may not be in a broader strategic context when you take into account our diplomatic, our economic interests, and the other competing demands that the president may have at a given time strategically, whether they be in a security realm or elsewhere.

You know, as I used to say, the president looks through this with a much bigger soda straw than those of us in uniform, and we need to be attentive to that in the public space and not put pressure on the executive branch to make a decision one way or another because of what military advice may be out there in the public domain.

Adm. Aquilino: Yeah, from the combatant commander's seat, it's important to understand the chain of command, right? So by statute the chairman said he's the military senior advisor of the president.

My chain of command was clear. I worked for the secretary of defense. That said, it was incredibly important for me to keep the chairman informed, and before I called the secretary I would call the chairman. That was my responsibility to ensure that there was no – number one, that there couldn't be different interpretations of the options, the risk, and how it was being transmitted up the chain.

But don't lose sight of the fact that, you know, the chairman is not one person. Well, he is one person but he's got an incredible team as a member of

the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I was the Navy's ops deputy when the chairman was the commandant, and then when he became the chairman General Goldfein was there, and when you talk about the service chiefs as members of the Joint Chiefs, that is an incredible, thoughtful bunch to help the chairman shape best military advice, to remove blind spots that may be missing, and to get an incredibly broad perspective.

So he gets it from the combatant commander, operational required to provide options through the lens of a single theater.

Then the Joint Chiefs are able to put a layer on top of that and say, hey, more broadly, here's what I think it looks like globally, here's what it looks like through the service lens, and all that information informed the chairman to ultimately take the best option to the president.

And then whenever I briefed the secretary the chairman was sitting in the room, and sometimes we agreed, sometimes we disagreed, and that was worked through in the process when I was in the chair.

I can't speak to how it works now but that was the path that worked, and as the chairman said last night, my advice to the chairman who provides best military advice, my advice was taken sometimes and other times I got thanked for my interest in national defense. That's just the way it works.

Ms. Bingen: Chairman Thornberry, how did you look at the role?

Rep. Thornberry: Well, I do think it has worked pretty well to have the chairman speak for the whole military and yet not be directly in the chain of command. It gives – so far, it has given him an objectivity where he didn't have to necessarily defend a decision because they're political decisions, but he can look at that broader picture about the state of our military, about the threats that we face, and I think those discussions for Congress to understand have been really important.

I suspect at every one of those hearings, some member will ask, what did you tell the president or what did you advise the president. Every chairman pushes back and says, I'm not going to tell you what I told the president, and we tried to respect that. That's part of the tension that goes on.

But I think I said this before, it's really important not just for Congress to hear it but for the American people to hear it through these congressional hearings and so forth, to hear directly from these military leaders in which we put so much trust.

The other thing that there's always a little bit of tension is we will – Congress will ask for some military leader to come testify and the Pentagon will always push back and so, no, they're too busy – they can't come and testify.

And when you were in Afghanistan we had some of these issues – you know, an active theater – but even combatant commanders and so forth. And so there is a natural give and take, a little tension there. Congress can't just automatically ask Admiral Aquilino to come from Hawaii at a moment's notice.

But in some structured way it's important to have that dialogue.

Gen. Dunford: Chairman, let the record show I came back on multiple occasions.

Rep. Thornberry: I know you did. (Laughter.)

Adm. Aquilino: I made some quick flights, too.

Ms. Bingen: So present company –

Adm. Aquilino: The chairman's point is really good, though. On the – you know, on the congressional side from the person who sat in front of the green table, there's ways to navigate that space.

You know, after nomination I signed a letter that said I'll provide my personal understanding and recommendations and not transmit the administration's desired talking points. I had to sign a letter to say that. The chairman did it multiple times, multiple times.

There's ways around that, right? When I was called up for my posture hearings, I made a request of the chairman on the House and the Senate side that said, hey, let's have a classified session first. Let me answer everything that I can in the classified space that will give you the understanding and oh, by the way, I think it'll help shape your questions for the public side.

That ended up being very, very, I think, effective both for Congress and certainly for me because it really made sure they understood where we were, why we were doing what we were doing, and how it was going to deliver. And, again, I thank all of the members of Congress for accepting that position because it was very – I found it very helpful.

Ms. Bingen: Well, can I pick up on that as well? And I want to go back into history a moment.

So President John F. Kennedy wrote a memo in June 1961 – this was after the disastrous Bay of Pigs incident where he did not get the best military advice

– that he expected his military advice to come direct and unfiltered and be presented such that military factors are clearly understood before decisions are reached.

So when you think of, you know, the Joint Chiefs – you mentioned General Goldfein here in the audience – you know, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the combatant commanders, how do we ensure that the political leaders making those hard decisions are able to hear the diversity of views but also dissenting views, and that they understand the risks involved in the consequential decisions that they're making?

Adm. Aquilino: Yeah.

So, again, if I had a different opinion than the chairman or the military advice that was going forward, I was always hopeful that the dissenting opinion went forward, right? Let's get rid of blind spots and truly understand where there's risk.

Second, I would say is the administration gets to choose how that goes forward. If the chairman wanted to take me to a meeting with the president, right, I was going.

If he wanted me to transmit that then I would do that. If he wanted to be the person to transmit that, then that's the way it was going to happen. So the secretary and the administration gets to choose how little or how much the combatant commanders sit in the room.

Guess what? We're going to that meeting if asked. So that's just a choice, and it can be done either way and I think it's been done either way.

Gen. Dunford: Right.

Kari, I think, picking up on something Chairman Thornberry said, I think it's working pretty well.

I can speak from the perspective of two administrations. So across two administrations there was not a single time when I didn't have an opportunity to communicate military advice, and after meeting in deliberation with the other Joint Chiefs.

And I will also say, without highlighting the issue, on two occasions – only two, but on two occasions we went into the National Security Council where I had a different opinion than the secretary of defense.

So my advice and the secretary of defense's advice was different, and we talked about it before we went to the meeting, and I'll give credit. This was – both of those happened under Secretary Ash Carter.

And I said, Mr. Secretary, I'm just in a different place on this. I've talked to the chiefs. I think the president needs to think about this. He said, OK, that's fine.

And we drove over to the meeting together and we drove back from the meeting together, and during the meeting I articulated where I was, and on both of those occasions the chiefs were in alignment, and I delivered military advice that was different than the secretary of defense's and it worked out – it worked out the way it's supposed to be.

So in my view, you know, the structure is sound. I did make a joke last night that we in uniform are obligated by law to provide advice. There's nobody that's a civilian in the chain of command or otherwise who's obligated to take our advice.

So this goes back to that first issue we talked about in terms of civil-military relations and the importance of establishing trust, because the only way – the process is not what's going to allow the military dimension of the problem to be fully considered.

It's not going to be the process. It's the relationship of trust that exists between political leaders and uniform leaders that's going to allow a full vetting of the military dimension of the problem.

Ms. Bingen: So I'm going to start weaving in some questions and encourage more questions from the audience to come in.

We touched on this a little bit but I want to revisit it because you just hit on this, and, General Dunford, it's – so how can a chairman, a nonpartisan professional, better work with a president, with a secretary of defense, who is by definition a partisan or a political actor?

Gen. Dunford: Yeah.

Ms. Bingen: How do you think about that?

Gen. Dunford: Honestly, I did not find that difficult. You know, I did not participate oftentimes. In fact, I'll just give you a quick anecdote.

I remember reading the biography of George Marshall when I was maybe a lieutenant colonel, and I thought, boy, he was really a stiff because, you know, when they were in meetings he would insist on the president using his title. There was all kinds of anecdotes where he sat in a room and there were

jokes being made and he didn't laugh, and I didn't really understand that until I was in the job.

And then I realized that you have to maintain that professionalism both in your conduct and in your comments throughout the process. You are not there to participate in the political dialogue, and we oftentimes, in the national security decision-making process or White House meetings outside of the process, we'll go back and forth between military issues and political issues, and I think it's incumbent upon us to kind of stay in, you know, what the current chairman describes as the midfield in that regard.

So we have to be aware of the political environment within which we're operating but we have to be nonpartisan, and as long as we stick to addressing the military dimension of the problem and not fall to the temptation to start participating and waxing eloquently about issues that are not in our purview, I think we can maintain that character.

Ms. Bingen: Chairman Thornberry, what advice do you give military leaders?

Rep. Thornberry: Well, I was just thinking, I do – going back to the role of the chairman, I do think that's the crucial role in setting the tone for the rest of the military to have this nonpartisan, objective, professional sort of manner.

In our system, the highest-ranking military officer, the chairman, just has enormous influence, I think, on how the combatant commanders and all the rest of the folks will respond to the political pressures that are swirling all around them.

And so I do think having a bit of insulation for that position but also the character of the individuals involved is just crucial to keep it as professional and nonpartisan.

Adm. Aquilino: Yeah, and it was really – you know, the chairman, as he spoke to all of us in the Tank, kind of was really able to help make us understand the environment we were operating in, to Chairman Thornberry's point, right.

You have to understand the environment you're operating in, right? So while we're apolitical and serious and professionals, we do have to understand the bubble you're living in as you make your recommendations.

Now, you don't make them based on the political environment but you do have to understand it.

Ms. Bingen: As a civilian, I've always wanted to understand what happens in the Tank. Maybe we'll get back to that in a bit here.

Adm. Aquilino: We can't even tell you; we'd have to kill you. (Laughter.)

Ms. Bingen: Shoot. "Fight Club" rules. I get it.

Gen. Dunford: Don't do that. (Laughter.)

Ms. Bingen: Admiral Aquilino, you said something earlier I want to key in on is, you know, as a combatant commander you reported – you worked for the secretary of defense and the president. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was not in your chain of command.

In 2017 in the National Defense Authorization Act, and this was when Chairman Thornberry was chairman of HASC – House Armed Services Committee – at the time, they wrote into law something called the global military integration responsibility for the chairman.

And, you know, when you think about the joint staff and the chairman's responsibility, it is the only uniformed officer who is looking holistically across the force, across the combatant commands, across all of the services.

So, you know, as you got this legislation and started putting it into practice, what does global military integration mean in practice?

Gen. Dunford: Sure.

So, first of all, if you think about conflict – this'll go back to the 1990s – you could assume that a conflict would be isolated to a particular geographic area and it involved, largely, sea, air, and space, and the homeland was protected. We didn't have the homeland issues that we just talked about in the first panel.

So when you think about managing risk, you could manage risk within a specific geographic area. As the character of war began to change – threats to the homeland increased, we're now operating in sea, air, land, space, and cyberspace, we know now that there's no conflict that can be isolated to a specific geographic area, we can see the conflict in Iran and Ukraine and the global implications of those two conflicts – there needed to be somebody that could help the secretary of defense think about risk across all geographic combatant commands and in all of those domains and in the context of broader strategic issues like service readiness and being prepared for the conflict or crisis that was going to come, even as we're dealing with one that may be ongoing.

And so when it came to force management, prioritizing, allocating resources, it needed to be done in a much more strategic way against the political

objectives, the strategic objectives that are articulated in our strategy documents.

When it came to planning, we used to have single-numbered plans – you'd be familiar with those, Kari – where plans were focused on the Korea plan or the Iran plan.

Well, again, if you agree with me that there's no conflict that doesn't have broad global implications, planning needs to be done not in a geographic combatant commander's region. It needs to be done globally, certainly informed by the supported combatant commander, if it's INDOPACOM or now PACOM commander perspective.

But while he's fighting the fight against China, there are certainly things happening globally that are going to require the prioritization and allocation of resources, again, back to, foundationally, defense of the homeland.

So when it comes to planning, when it comes to force management and, frankly, when it comes to capability development so that we cannot take what the service is producing and integrate it on the back end, but our capabilities are borne and driven by joint concepts so that the services are producing material solutions to deliver a force that we all agree is the right joint force that is going to be prepared for both deterring and responding in the event that deterrence fails.

Adm. Aquilino: Yeah. So I've watched the evolution and the chairman has it exactly right.

Again, the way he articulated that, which is, hey, depending on what's happening in that theater there are implications in other theaters, that he's got to bring best military advice forward and he's got to understand how he's going to recommend prioritization of resources and things, and I'm always very supportive of that.

Not supportive, depending on interpretation – and there are people who interpret it differently, right? We're not going to have a fight and drive it from Washington, D.C. The German general staff model doesn't work.

So cordoning that off and structuring the combatant command to be able to do the integration that has to be done in the theater are things that have occurred. I had an interagency support team on my staff from State, FEMA, three-letter agencies, and so on to inform and synchronize at the regional level the introduction of Cyber Command, Space Command, right?

The components that exists for the combatant commander historically were maritime, air, land, and amphibious or expeditionary along with the special operators.

Those are physical people, and in command and control language we have operational control. We have tactical control. From the combatant commander perspective, the control that works best we call "Choke-COM," which means there's a body right there that I can grab and make sure they're synchronizing efforts to deliver the strategic outcomes that we're trying to get there, and we've expanded that.

So at PACOM when I was sitting there, we ended up – I had a cyber component and a space component. So I thank my partners in Paul Nakasone, Jim Dickinson, Jay Raymond, and General Saltzman. They understood the importance of that and we synchronized.

So in the theater that could happen and the fight could be executed there. But that's a – some people interpret the global integrator role differently than the chairman envisioned. Hell, we practiced exactly what he implemented through exercises and events with the joint staff, with all the other combatant commanders, and we did exactly what he implemented, and that worked, as long as people don't take it to the next step which is, you know, hey, I'm now in charge of everything and I sit in Washington.

Gen. Dunford: Look, I think – I just want to make one quick follow-up.

You know, Admiral Aquilino has it exactly right. I think it's important to point out that all of the functions that are involved in this legislation are to assist the secretary of defense in executing his or her responsibilities. This is about the secretary of defense command authority and the chairman is not doing anything that's related to command as he's doing this.

But just in practical terms, think about the secretary of defense. We have a conflict with global implications. There is a cacophony of voices from combatant commands. There's competing demands. Admiral Aquilino is asking for missile defense capabilities but I'm looking at Alaska and it's exposed. And these issues have to be teased out and highlighted for a decision by the secretary.

So, in my view, this is a management function, and as Admiral Aquilino pointed out, it's not to be confused with warfighting. It's to be – it should be viewed in the lines of the secretary of defense exercising responsibilities for force management, for planning, and capability development.

Ms. Bingen: Congressman Thornberry, if I can bring you in as well.

You know, back to – I'm going to go back to the 1980s here – but a big debate leading up to Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 was how strong to make the joint staff and whether the chairman should be in the chain of command, so

exactly these issues that are being discussed, and Congress deliberately in 1986 kept the chairman outside the chain of command.

But just given this increasingly dynamic, fast-paced, cross-command, cross-function environment, is Goldwater-Nichols – is that model still fit for this environment and the future of warfare that you're seeing?

Rep. Thornberry: Well, I think if you step back, it is important – and Admiral Aquilino said this – that the role of the chairman of the joint staff has evolved over time. I mean, it's kind of amazing to think we fought World War II without a chairman.

We had a chief of staff of the Army, we had the Navy doing their own things, and really would have to come together with the president. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs was created in the National Security Act amendments of 1949 and it has evolved over time.

A big change was all of the Goldwater-Nichols changes, and I think the 2017 changes reflected what Chairman Dunford was talking about about the truly global nature but also all of the domains affecting all the combat.

So I suspect it's going to continue to evolve. I also suspect it's not going to go as far as the Prussian general staff because that is a fundamental sort of change that we were just talking about with civil-military relations, about civilian control of the military.

That would be a change, but you do – I do think the key characteristic that we need to – that is shocking in a lot of ways is speed these days, speed of decision-making and speed at which things have to – are happening with AI and the rest, and have to happen.

And so we always need to look at our organizations to see are they meeting the moment, and there may be further evolutions of the chairman of the joint staff. But I agree that I don't think it will or should go that far.

Ms. Bingen: There's a related question here from the audience.

This is from Daniel C. with the Marine Corps, so maybe, General, we'll put you on the spot here. But does the current unified combatant – does the current Unified Command Plan – the UCP – need to be restructured to better address the current challenges? Or any of you if you have thoughts on that.

Gen. Dunford: Yeah. Look, we've looked at this multiple times, and I wouldn't sit here today and say refinements can't be made. Refinements –

Adm. Aquilino: Gets looked at every year.

Gen. Dunford: It gets looked at every year formally.

Refinements can't be made. But I think it's – my own view is it's fundamentally sound as it is right now.

Ms. Bingen: I would be remiss if I didn't hit a couple other topics here, and having a former INDOPACOM commander here let's talk China, and you mentioned it, Admiral Aquilino, at the outset.

There was an interesting article this month in "Foreign Affairs" written by retired Admiral Denny Blair who argued that concerns about China's military edge may be overstated, and he pointed to trends in military technology that now favors the United States and Taiwan.

So I'm curious what your take is on the military balance and the broader trajectory of strategic competition with China.

Adm. Aquilino: Well, let there be no doubt. China has stated their intent, which is displace the United States as the main global power on this planet, and they are doing everything possible to get there.

There's no arms race right now except China is cranking out a military, both conventional and nuclear, at a pace that hasn't been seen in decades, and I truly believe it is the number-one threat that we ought to be concerned about, and the work that INDOPACOM has done and continues to do to deter that conflict is impressive.

I think the demonstration of both operations in Venezuela in the first Iran strike and in Epic Fury served as a really large deterrence to our Chinese competitors, and I say China – I mean the CCP. What the United States military had demonstrated there and can do with regard to global projection of power sustained and integrated can only be done by the United States.

Let there be no doubt China is trying to get there. By ship count they have the largest navy. They have multiple, multiple thousands of missiles that are designed to keep adversaries away from their shorelines. That is their strategic approach.

But there's no doubt they intend to build a powerful military to push their objectives – strategic objectives – in the future and shape the global environment, the international order, rules-based law in ways that benefit China at the expense of everyone else.

That has not changed. We ought to be concerned.

Gen. Dunford: I think – Kari, I didn't read his article yet, I will – but I think two things could be true.

Look, I'm fully aligned with where Admiral Aquilino is. The math tells us a few hundred to a thousand nuclear weapons, more ships, industrial capacity, numbers of satellites being launched every day, numbers of missiles.

I mean, the math tells us that we need to be very serious and be focused on this threat. We can also say that, perhaps, lessons learned from recent conflicts might highlight the difficulty that China might have in a Taiwan scenario, based on Taiwan's ability to leverage technology.

So two things can be true at one time. But I think it would be a big mistake for us to underestimate the Chinese threat, and as we always say, we need to focus on two things, the capability and the will, and military planners have to think about the capabilities.

And so when we just benchmark the U.S. military and our competitive advantage to project power anywhere we want to and to be able to operate freely and achieve superiority in each of those domains we talked about earlier, when I look at the China threat, and I would just say this. We did a detailed analysis at a top-secret level in 2016-17 – I'm sure it's been refreshed many times – and what I can say about that is we looked at 14 competitive areas, and based on the trajectory of Chinese capability development, based on our own investments and where we would be, we identified several areas of great concern.

We brought those to the Hill, and we all agreed that 3 (percent) to 5 percent real growth above inflation was necessary for us to just maintain the advantages we had at that time, let alone take full advantage of emerging technology and increase our advantages.

So I would just say two things can be true. The fight might be more difficult for China against Taiwan in the context of emerging technology but that doesn't mean we should downplay the threat that China poses, particularly given their political aspirations.

Adm. Aquilino: OK. We're paid to go worst case, right?

Ms. Bingen: Right.

Adm. Aquilino: The worst possible thing we could do is underestimate.

Rep. Thornberry: And I think he made a number of good points in that article, and it's true China's not 10 feet tall. But several times he has scenarios in there and says

no rational actor would do that. Well, sometimes wars happen without rational actions.

And also the trends he talks about, it is also possible that we could do things to ourselves – limiting technologies, et cetera – that would make it hard. But I really want to pick up on Chairman Dunford's point, strength and will.

What this is about is about deterrence, and so we have enormous military strength, but what China also looks at is our willingness to use it, our perseverance, our social stability, all of those non-military factors that go into whether we are willing and whether we are to stick with a use of force.

And so as we look at the threat that China poses, we need to not just compare missile to missile. We need to look at this whole of nation, what does it occur – what is required to deter them from seeking an opportunity, and it may be broader than the kinds of narrow looks that we're talking about.

GEN. DUNFORD: Chairman, when you talked about what a rational actor would do or would not do, I'm very mindful of the Chinese attacking across the Yalu River in 1950.

It would have made no sense if you looked at it through the lens of a rational actor. Five years after World War II, the United States, the preeminent military power in possession of nuclear weapons at a time when China was not in possession of nuclear weapons, and divisions of Chinese attacked Americans up at the Chosin Reservoir.

So I think applying what we think is rational or irrational to other governments that don't have the same character as ours does would be a big, big mistake.

I think we called that mirror imaging in the Cold War.

Ms. Bingen: Let me shift to the industrial base and technology – Chairman, you just mentioned this – and this – I'll weave in a question from Sage with GovSignals, and this person highlights all the work that you've been doing in acquisition reform from your time on the Hill, leading several rounds of reforms in the NDAA. But in an ideal world, what policies would you enact to make a more robust defense industrial base and make real acquisition reform in terms of capabilities fielded at speed and scale?

And I would just add to that, you know, is the department, is Congress, are they structured to adapt fast enough to these emerging technologies that we're seeing – AI, autonomy, et cetera?

Rep. Thornberry: I don't know that structure is the issue.

As I look at it, three key things. One is the authorities, and while they could be perfected, I think we have given a lot of authorities to the department to do what they want to do.

The second one is funding. I'm encouraged that last year's reconciliation bill has a lot more flexibility of funding, not worrying so much about color of money, multiyear funding, setting up portfolios to manage not only what the need is but where the technology is going. I think that's encouraging.

You got to say stability in funding is essential and these endless CRs are horrible. You know, we've grown used to them but they're terrible.

I think stability and flexibility of funding is still the greatest need in that area. The third one is culture and risk taking and, frankly, Congress plays a big role there, too.

When we haul people up to the Hill and rake them over the coals for trying something that doesn't work, then that just encourages more cautious behavior from the program managers at the Pentagon. If we could – one of the great things that SpaceX has done for our ecosystem is to show you blow things up and learn from it, and then you go try it again and you keep learning and improving things.

And we need to have more of that mentality, I think, and that's a cultural thing that the Hill can play a role in but it's also the department leadership.

Adm. Aquilino: Yeah, the nature of warfare has changed and it has sped up, right, the delivery of affordable mass.

The system has to go at least as fast if not faster than that. The chairman gave an example. One thing, though, we cannot forget, right, so the infatuation with startups and plugging in technology as fast as we can, all positive.

But from the warfighter perspective, we have to put real capabilities that work in the hands of those kids who are fighting this fight. We can't just take something because it's fast and it looks neat. But we have a bigger animal than that, right? It has to be delivered to a force of a million and a half.

It has to be sustained through a supply system. It has to be tested. But we have to have the confidence that when I give that capability to the force that it is – works, it's integrated, and it's effective.

So the system still has to deliver that; it's just got to do it at speed.

Ms. Bingen: Let me touch on two more questions here from the audience and then we'll wrap up with a lightning round.

And this is from Richard with RK 4 Consulting. He asks: Has the U.S. lost its ability to construct and implement global strategy? Despite demonstrating superb operational and tactical proficiency in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, et cetera, you know, can we still construct and implement big global strategic strategies?

Gen. Dunford: Yeah. So I would say can we? Do we have the human capital to do that? Yes, we do.

Do we spend much time on that, as much time as we should? I don't think so.

And, you know, the title of this conference on, you know, where we are at the 250th, you know, looking ahead and envisioning, you know, I would just say this.

You go back to the post-World War II era – and I'm not advocating that we have the same system in place that we had in post-World War II – but we had visionaries that took a look at what had happened both in the Great Depression and two world wars and they said, OK, what would a world look like within which we could advance our national interests.

They envisioned what that world would look like and they put in place the relationships and the structures and the rules that would allow us to best advance our national interests, and the record of 80 years speaks for itself.

I think this is a great opportunity, a great inflection point, for us to look at the 250th and look forward and say, OK, what is a world within which we can advance our interests? What does that world look like, and where do we need to go from where we are to where we want to be in the future?

So, look, we – I have tremendous confidence in the American people, our academic system, our political leaders, and so forth. We have the raw talent to do it but we've got to be incentivized to do it and I think right now, given the pace of change that has been a theme so far, geopolitical and technological, this would be a time to step up our game from a strategic perspective.

Adm. Aquilino: Again, I think we do it through the lens of the National Defense Strategy and the National Military Strategy. I mean, that's what it's designed to do.

It's worth understanding that what will be successful through a lens of deterrence against one potential adversary may be completely different from what does that same effect against a different adversary. Synchronizing that

at the national level is what those documents intend to do. You can agree with them or not agree with them but the process is designed to do that.

MS. BINGEN: Let me ask – I want to go back to the civ-mil discussion where we started, and this is a question – Chairman Thornberry, I'll put it to you first – from Oriana Zill at CBS News, and it goes back to the firings of general officers: So how have the firings of many in leadership, how do you think it's affecting the morale and relationships among the force and with civilian leadership?

Rep. Thornberry: Yeah, I think it's unsettled the force because there has been no explanation of why many of these actions have been taken. Admiral McRaven had a piece I think in The Atlantic that made this point.

Certainly, a secretary and a president have the authority to fire military leaders and have done so in the past. But when they've done so in the past, especially in high-profile instances, they've explained why and what's at stake.

And so I think partly for the force but partly for the civil-military relationship we were talking about, the professional nature of this military is rocked a bit if you don't know what the rules are, what leads to advancement, or what can get you slapped down, and without that explanation I think it does some significant damage.

Ms. Bingen: Can I – let me end on this, and, Admiral Aquilino, General Dunford, you know, you can weave in answers to that but I want to broaden it a bit, and we'll go down the line here to end.

And, you know, you all are tremendous leaders in each of your fields and for the nation. You are role models to the force. You know, we have several – many young folks here in the audience today. I know we have several, you know, ROTC young men and women out watching us that are commissioning into the service now.

So if you can offer maybe some final reflections here on this discussion at large but also advice that you would give to our men and women in uniform today, whether those – you know, that colonel staying in, the – you know, the E-4, the student about to commission into service.

Maybe, Admiral Aquilino, we'll start with you and work back.

Adm. Aquilino: Yeah.

First, and I always say this when I speak, don't ever forget that as we sit here in comfort, there are soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen out

carrying the weight of the nation and defending us every day. That's important.

The second thing I'd say, Kari, is number one, it's not about us. It was about the 385,000 forces that supported me, their dedication to the mission, their patriotism and love of this country that puts us in this place that we are and we have to maintain that. There's – it just can't be overstated.

So that's kind of where I'd end it for you.

Ms. Bingen: Chairman?

Rep. Thornberry: I guess I would say for the people serving or about to serve, do your best to ignore the political chaos going on around us.

As we were talking at first, the military is still one of the most trusted institutions in this country and we need to make sure we keep it that way.

But I'd also say, and I'll borrow a little bit from Secretary Ash Carter, there is no higher calling, no better way to spend your days, than to help defend your fellow citizens and protect their freedom, and I think that is still absolutely true for those who serve in the military, also for the people who support them in various ways, including most of the people in this room.

Gen. Dunford: So I'll echo Admiral Aquilino and the chairman, but maybe just offer some practical advice.

When I sit here and based in this discussion I think back to the pace of change, and when most of us came on active duty, without exaggeration the pace of change was measured over decades. I always say that a World War II lieutenant would have been very comfortable in a cockpit in 1977 or been very comfortable in an exercise at Camp Pendleton, California, where I was in 1977.

Now, we all know – and that point has been made many times this morning, it'll be made many times this afternoon – the pace of change is often measured in weeks, and a young leader today needs to be very deliberate about their own personal campaign of learning, to stay engaged and never be comfortable with the information and knowledge they have.

And they also have to reach out beyond their military associations to make sure that they're fully informed in areas like technology and so forth that may not come across their desk on a day-to-day basis. But a deliberate approach to a campaign of learning that is throughout their career is going to be critical for them to be able to manage and lead change in the future.

MS. BINGEN: Well, this is a great way to end a sobering yet so insightful discussion. I want to thank these three gentlemen for their decades of leadership to the nation, for the continued service that they provide our country, and really for the model that they set and the wisdom that they share with us.

So please join me in thanking these leaders. (Applause.)

(END.)