

Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

Gulf Roundtable with CJCS General Martin Dempsey

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(Applause.)

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: Thank you. Thanks. (Applause.)

Well, thank you, Dr. Hamre. If I could return some of the kind words, Dr. Hamre has been one of those individuals in my life who, whenever I had a particularly vexing challenge, which is darn near every day in the last 10 years, whether I was an OPM-SANG or acting commander at CENTCOM or chief of staff of the Army, I could call him up and he would gather a group together and let me bang around some of our most complex problems. So, I appreciate – it's good to see you again, sir.

And ambassadors, especially the future diplomats of our world, we're – those of my generation are hoping to wrap this all into a nice little bow and hand it to you. (Laughter.) Don't count on that. (Laughter.) But we're – I'm always encouraged when I travel around and visit those who are – who have agreed to dedicate their lives into the diplomatic corps in all of our countries, and I think – I think there's reason for optimism there.

Sheikhs, Ambassador, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon, and thank you for having me here today. And especially Ambassador Al Otaiba – Ambassador Yousef, as I like to call you – it's good to see you again so soon, because many of you might know that just the other night the ambassador received the distinguished Diplomat(ic) Service Award from the World Affairs Council. He earned it, and he earned it by bringing the United Arab Emirates and the United States closer together. His acceptance speech that night, by the way, was absolutely terrific. I'd actually probably be smart to cede the floor to him right now, but I don't know that Dr. Hamre would let me do that, so instead I'll give the speech and he'll answer the questions – (laughter) – during the Q&A. So, I'd ask you to prepare for that, Yousef.

This Roundtable Series today, something I – we might consider to be a sort of modulus for the mindful, is a valuable forum for thinking through the challenges – and opportunities, by the way – that we face in the Gulf region, and for that matter, throughout the world. Much of my own life, as Dr. Hamre mentioned – but also, I would add, much of my family's life – has been spent in and shaped by the region.

Before commanding Central Command, as Dr. Hamre noted, I lived and worked in Iraq and Saudi Arabia for many years. I've been to the region three times since I became the chairman. That's about three times in 15 or 16 months or so. And all of these experiences and the many friendships and relationships that go with them are actually part of who I am. With that in mind, I came here today with a message of assurance, a little piece of mind in the context of uncertainty. Or, as put by an American humorist by the name of Finley Peter Dunne, who wrote in Chicago at the end of the 19th century: I'm here to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted.

We face real danger at a time when resources are in decline. And this should worry most of us. At the same time, we're not a nation nor a military in decline. We have it with us to stay strong, to remain a global leader, and more important, a reliable partner, and this should comfort you. Or, you might be skeptical a bit and question how these opposing ideas can coexist. I

concede that there is room for debate here. So, allow me to share some of what's on my mind before hearing what's on your mind. And I'll start with why we might all need a little bit of assurance. And that is, in a word, "risk."

Some of you may have seen on American television here, these commercials for that insurance company, and they describe mayhem. In them, an actor is mayhem in all of its forms. It might be a driver's blind spot or a loosely tied – tied Christmas tree on the hood of a car, an emotional teenager – and, by the way, I think – is there any other kind of teenager? – or texting from behind the wheel of a car. (Audio interference). In any case, in these commercials, of course, mayhem prevails and the message is you need to have insurance against mayhem because mayhem is all around you. In some ways, actually, that feels a bit like the world we confront today, both uncertain and dangerous. Now, again, I'll concede that not everyone agrees with that way to categorize the world.

By some accounts, we're actually experiencing an evolutionary low point in human violence. Now, that's good news and we'd certainly like that train – trend to continue. In fact, I would suggest that our military, the United States military, deserves some of the credit for that evolutionary low level of violence. We help prevent conflict by deterring aggression and by assuring our partners. Our presence is a source of stability that fuels economic growth. This is true in the Middle East as it is in the Far East.

Now, for the bad news: Less violence does not necessarily mean less danger. Risk is on the rise. That is to say, I think that the probability and consequences of aggression are going up as a result of two trends. For one, power is shifting below and beyond the state. In his new book called "The End of Power," Moisés Naim goes so far as to say that power is actually decaying. By the way, I know that he's in a – he's in a separate and different think tank but I just wanted to quote him because – (laughter) – I actually find the argument rather persuasive.

In any case, the shift, the shift of power is spawning more actors that are more connected. And many of them are more capable and more willing to do us harm. The shift is also changing the relationship in many parts of the world between government and the governed. New social contracts are being negotiated in the street. We're witnessing the birth of citizenship in many parts of the Middle East. At the same time, advanced technologies are proliferating down and out. Middle-weight militaries now have intercontinental ballistic missiles. Cyber has reached a point where bits and bytes can be as destructive as bullets and bombs. Our homeland is not the sanctuary it once was.

Now, unlike that famous story of the fisherman in the tale of "The Arabian Nights," we will not be putting that genie back in the bottle. Mayhem is here to stay. But money is not. In a sense, the deductible on our national insurance policy has gone up. It's gone way up. And we can all understand why. Our nation is going through an historic fiscal correction. We're working to restore the economic foundation of our power, and we need to do this. Deficit reduction is in fact a national security imperative. But we need to be a little – no, actually we need to be a lot smarter about how we go about it.

It's worth noting that we haven't had a budget since I became the chairman of the joint chiefs, and for some time before that. And sequestration is quite simply the most irresponsible way possible to manage the nation's defense. It's actually the antithesis of what we need. We need budget certainty, time and flexibility. Sequestration compromises our readiness and it compounds risk. Left unaddressed, it could lead to a security gap; a lapse in coverage against the threats to our national security interests. It's also the law. I'm hopeful but not all that optimistic that both its magnitude and its mechanism will be diffused in some future budget deal. But in the meantime, we have no choice but to prepare for its full effect, which is of course our worst-case scenario.

So, are you feeling afflicted? Well, if you are, you're in good company. Now, let me tell you this, though. The coverage – to continue my insurance metaphor here, the coverage may be a little less than what you were used to. But it's still the best available and it's going to get better in time. And here's where I hope my confidence brings some comfort.

Last week, I called our joint chiefs and our combatant commanders together to discuss how we will lead through this latest contraction – and it is the latest contraction. It's – as I said, it's a bit of a historical pattern. Now, in that room were over 600 years of military experience around the table. Frankly, I thought we looked pretty good for our age. You may have noticed some of the same if you watched us testify before Congress up on the Hill.

Let me tell you what you did not see in that group, or would not have seen. You would not have seen weakness and you would not have heard a chorus of decline. This is a resolute bunch, just as those young men and women who we serve out on point for our nation, our resolute bunch. They have the courage to make the difficult choices about our investments, about our people and about our way of work. They're ready, along with every man and woman who served – I'm talking about the combatant commanders and chiefs now – they're ready, as is every single soldier, sailor, airman and Marine in uniform, to give their last breath to defend America and her allies.

They've also been down this road before. We all served during previous drawdowns, and we've all seen that there is the possibility of making mistakes in drawdown, big ones.

Eventually, we come through these periods stronger as a military and a nation. But make no mistake: Those were and these are tough times for our military family. This one's going to be maybe the toughest yet.

At least it's going to be different, we know that. This will be the first with an all-volunteer force. There's no mass demobilization. We didn't modernize much over the past 10 years, so our equipment is a little older, and there's no peace dividend on the horizon for reasons I described previously.

We're going to have to find opportunity, though, in the midst of this fiscal crisis. We need to seize the moment, and we need to do so to think differently and to be different. We can't do it alone – back to partners. We need the help of our elected officials to give us the certainty, the flexibility and the time to make change. If we can get the reforms to pay and compensation

we need – and we need them – and if we can get rid of weapons and infrastructure that we don't need, then we can begin to restore the versatility of the – of the Joint Force at a(n) affordable and sustainable cost.

As I stand here today, I don't yet know whether or if or how much our defense strategy will change, but I predict it will. We'll need to relook at our assumptions, and we'll need to adjust our ambitions to match our abilities. And that means doing less, but not doing less well.

It also means relying more on our other instruments of power to help underwrite global security. Of course, we won't do this well if we don't back diplomacy and development with sufficient dollars. And our partners will have to work with us and collaborate with us on accepting a greater share of the risk. Some are more ready and willing to do that than others. I have to say that the United Arab Emirates, for example, is our most credible and capable allies, especially in the Gulf region.

Our consistent first line of defense has been and always will be our people. They really are our greatest strength. We will rely on these combat-proven leaders to think and innovate as we navigate our challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

I should probably close while I'm ahead in this – in this – in this equilibrium of optimism and pessimism. I hope I – I hope I sense a bit of – that you might feel a little bit better about things as a result of this conversation. You are starting to reconcile these competing realities of staying strong in the face of danger with fewer dollars. If so, you should also feel pretty good about yourself. It was F. Scott Fitzgerald who said the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two competing and opposing ideas in your mind at the same time. If that, in fact, is the definition of intelligence, I can certainly tell you that I'm there, and I suspect you are as well. Ambassador, I will tell you, but I'm sure there is someone with that kind of genius and intelligence in this crowd who is armed for your first question. (Laughter.)

Look, let me – that's my prepared remarks. Let me also tell you, I really did come here today with the intent of assuring you that we will lead our way through this. It's – you know, the conditions are not making it easy to do that, but none of us that serve in uniform, none of you who serve your country is in – and civilian life and the diplomatic corps and economics – I don't think any of you ever signed up for anything easy. Easy wasn't part of the job description. And we'll get through this, but we'll get through it mostly because of the application of leadership, thinking, creativity and a commitment to each other.

And that's the message I want to leave you with before I take your questions, that we have had a shared future – we have shared the future. We have an interest in sharing the outcomes as we move ahead. And that will always be the case and always factor into the decisions we make about distribution of forces, partnering, engaging – all the things we've done through the past – really for the past 25 or 30 years to make sure that the Middle East in particular is on a path for greater security and stability on the basis of our common interests and values.

And with that, I'll start – I'll take questions. (Applause.)

Ah. There went the podium.

JON ALTERMAN: It's magic. Have a seat if you'd like, sir. (Inaudible.)

GEN. DEMPSEY: You know, I think I'll stand up, because if the – if I get a really tough one, I have this little tap dance that I've worked out over time. (Laughter.)

MR. ALTERMAN: And it's – and it's quicker to run out of the door if you want too. (Laughter.)

GEN. DEMPSEY: No, I'll stay standing. I –

MR. ALTERMAN: OK. Thank you, sir. I'm Jon Alterman. I'm the Brzezinski chair here at CSIS and the director of the Middle East program. I'm grateful to you for coming and giving those comments.

I would ask all of you that you wait until you're recognized – I think we have microphones – that you identify yourself, that you only ask one question until everybody's had a chance, and also that you ask your question in the form of a question – (laughter) – which is not to make a long statement and say, what do you think of my statement? (Laughter.)

GEN. DEMPSEY: I've never seen that happen. (Laughter.)

MR. ALTERMAN: Never – not in Washington, certainly.

GEN. DEMPSEY: No. (Chuckles.)

MR. ALTERMAN: So I wonder if I might start. I'm Jon Alterman. I run the Middle East program here. And you talked about cooperation. Most of what we are protecting in the Gulf is the trade of energy between the Gulf and Asia. As we talk about burden sharing, what is the role for partnerships both with countries that are already close allies and countries which are not allies but which are relying on energy from the Gulf? Should we be thinking about that differently in the budget context you've described?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah, that's the argument we hear sometimes. It goes something like this: If by 2017 the United States can achieve some level of energy independence, why in the world would we continue to be concerned about the energy that flows out of – out of the Gulf?

Well, look, my answer to that is I didn't go to the Gulf in 1991 and stay there for about the next 20 years because of oil. That's not why I went. It's not why my children went. It's – and we went there because we thought that a region of the world where we had – where we had not, except for a few bilateral relationships – where we hadn't invested much of our, let's call it, bandwidth, intellectual energy, commitment – now, we went there in '91 because of the – of the aggression of Saddam Hussein, but we stayed there because I think we came to the realization that the future of the region was tied to our future, and not through this thing called oil but rather

through the – as I said earlier, the shared interest in a common future where people would be able to build a better life and where threats could be managed collaboratively, not by the United States uniquely but by the relationships we would build on the basis of common interests.

So when I hear about in 2017, you know, oil won't be as big a factor for us – and that's great. I hope we do achieve energy independence. But I can assure you that at least from a military perspective – and I can only speak, as I dress, from the military perspective – that the continued development of capabilities – military capabilities, notably, in my world, but also partnerships and trust that we build by working together, by exchanging officers and noncommissioned officers in our professional military schools, that on that basis, you will find – you will find that the future will be a period of greater commitment.

Now, you know, if you measure our commitment in terms of numbers of boots on the ground and numbers of aircraft and number of aircraft carriers, I think you'll probably – you know, there'll always be this debate about inclining or declining commitment. But that's not what the commitment's all about, really, in my view. As I said, I went to – I went to the Gulf in '91, spent almost the next 20 years there on and off and didn't do it for oil.

MR. ALTERMAN: Thank you. (Inaudible) – we have a microphone.

Q: Hi, I'm Yousef. I'm the UAE ambassador. Thank you very much, General, for those lovely comments. My question dovetails right along Jon's question, which is one of the questions I hear as I travel home more and more frequently is, based on your withdrawal from Iraq, your impending withdrawal from Afghanistan, pivot to Asia, are the U.S. – is the U.S. committed to the Gulf region and the Middle East in general? And if you can just elaborate a little more on the general commitment to the region – and if the answer is yes, how can we find more ways to demonstrate that commitment?

GEN. DEMPSEY: The answer is yes. And the – and the expanded answer to that would indeed be, how can we find ways to demonstrate our commitment differently?

You know, this notion of withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan as somehow indicative of a – of a – of less commitment to the region, I really would like to react to that.

And, you know, it was – I spent three years in Iraq. And, you know, what you have to say – and I – and I – we're all aware that tomorrow is the 10-year anniversary, and the debate goes on about whether we should have, whether it was worth it. And that debate will go on. There's – you know, even if we – if we – if in this room we all decide that we have a common answer to that question, it will go on and should go on. I mean, we should always be introspective about the things we do.

But look, you know, I – my personal belief is that having given Iraq an – first of all, we – there is no longer the strong man, the dictator and the threat to the region by the name of Saddam Hussein that there was. Secondly and I think importantly, we've given the Iraqi people an incredible opportunity. And say what you will about whether we – it was a – you know, kind of a clean path to that opportunity or it was one fraught with missteps, opportunities gained,

opportunities lost. Of course it was. But the point is we really did give them an opportunity. And today we have in Iraq – we have a partner, not an adversary. And it remains to be seen still about how strong a partner they are willing and can become, but we have a partner.

So to your point, Yousef, I – you know, I think that it was – it was – it was inevitable that at some point our presence in Iraq would reduce, as they were asking for and given the opportunity to take control of their own destinies, and you're going to see that similarly play out in Afghanistan over the next few years. But that's separate and distinct from our commitment to engage with, partner with, collaborate with our important partners in the region, and again, not measured in terms of air wings or carrier battle groups but rather in terms of the kind of collaborations we actually have with the United Arab Emirates, where you are seeking to build your own capabilities, where we are eager to help you do that, where we do things like exercises. The mine – countermine exercise a few months ago was where 23, I think, or 24 nations participated.

That's the future, not necessarily the United States of America sitting there with half of the United States Navy positioned in the Gulf but rather a strategy, a long-term strategy that's feasible given the resources available that will allow us to achieve some common objectives. And I – and I can tell you that with the United Arab Emirates in particular.

But the other – the other strong allies we have, Saudi Arabia, Jordan – and if I go – if I start ticking them down, somebody's going to say, why didn't you mention me? But the point is we do have some incredible allies in the region and – who will remain allies. We just have to figure out how to – how to help you do more so that we can do less, but that doesn't mean less well.

MR. ALTERMAN: I see a question over here. Wait for a microphone.

Q: Hello, General Dempsey. Thank you for your service.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Good to see you.

Q: Mary Beth Long –

GEN. DEMPSEY: Of course you are. Still.

Q: Still. Most of our allies in the region are very concerned about Iran, not only her nuclear program but her increasing involvement in local politics, in the economy, support for proxies. If you had the opportunity to sit quietly with the supreme leader of Iran and talk him out of whatever he appears to be intending to do in the region, what would you say to him about U.S. intentions and U.S. cooperation with our partners in the region?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Well, first thing I'd do is I'd send Dennis Rodman over there, I think. (Laughter.)

No, the truth is the first thing I would do is I'd ask them why they're doing what they're doing. You know, I'd really like to hear it from him personally, you know, because we know, of course, what his surrogates and proxies are doing.

I'd like to know from him whether, you know, this – if he is – if they – by the way, though, you know that in that region, the three countries that have always been countries, Iran, Turkey and Egypt, you know, they are kind of the cornerstone of that region. Doesn't mean we want to be like any of them or that anyone else should want to be like them, but they – we have to account for the fact that those three countries are the – are the historic cornerstones or endpoints of that region.

So the first thing I'd like to know is, you know, what is it that they believe the future holds for the region, and why are they apparently, it seems to me – on a path to try to dredge up old animosities among Sunni and Shia, you know, things that frankly in this time in world history, they should be able to find a more peaceful way to pursue? What are their economic – the Persian people, you know, what are the aspirations of the Persian people; and again, why they think that their current behavior will achieve that result as they fundamentally not only discount anything that we believe is our national interest but what the nations in the region believe is in their national interest.

So I – you know, if I had a chance to sit with the ayatollah, I would ask him just exactly, you know, what are you hoping to achieve here? And you know, frankly, because we think we know what he's seeking to achieve and we think it will be unacceptable. In fact we've said so – unacceptable to not only the United States but the region. But I'd sure like to have – you know, again, this is extremely – and I'm not going over any more than I think Dennis Rodman is – but the point is I think that question about how they see what they're doing in their national interests – unless it is to, in fact, create that Sunni-Shia divide and have Iran, in the name of Shia Islam, become dominant – if that's their aspiration, then they're on a path that we will all find unacceptable.

Sir.

Q: General Dempsey, sir.

GEN. DEMPSEY: How are you? Happy St. Patrick's Day, by the way.

Q: Thanks very much, and to you, sir. Buster Howes, British defense attaché.

I just wanted to touch on Syria, recognizing what a difficult problem it is, perhaps the definitively wicked problem. The British prime minister is going to strike a parallel between the West's failure to act in Bosnia in a timely fashion, and particularly intervention in Srebrenica as a potential trigger to radicalization of Muslims in Europe. The heady days of the Arab Spring and democratization seem a long time ago. How do you think the West's failure to act in Syria will affect the American people's relationship with the people of the Middle East in the future?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Well, first of all, I'm not ready to put my rucksack in and pick up the rock of guilt and failure and put it in my rucksack. You know, but you did say the West's failure

to act, how will that play out in the region. And I'm suggesting to you that I'm not – I'm not quite in the camp that suggests that we are sitting here today having failed in the region.

Look, you – let me start with your characterization: the heady days of the Arab Spring. The heady days of the Arab Spring are actually playing out about like anyone's who's studied history should expect them to play out, that, you know, when strong men are overthrown historically, the first generation that takes their place struggles, and then oftentimes the next generation that takes their place will overcompensate, and it's the third generation, generally, that gets it right, right in the sense of balancing the needs of the center with the needs of the people.

So I think, you know, what, are we two years into the Arab Spring and we're ready to declare it a failure? I think that's a little premature, frankly. I do think that the guy coming over here with this big stick scares me a little bit but – oh, OK. All right.

Yeah, you're friendly, OK? That's good. So, you know, the heady days of the Arab Spring are creating the complex days in between the Arab Spring and whatever it becomes, and I think that's something we need to monitor, watch, help shape in the sense of through our partners in the region.

But now let me segue to Syria because you mentioned Syria in particular. You know, if – as a student of that part of the world now for about the last 20 years, I think Syria poses the most complex set of issues that anyone could ever conceive, literally, in every facet. And what – you know, when we talk about what is it that we hope to achieve in Syria, that's a tough – that's a tough question to answer. I mean, we have some – we have some national interests that run from issues related to the chemical and biological weapons, the heavy weaponry, our partners in the region and their security – so Turkey, notably Israel and Jordan, but also Iraq. We have some humanitarian concerns. So, you know, this is one of those cross-cutting issues. But in the – in the middle of all that is the fact that about six months ago, we had a very, let's call it opaque understanding of the opposition. And now I would say it's even more opaque.

So six months ago, the situation was – seemed to me to be very unclear. The number of groups seemed to me to be very unclear. And today that number and that issue seems to be even less clear in some ways. And so I think that the path which is a path to build consensus among partners – a path to do collaborative estimates of the situation, to plan not only for what's happening today, but the potential for the day after, as it's commonly called, you know, we're doing – we're doing all that.

But I don't have a – I wouldn't compare – first of all, because historical comparisons generally fall apart pretty quick. I'm not sure that the – that the comparison of this situation to Bosnia stands that test. And I think we should be doing everything we're doing to – on – with all of the instruments of power. But the military application of power should be the very last instrument we employ. And we're doing planning so that I can provide options, but again, I don't think – you know, I don't think, at this point, I can – I can see a military option that would create an understandable outcome. And until I do, it will be my advice to proceed cautiously.

(Off-mic exchange.)

Q: Nice to see you, General Dempsey. My name is Lu Xiang, and I'm a visiting fellow here at CSIS from Beijing, China.

My question is about – to the air-sea battle concept which has been proposed and developed by the U.S. Navy and the Air Force. With your background and your experience in the U.S. Army for over 30 years, how would you like to evaluate the viability and effectiveness of the ASB concept? And also, you will take a trip to China next month, right?

GEN. DEMPSEY: I am.

Q: And I wonder, how would you like to reply to your PLA counterparts if they raised a question about the ASB? And finally, I wonder, do you think that ASB which have an overwhelming capabilities against the threat you perceived as A2AD? Thank you very much.

GEN. DEMPSEY: OK. That's – there's a couple of threads there I need to pull apart in order to do justice to the question.

One is, air-sea battle is a tactic. It's not a strategy. And as you said yourself at the end, air-sea battle is a multiservice – not a joint. It's two services, generally. It's a multiservice answer to the A2AD challenge. A2AD: anti-access, access-denial – not unique, by the way, in the Pacific. I mean, we have an anti-access, access-denial challenge in the Gulf, for example, that we have to be alert to.

So you've got an operating concept – a joint operating concept, which is to say, operational access. The United States military, with partners, wants to know that it can maintain freedom of movement in a variety of complex environments around the globe. So that's the joint operational access concept. A subset of that is how the Navy and the Air Force are collaborating to achieve it, but the Army and the Marine Corps also have a role in that regard.

To your point about – if I'm asked about – you know, when I'm in China about air-sea battle and is it aimed at China, the answer is no. It's not aimed at China. The United States has interests in the global commons. It has interests in maintaining freedom of movement, freedom of action, and the things that we do in the development of technologies and tactics are fundamentally to guarantee that that freedom will continue to exist, regardless of who threatens it.

Q: Thank you.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Right behind you.

Q: General, may I ask you about what you consider is the impact of the nonresolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the security of the Gulf, and what specific challenge that Iran presents now can be enhanced or ignored by the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli –

MR. ALTERMAN: Sir, can you identify yourself?

Q: Oh, I'm sorry. Ziad Asali, American Task Force on Palestine.

MR. ALTERMAN: Thank you.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Well, the Mideast peace process, and those attempting to – or intending to continue to seek progress in that regard or to jumpstart it, depending on who you believe, is clearly outside of the realm of a military man.

But I will tell you that in most every place I travel and have a conversation with a counterpart, the very first topic is the Mideast peace process, as a way to set conditions for greater stability. And I accept that, having lived in that part of the world for many years. I mean, I am a strong advocate of continuing that – the progress of the Mideast peace process.

How it relates to the – to Iran is yet another one of these problem sets it's – this is – this is the issue of what are Iran's intentions of – in Syria? What are Iran's intentions in the Gulf? What are Iran's intentions in Bahrain? What are Iran's intentions in the Mideast? And you know, they are a declared enemy of the state of Israel.

And so I think all of these things – my approach, militarily, is not to look at issues through a soda straw. You know, you'll say, well, what about Syria? And you'll look through this narrow prism of Syria. And if you do that and miss the opportunity to understand Syria in the context of the region – the Levant, notably – but also in the context of Iran, I think – I think it illuminates both vulnerabilities and opportunities.

And so my answer to your question would be first and foremost that this is a diplomatic issue, which I very much encourage. But secondly, I try not to look at issues in isolation because I think you miss opportunities when you do that.

MR. ALTERMAN: Sir, do you have a question? Did you have a question? I saw your hand up before. No? OK, could you then – I'll call on you. You have to wait for a microphone.

Q: (Off mic.)

MR. ALTERMAN: I have my list. Trita and Mohammad (sp) – (inaudible) – list.

Q: Thank you. Karen DeYoung with The Washington Post. I wanted to follow-up on the Syria question and pose a comparison to Libya rather than Bosnia. That was a place where the kind of partnership you spoke of, certainly with partners in the Gulf and in Europe, came into play with the United States, an active participant.

In Syria, you see all of those partners virtually – the British and the French, UAE, Qatar, Saudis – advocating more robust support for the opposition. And you heard Prime Minister Cameron, in fact, last week give really a sort of opposite assessment of opposition organization and definition from what you just gave.

I wondered if there's any thought – short of the kind of direct military intervention that you spoke of – any thought given to going the way that some of our other partners now feel the need to go to, and more support for the opposition not through direct operations but more robust training, more weaponry, providing more intelligence and just basically following them or participating with them in a more robust way?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah, I mean, I think that there are opportunities there. And that's exactly the right – I think the right characterization. But to the Libyan comparison, you know, as you recall, the Libyan opposition was geographically kind of separated from the regime forces, and it was a much cleaner – a much cleaner effort to support them – from east then west toward the middle.

I mean, this – as I said before, the challenge with the opposition in Syria is that it is – it's multilayered, multifaceted, and it's kind of ubiquitous and it's – meaning, spread throughout the country, pockets in some cases, intermingled in others. And so we very much do believe that the answer to Syria is through partners, because I think they will – there's a greater likelihood that they'll understand the complexities than that we would.

MR. ALTERMAN: On my list I have Trita, Chris (sp), Mohammad (sp), Todd and Steve.

MR. : (Off mic.)

MR. ALTERMAN: Two? OK. Then Trita, first question.

Q: General, thank you so much. Trita Parsi from the National Iranian American Council.

Your predecessor mentioned on numerous occasions before he left that he was very concerned about a potential conflict with Iran in the Persian Gulf as a result of an accident, pointing out that the absence of communication creates a situation in which there is – much easier to miscalculate, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of escalation.

I would like to get your assessment as to whether you think over the course of the last two years if there has been an improvement in communication, if there is improvement in the diplomacy in order to at least shut off that potential path towards a military confrontation.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Well, I can't speak for the improvement in diplomatic outreach; again, that's out of – out of my area of expertise, although I – you know, I am quite confident there have been several attempts. And, of course, there's the ongoing P-5 plus one, which is narrowly focused, but is at least a venue for contact.

Militarily, you know, we do exchange – in terms of the risk of miscalculation and misperception, there are the – sort of the international rules of navigation, which both sides do follow. So guard channel, which is a common radio communication among aviators; the rules of the road, if you will, as well, in the maritime domain, which are exercised anytime anyone is transiting the Straits of Hormuz. So there are the routine contacts, bridge-to-bridge

communications, aircraft-to-aircraft communications that go on. And, you know, to this point, I think they have played a role in avoiding misperception and miscalculation.

But there is also on occasion the Iranian effort to expand its influence, to – as you know, they assert a certain freedom of navigation out beyond the traditional and accepted global standard of 12 nautical miles. They assert a straight baseline that does – so in between that traditional 12 mile – nautical mile limit and what they assert, which can reach out to about 22 miles, there is a – there is risk in that band right there of miscalculation. So we're not – I share Admiral Mullen's lingering concern, but we do have the routine contacts that you would expect notably mariners and aviators to have in the Gulf.

MR. ALTERMAN: Chris, you get the last question. Just don't ask about Asia.

Q: I have to. Chris Nilson, I do the Nilson Report. It's mainly for Asians watching us and for us watching the Asians.

GEN. DEMPSEY: You named your report after yourself?

Q: When you get gray hair, you can get away with all kinds of stuff, sir. (Laughter.) Plus who else would do it? (Laughs.)

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah. Write that down. I'm going to do the Dempsey thing – (off mic) – (laughter).

Q: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely, there's room.

In view of your upcoming trip, but also, in a sense, to follow up on the last question, crisis management escalation risk, are you optimistic that you're going to be able to make some progress with your Chinese counterparts on the need for serious U.S.-China mil-mil at the senior levels on how to manage the risk, especially with our – their and our North Korean friends, in view of the potential for problems?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah, I really am, as well as with my Russian counterpart. Both my Russian counterpart and my Chinese counterpart just changed within the last few months. And I've had contact with both of them, one with a video teleconference, one with a telephone conversation.

But to your point about my Chinese counterpart, I am. And I think he is, as well, in our first contact. And, you know, the way we work that is we acknowledge the points of disagreement – or let's call them friction – between us, and then we find the places where we can work together on common interests absent those frictions, and then we try to move toward each other, mostly from the bottom up. I mean, we already have a very robust engagement at the service level with our Chinese counterparts, and so what you'll see me try to do is connect that with a sort of a strategic-level engagement.

But sure. Look, I've said – we already had a conversation about, you know, what does this rebalancing – I don't use "pivot," I use "rebalancing" – to the Pacific really mean? And I was able to explain to him that it's my military belief that it would be – it would be our absence, not our presence, in the Pacific that would lead to miscalculation and misperception; that our presence there, even though from time to time we'll have – you know, we will misunderstand each other, but we'll work through those misunderstandings because we're there. If we weren't there, I don't know on what basis we would have that kind of engagement.

So – and he seemed to accept that, and I intend to pull that string as we get – as we go and meet each other, with our families, by the way, because I do believe that most of what we accomplish we accomplish on the basis of relationships and the effort to try to achieve some level of trust. And so I'm going to give that my best shot when I'm over there next month.

MR. ALTERMAN: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, the chairman has to go. I'd be grateful if you could just stay in your seats until he and his party can leave. But please, before he does, join me in thanking him for – (inaudible). (Applause.)

GEN. DEMPSEY: Well, let me just – let me end where I began, by thanking you for the chance to come over here and discuss and have a(n) exchange about the extraordinarily challenging issues that confront us, everything from the practical issues of threats to our national interest, all the way back to how do we match ends, ways and means as we build the strategy in the face of reduced resources.

But what I – but I promise you we will figure this out. We're one budget deal away from, you know, forgetting about all these issues, really. And I'm counting on our elected officials to deliver that deal. And in the middle – in the meantime, we'll manage – you know, we'll manage – actually, I should – let me use the better phrase – we'll lead our way through this. And if you're listening to this or if you're a partner from the region who's going to go back home and report on what the chairman of the Joint Chiefs said, you can take it to the bank that we will remain the partners that you've enjoyed, and you will be the partners that we've enjoyed, for the last 20 years. And I can only see a future where we become stronger together.

Thanks very much. (Applause.)

(END)