

Center for Strategic and International Studies

Online Event

“The State of Special Operations Forces: A Conversation with Rep. Stephanie Murphy”

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FEATURING:

Representative Stephanie Murphy (D-FL)

Vice Chair,

House Armed Services Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations

CSIS EXPERTS:

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Dr. Seth G. Jones: Welcome, everyone. I am ecstatic to have with us here Congresswoman Stephanie Murphy. She represents Florida's Seventh Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives. She currently serves on the House Ways and Means Committee, where she is a member of the Subcommittee on Trade and the Subcommittee on Worker and Family Support. She's also – and this is particularly relevant for this discussion – she also serves on the House Armed Services Committee, where she is vice chair of the Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations, and is also a member of the Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces.

Welcome, Congresswoman. It is great to have you with us at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Representative Stephanie Murphy (D-FL): It's great to be with you, Seth. And thank you so much to CSIS for hosting this event, and for all of the incredibly in-depth and intellectual conversations that you have on such a broad range of issues.

Dr. Jones: Well, great. You've got an incredibly diverse background, so I wanted to start off in part if you could unpack a little bit your trajectory – Vietnamese refugee rescued by U.S. troops, later worked at the Pentagon post-9/11, ultimately became as you are now a U.S. congresswoman. So how have your experiences shaped your worldview more broadly? I mean, what an incredible background.

Rep. Murphy: Well, I appreciate you saying that. I think it's fair to say it's a fairly unconventional path from refugee to member of Congress, but it's also a very – very much an American dream story. And you know, just – and it totally does frame the way that I think about the work that I do today in Congress and also the way that I think about what America's role on the world stage should be.

But in the aftermath of the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War, my family – my mother had worked on a U.S. airbase. My father had worked for the South Vietnamese government. And they found themselves among the Vietnamese people who were being persecuted by the new communist regime. They were rounding these people up and sending them to what they called "reeducation camp," and that was places where there was forced labor and a lot of people didn't make it. And so my family, looking at the prospect of raising my brother and I in a country without freedoms, human rights, and an authoritarian government that oppressed its people, they decided to make a dangerous and maybe brave decision to escape by boat in the dead of

night. And I think my family understood, my parents understood inherently, that this was a journey in which we might not make it but that it might be better for us to die together in search of light than to live on in darkness.

And so we get on this boat. I'm all of six months old. My brother is eight years old. And we were on a boat with several other dozen Vietnamese people. And we get to the high seas and we simply run out of fuel. And so there we are, dangerously adrift, when the U.S. Navy encounters our boat and they provide us with the food, fuel, and water to let us make it to a Malaysian refugee camp. And from there we're sponsored by a Lutheran church and relocated to Virginia, so just about an hour south of D.C.

And I tell you this story because for me that was the first moment where I encountered what I think makes America great. And obviously, as a six-month-old, I probably didn't understand it at that point. But in retrospect, it was a moment where my family were the beneficiaries of American power and American generosity.

And it's the power that enables the U.S. military, the U.S. Navy, to deploy thousands of miles from home. But it's the generosity that has these sailors, who are trained for combat, decide to extend grace to these desperate strangers. And that moment forever marks my life, because I'm deeply indebted to this country. I feel like I have a debt of gratitude that I'm always trying to pay back. It led me to the Department of Defense after 9/11 because I saw my country under attack and I wanted to go do something about it.

And at the Department of Defense, what I learned was that we don't look left and right and say, hey, are you a Democrat or are you a Republican? We're all Americans. And we ask what's the mission and how do we move forward? And so those things are the things that frame the way that I look at my work in Washington, in Congress today, you know, less about politics and more about people and what moves this country forward, understanding that not only do I have a responsibility domestically to ensuring working families and small businesses and, you know, all the things that we do here at home, but that America has a role on the global stage, one that, you know, has its limits to our power but that its leadership is incredibly important, and more so today, I think, than ever in my lifetime does America need to really step into that global leadership role.

Dr. Jones:

That's an incredible story. Thanks for sharing it with us.

I wanted to move a little bit – you talked a little about 9/11. You spent time in the Pentagon. Based also on your current subcommittee work in the House Armed Services Committee, where you're involved in Special Operations and intelligence, I wanted to move to SOCOM in particular, U.S.

Special Operations Command, and more broadly U.S. Special Operations activity.

And it would be helpful for the audience here – we’ve got a mixture of people with a military background and the general public – but from your perspective, what’s Congress’s role in providing oversight of SOCOM and the Special Operations forces you just talked about?

Rep. Murphy: You know, to set the stage a little bit, I’m the vice chair of the Intelligence and Special Ops Subcommittee that’s a part of the House Armed Services Committee. And I’m delighted to be back working on these issues, because when I was at the department I actually worked in the policy office that oversaw Special Operations and counterterrorism. My portfolio is the Asia-Pacific and Latin America. And I’m just thrilled to be back working with the community.

What I would say is that, from a congressional perspective, however, it’s a little bit of a different perspective to be on this side of the table. And for Congress, Congress does three kind of key things for the community. We set policy, we provide funding, and then we perform oversight.

And to break that down a little bit, you know, insofar as policy is concerned, this community reports to a number of relevant committees in Congress – the House Armed Services Committee, the Senate Armed Services Committee, as well as the Appropriations Committee, both in the House and the Senate, for armed services. And we can set policy by providing authorizations – you know, what are you permitted to do? And also, you know, a sense of Congress. You know, we want you to focus on the force and the health of the force. How do you do that? We can ask for reporting, those types of things.

On funding, we provide – while House Armed Services and Senate Armed Services authorizes the funding to be spent, the Appropriations Committees in the Senate and the House actually appropriate that funding. And that money can be used for buying equipment, operations and maintenance, research and development, military construction – you know, all kinds of things. And I will just take a moment and note here that Special Ops is a bargain the defense world. They are less than 2 percent of the over \$700 billion that we spend on DOD programs.

And then on the oversight piece, I kind of veered into a little bit of this with the policy, you know, we ask for hearings, and briefings, and reports on a wide array of topics. And, you know, we will have the civilian head – or, the civilian leadership, policy leadership, ASD(SO/LIC), who – I used to work for an ASD(SO/LIC) – come and testify in front of us. We’ll also have the Special Ops command commander, General Clarke, who also appears, or will appear

before our committees here. And I'm grateful to have a good relationship with him and be able to have frank conversations about both the opportunities and challenges for the community.

Dr. Jones: Great. Well, we're going to move from that description of the role that you and Congress has, and a couple of specific questions. So start to drill down a little bit more detail. And I think when you – when you look at the Biden administration's interim national security strategic guidance, I mean, in many ways it continues what General Mattis – Secretary Mattis had started under the National Defense Strategy in the previous administration, a shift away from counterterrorism as the priority and to focus more on competition or the pacing threat, as Deputy Secretary of Defense Kath Hicks talks about, with China, as well as Russia to some degree. Where the priority really is not CT anymore, counterterrorism.

So from your perspective, because there's been a big debate even within the Special Operations community, has SOCOM adapted to competition with countries like China and moved away from counterterrorism? What's your general sense about – I mean, there's certainly a lot of talk about shifting. But from your perspective, what does it actually look like?

Rep. Murphy: Sure. And, again, just to provide a little bit of context, when I was at the department in the early 2000s, and we had two wars going on in the Middle East, and I was working the – I had worked the counterterrorism portfolio, I was moved over to write what at that time was called the Guidance for the Employment of the Force. And it essentially was a document that set out the goals for what our war plans look like, or what we call OPLANs, as well as our theater security cooperation. And then we racked and stacked combatant commands, as well as priority missions.

So I know how hard it is to make priorities and to prioritize either a region or a mission above another. Those conversations with the brass, I'm still scarred by some of them – (laughs) – because everybody believes they belong –

Dr. Jones: Me too, by the way. I'm scarred by many of those debates as well.

Rep. Murphy: (Laughs.) They always believe they belong somewhere else on that priority list than where they are. But even though we spend over \$700 billion on defense, we do have to have prioritization and allocation of resources to meet the most immediate threats.

And so to your question of whether or not we are seeing SOCOM make a necessary transition, I would say it's not – it's not a binary choice of counterterrorism or great-power competition. It's not an either/or situation, but rather it is a situation where we will continue to have to have

some of our elements execute on a counterterrorism mission. And I would argue that Special Ops Forces are well positioned to be that leading force in that area and that frees up our regular military to attend to other – train and prepare for other types of missions.

But those operations that our SOF engage in in support of CT also has benefits when it comes to great power competition. Their presence in these countries allows them to be on the ground and collect intelligence as well as to build networks. It gives them reach that conventional military may not have. Their expertise in working on building partnership capacity is critically important.

You're not just building capacity, you're building a sense of loyalty, I think, some interoperability capabilities as well as the kinds of relationships that if things were to hit the fan on any one of these great power competitions, you know, you have those existing relationships in a way that our competitors simply don't have.

And then, finally, they are really astute at – they're experienced in proxy wars, right, and a lot of – you could argue that some of the great power competition that we're seeing has not yet, thank God, hit kinetic, you know, point. What it is – where we are is gray zone. And in the gray zone, often, you're looking at proxy wars, and this force is well suited to, you know, advocate and advance U.S. interests in all of those areas.

So I think they're doing a little bit of both. Obviously, we will continue to work with them to make sure that they're prioritizing and maximizing the resources that they have. But, again, this is a force that is good at doing a lot with little.

Dr. Jones:

It certainly is. I wanted to focus on China, but just to support what you just noted, from a number of countries we certainly see the Iranians, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, Quds Force in particular, active, as you noted, and working with proxies or partners in Lebanon, Hezbollah, the Iraqi groups that have been threatening American forces in Iraq, the Hashd al-Shaabi Yemenis that the Saudis have complained about firing standoff weapons, and, obviously, plenty of other places.

The Russians, as we've seen recently, with a heavy focus on GRU and Wagner Group, in this incredible U.N. report from a week and a half ago on Wagner and Russian atrocities in the Central African Republic. So you're definitely right, we're seeing a lot of gray zone activity from a number of these countries.

But I wanted to touch base on China, and as you look towards the future, what's your sense about the Special Operations' role in countering China? I

mean, it's unlike what we've seen with the counterterrorism world where it was the supported command. It's really a supporting effort to other forces. So how do you see Special Operations playing in the Indo-Pacific area?

Rep. Murphy: Yeah. So I actually was assigned out at the Pacific Command working in the operations shop back when we were doing Operation Enduring Freedom Philippines. And I'll start there as one footprint, one place in which Special Ops Forces have for over a decade built relationships, establish a presence, and have created that sense of trustworthiness.

You know, no matter what happens in the Philippines with their president – the government leadership, their civilian leadership – their relationship with their military leadership is incredibly strong and it's a relationship that has been built over the years through a number of congressionally provided soft tools, whether that's the exercises that we do with them or the military education dollars or the work that we were doing in countering terrorism in the Philippines.

All of those things have established a decades-long working relationship in the region where, you know, China really is trying to establish its presence and its influence. And we have a counterpoint to that, that you can't build overnight, nor does China operate in a way where they want to build those relationships. Theirs is much more of a transactional relationship, and I think – I think, you know, these countries understand that.

So I think SOF is engaged in Asia, and you know – and then they are also engaged in parts of the world where China is also trying to compete for influence. And you rattled off a number of places in Africa, and it's true that they're there with suitcases of money, but do they have that lasting relationship and the influence? And I would say SOF right now plays a role that is part of a broader U.S. foreign policy in countering Chinese influence, even if it isn't necessarily in the traditional military way that you think of.

Dr. Jones: Yeah. It's worth noting for those in the audience that haven't watched it if the – I think it's still the highest-grossing movie in Chinese history inside of China is "Wolf Warrior 2," which – I mean, it's not exactly a technologically savvy produced movie, but it is a – you know, what's interesting is it's a Chinese special operator, not an infantry – a special operator – in Africa that is fighting the Americans – not directly, but a private contractor. So it's symbolic, and it is the most-watched movie in China. So I think that sort of supports this –

Rep. Murphy: (Inaudible.) (Laughs.)

Dr. Jones: Yeah.

So one question, just moving on a little bit, you know, there have been some challenges, and I think the SOCOM commander has been upfront about challenges within the Special Operations community that Congress has been involved in. So last year, partly for those in the audience for background, SOCOM and the ASD(SO/LIC) – assistant secretary of defense for Special Operations – provided Congress the results of a comprehensive review of SOF culture and ethics, which identified some pretty notable lapses in leadership and accountability. And again just to give context for those in the audience, there's a U.S. Army Special Forces major that was accused of murdering a(n) unarmed Taliban bombmaker in Afghanistan. Two Army Special Forces NCOs – noncommissioned officers – were convicted of smuggling cocaine from Colombia. A Navy SEAL and two Marines were accused of murder – manslaughter of an Army Green Beret in Mali. And Congress has gotten involved in asking for kind of the results.

So, from your perspective, how would you evaluate SOCOM's efforts to improve its ethics and culture? And what more, if anything, needs to be done?

Rep. Murphy: You know, there's a saying within the SOF community that humans are more important than hardware. And when you see some of this – the manifestations of this kind of behavior that – within the community, obviously, it raises concerns for Congress as well as the leadership of the Special Ops Command, as well as their civilian leadership.

But I do want to – and I will address how I think they're doing. I think they're taking the issue seriously and working on it.

But in answering this question I don't want this to be the impression, that the entire community is this way. We often say that our military is just a reflection of our society, and so some of the things that you're laying out happens within our general forces and are also manifesting themselves within our civilian population. And so – but when it manifests itself within the SOF community, we have to take it very seriously. And so we have to get very focused on both the physical and mental wellbeing of the formations, as well as the ethics and culture of the force.

So SOCOM has done a lot in this space. They have put more emphasis on what they call the – it's POTFF. So we speak in so many acronyms and I'm trying to make sure I define them for the audience, but preservation of the force and family. And this effort used to be focused on physical needs because we were – we had a high – or we were – we had a high deployment ratio. A lot of the issues were manifesting themselves in physical conditions. But they've – SOCOM has done a good job opening the aperture and focusing

on a broader range of cognitive, behavioral, psychological, and physical standards so that we are tending to the whole soldier and to their families in a way that is comprehensive and that can be preemptive to having some of the incidents like you've laid out actually occur at all.

And I think the other thing that I have seen SOF do is to recognize that during the high pace of back-to-back deployments and a focus on getting the kinetic mission done, so to speak, there was some leadership I guess not focused – leadership wasn't as focused on some of these personal and behavioral things, and they have now made a very explicit change to say leadership at every level is accountable for the conduct of the folks that they are leading, not just the execution of the mission. And I think that's really important. But we're going to keep on this. We're going to continue to ask SOCOM commander and ASD(SO/LIC) to provide us updates and measurable statistics to show that they have been able to address some of these issues, because, again, if humans are more important than hardware, we need to make sure that humans are as healthy and as supported as they need to be to execute the mission.

Dr. Jones: So keeping with this theme of humans being most important in executing the mission, there has been some progress and the SOCOM commander has talked about this in the role of women in the military, including in the Special Operations community. So there was a RAND study a couple of decades ago, published about 22 years ago, that identified barriers to the participation of women, and minorities more broadly, in the military. The SOCOM commander has recently testified about this. He said, quote, "We continue to see positive movement with the contribution of women leaders in all four service component commands of the Special Operations community and the selection of the first African American officers to command a Navy SEAL team and a Ranger battalion."

So from your – how do you gauge this progress? Has it been sufficient or are there additional steps that the Special Operations community can take here?

Rep. Murphy: Well, let me share with you: I was recently in – down in Tampa meeting with some folks at SOCOM and we had a lunch on diversity and inclusion, and around the table was a very diverse set of folks. I got to meet the African American Navy SEAL commander. But also, to my left, was a Latina who had been recently selected for a special team. And in contrast to my experience in the early 2000s, when I would go out to SOCOM to brief them – and, as you can imagine, the bureaucrat from D.C. coming to SOCOM to brief them went over really well – (laughs) – especially in the packaging I come in. And I remember what it looked like walking through the command and standing in front of the 3(00) or 400 SOF members briefing, and it didn't look anything

like it looked a couple months ago when I visited SOCOM. So they're making progress.

But can more progress be made? Of course. And I think what we need to focus on – because they are an organization that is a standards-based organization. We need to focus on diversity of opportunity, and if you get diversity of opportunity and ensure that you open the door and the aperture to all walks of life to compete for these positions, I think you will make additional progress.

And the other thing that I think is important for us to do is to look at each unit within the SOF community. We're here talking about SOF as if they are a monolithic organization, but that's simply not true. There are civil affairs units or military information units that have different standards to qualify to be a part of them than, say, the Green Berets or the Navy SEALs. And so we should look across all the units and understand what the barriers to diversity are. Is it that the – in some units, you know, the people picking are picking people who look like them? Or is it simply that we don't have a diverse enough set of folks who are applying? So diversity is a complex thing, but it's a necessary thing for the missions that we're going to be asking the SOF community to execute here into the future.

And I – one last point, and I'll just say that I always look at the SOF community that deploys into Latin America, based in Florida, my home state. And they have recognized that they need the kind of diversity to allow these forces to arrive in Latin American countries and blend, not just from a linguistic perspective, which you can teach, but also from a cultural perspective. And that's going to be increasingly important, especially as we look at, you know, implementing operations in the gray zone, which is more about information and being able to understand cultures and what is moving them.

Dr. Jones:

My own experience working with some of the Special Forces or Green Beret groups deployed to Latin America is their recruitment has included a rich variation in Spanish-speaking individuals from across Latin America. It's been – it was – it was probably of less use in many ways to many of their deployments to Afghanistan, but certainly to Colombia and El Salvador, historically, was quite useful. And, you know, they could speak the language, understand many of the cultures.

I mentioned Afghanistan. And we have a question from the audience about your reaction to the withdrawal from Afghanistan. And any concerns that you have as the war looks like it's heating up? There's already been a war – in fact, there's been a war since the late 1970s. But there have been some concerns about Taliban advances on the ground. So any thoughts on the direction that Afghanistan is going, and concerns you have? Including about

the impact on human's or even women's rights in areas controlled by the Taliban?

Rep. Murphy: Yeah, of course when it comes to foreign policy that has an impact on U.S. security or on human rights abroad or on our forces who may still be there – of course I have concerns, but – as I do in any case. But I also have an awareness. And that awareness is around the fact that the American public has grown weary of being in Afghanistan. And as somebody who's from Vietnam, I understand the impact of what happens when the American public loses its will or desire to continue to remain engaged. And so that's the reason why – the public and the public sentiment – is the reason why both a Republican administration as well as a Democratic administration is pushing forward with withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Those being the facts that they are, I think I'm more focused on, well, how do we continue to resource our forces so that they can deter and disrupt terrorists who seek to do U.S. homeland or U.S. interests' harm. And then how we are able to ensure that the folks who've worked with us in Afghanistan are protected from, you know, retribution – as my family and I are all too aware happens – when U.S. pulls forces out of a country? And so that's my focus. A lot of that still remains to be seen.

You know, both the Trump administration and the Biden administration understand that there were risks involved with removing – or, shrinking our footprint in country. And we will just have to continue to evaluate the conditions on the ground and make decisions as we are able to assess that risk. But I think penultimate on that is to ensure that the Taliban or other terrorist organizations don't – can't use Afghanistan as a safe haven from which to attack the United States homeland.

Dr. Jones: Well, this leads to another follow-up question. And, by the way, on your point – and it has also been, obviously, a lot of discussion about trying to get the translators, many of which I've worked with in Afghanistan, out and to protect them, because they have given their lives and are under direct threat right now. So I know many in the military, including the Special Operations community, are very intent on protecting those that served with American forces.

Rep. Murphy: And I believe we will be taking a vote on that very issue here in the next few weeks in the House. So let's – I'm fingers crossed that we can get this across the finish line on the Senate side and into law so that we can protect those very people that you've gotten a chance to know and have worked with.

Dr. Jones: Yeah. I think it sends – frankly, it would send a message to others who want to work with us in the future that we will look after – we will look after those that work with us.

But one question that has come up – and this is kind of a follow-up on the Afghanistan one – is the role of the Special Operations community, because I know there are still some discussions about what role, if any, from the air the Special Operations community might continue to have, the armed overwatch or over the horizon. And for those in the audience less familiar with it, continuing to fly drones, for example, like the MQ-9s, from bases like Al Udeid in Qatar. Or there have been discussions about Special Operations operating under Title 50 intelligence authority.

So I guess the question is if there is and there likely is going to be a continuing threat from some groups like al-Qaida in Afghanistan, or if there's an expansion of competitors – the Russians, the Iranians, even the Chinese – what role should the Special Operations community have, if any, in Afghanistan moving forward?

Rep. Murphy:

I believe that, you know, the SOF community has the mission of counterterrorism. And insofar as Afghanistan poses a threat in that area, they will do that.

What I – what we have heard through testimony from Department of Defense officials and the Joint Chiefs who come before Congress is that they believe they can exercise some of these missions over the horizon. But of recent days we have heard a lot about what over the horizon really means. It means potentially an eight- or nine-hour flight if we can't get the cooperation closer in.

And so I think it remains to be seen whether the strategy of conducting counterterrorism over the horizon is going to be effective. And I think the onus is on our military commanders to let us know, as members of Congress, whether this is working out for them or what other assets and resources they need in order to make that strategy work, because at the end of the day the political decision to withdraw from Afghanistan has already been made.

And so now we have to monitor the situation, see whether or not we have the capabilities and resources to exercise the strategy of countering terrorism from over the horizon. And if we don't, then somebody needs to flag this for the political decision-makers so that they can reevaluate where we are in this.

Dr. Jones:

Yeah. I think that discussion will be – will continue to occur. And frankly, if we do continue to see Taliban advances on the ground, I think that we'll see more interest in discussion along those lines.

I wanted to take a step back on the broader issue of counterterrorism just for a moment and read a quote from the SOCOM commander, who noted

recently that over the past year SOCOM has assumed moderate but acceptable risk in countering terrorism – he used the violent-extremist organizations – as we rebalance the force for modernization, readiness, strategic competition, all the issues we’ve already talked about so far.

And the question for you is do you share that assessment? And before you answer, just to highlight, you know, there was a Times – a New York Times story today about the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Somalia. The French are decreasing their presence in West Africa. The U.S. is largely gone, although they do have a presence, drone base in Mali.

But is it your sense that we’re taking – we’re accepting too much risk here, or are we – are we doing what we have to do based on other interests overseas?

Rep. Murphy: You know, that’s a really tough question and one that doesn’t have an easy answer. We only really know if we accepted too much risk if there is a major terrorist attack on the U.S. or our interests that we could have potentially stopped had we struck a different allocation of forces or a different balance, and it’s impossible to prove a negative. You know, the fact that we haven’t seen the kind of 9/11-style attack on our homeland in large part is to the credit for the counterterrorism activities that we’ve been doing, but it’s really hard to prove a negative.

What I will say, though, is that I mentioned that SOCOM has a fairly small relative to the rest of the DOD budget. So they have 75,000 people, about \$13 billion in defense spending. And when you’re talking about a finite amount of people and a finite amount of money, it’s inevitable that you are going to have to take risks and make priorities when you are dealing with such a wide range of missions that we expect of them. And so I think they are doing the best they can to make the shift, just as the general forces are, as the civilian leadership is pointing in the direction of great-power competition and de-emphasizing CT. And you know, so you’re right to point out that there is a broad and complex set of terrorist threats still trying to – or that the U.S. is still facing, but you know, we have to – we have to take calculated risk, measured risk, and we do that across the board at the Department of Defense – or, I guess they do it; I should stop speaking as if I’m still there. They do that. And we rely on our commanders to provide us with the military advice as to what is acceptable risk.

So it’s not – it’s not a clean answer, but I think, you know, we are – we are all shifting focus as the whole of government to great-power competition.

Dr. Jones: Yeah, and I think that will continue.

And as you pointed out earlier, it's not a zero-sum game; that actually, when you look at a number of powers like the Russians, their operations in Syria, the maneuver element on the ground included Lebanese Hezbollah as a major element, so they have worked directly with designated terrorist organizations overseas. So there is not a clear dividing line in all cases between states and terrorist organizations.

So we're right at the end of the segment, and the last question maybe is the toughest because it's one that I think continues to be a problem or a challenge for not just the Department of Defense, but others including the State Department and those in the intelligence community. It's in the area of information operations.

The Special Operations community, particularly SOCOM, is the lead for military information-support operations, including what they call or what used to be called psychological operations. SOCOM does run a center along these lines. And I think if you – you don't – you don't even have to read the news every day to know that the Russians, the Chinese, and other states are engaged in a heavy disinformation campaign against the U.S., including offensive cyber operations against our companies. This is almost a daily occurrence now.

So I think from your standpoint, what – how do we continue to improve in these areas? And what role does the Special Operations community have, nested in broader interagency activity?

Rep. Murphy:

Well, I think it was Churchill who said a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth gets its pants on, and I think he said that before the advent of the digital age. And I think it's more true now and more worrisome now, given that a lot of the radicalization that happens across the world comes from misinformation. A lot of the attacks that we're seeing on our country are through cyberattacks, ransomware attacks. This is all escalating, not declining, and it may be one of the biggest national security threats that we are facing.

I'm looking forward to seeing Biden's ransomware strategy. I think the fact that he's taking it seriously and willing to, from a diplomatic perspective, hold Russia accountable – anybody who harbors cybercriminals should be held accountable. And so there's a diplomatic element to it. And there's an intel element to it. And there is this SOF element to it.

And I think the reason why SOF is involved in this – and I should say that I got a chance to visit the JMWC, which is that center that you're talking about, the Joint Military Information Support Operations Center – again, another long acronym – (laughs) – but I got a chance to visit that center when I was at MacDill. And I've become a major champion for this initiative in Congress

and have been really working to ensure that it gets sufficient funding and personnel. Because SOF often is a place where you can incubate ideas and move a little more quickly than, say, the rest of government, or the rest of DOD can.

And they have done an incredible job of integrating cultural, linguistic expertise to be able to execute on this mission and are feeling out, you know, how we should counter misinformation and how we use information in order to help us obtain our goals without violating any of the principles that we have as a democratic nation. And so I think they're doing great work there. I think of them as an incubator of good ideas. And when this threat is evolving so fast, we need to have a whole of government approach, everybody throwing everything against the wall to see what's the best approach.

And then we should fund and resource it, because this is the place where lesser competitors who don't meet our military advantage, who can't overcome our military advantage, are seeking to cause harm to our country, because it's a low-cost way for them to be disruptive. And we can't allow that to happen.

Dr. Jones: No, we can't. I just want to thank you. This brings us to the end of our session. I want to thank you for such a wide-ranging discussion. Your answers were thorough, across everything from your own background – which is a fascinating one – all the way to diversity issues, to the health of the force, to terrorism and great-power competition. Really appreciate you taking your – some precious time today to talk with us and the audience here. And thanks for the wonderful service that you're providing to the state of Florida as well as to the nation more broadly.

Rep. Murphy: Thanks so much for having me, and thanks everybody for joining us today. This was a great conversation. I look forward to doing it again soon.

Dr. Jones: Thank you.

(END)

