

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

**Maritime Security Dialogue: A Discussion with the
Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps**

DATE

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FEATURING

General Eric Smith

Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps

Vice Admiral Peter H. Daly

USN (Ret.), CEO and Publisher, U.S. Naval Institute

CSIS EXPERTS

Seth G. Jones

*Senior Vice President; Harold Brown Chair; and Director, International Security Program,
CSIS*

Transcript By

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Vice Admiral
Peter H. Daly
(Ret.):

Good afternoon. I'm Pete Daly, CEO and the publisher at the U.S. Naval Institute.

On behalf of the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Naval Institute, we're very proud to welcome you to this continuation of the Maritime Security Dialogue. This Dialogue is made possible with the generous sponsorship of HII.

Our guest today is General Eric Smith, assistant commandant of the Marine Corps, and our topic today is Force Design 2030 and Marine Corps talent management.

A graduate of Texas A&M University, General Smith was commissioned in 1987. He's a career Marine infantry officer. He's commanded at every level including a weapons company, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marine regiment during Operation Armed Response in Liberia, 1st Battalion 5th Marines in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and 8th Marine Regimental Combat Team 8 during Operation Enduring Freedom.

As a general officer, he commanded Marine Corps Forces Southern Command, 1st Marine Division, 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force, and, most recently, Marine Corps Combat Development Command in Quantico. General Smith has served as the 36th assistant commandant of the Marine Corps since October 2021.

Dr. Seth Jones will engage General Smith in a moderated discussion, which will include Q&A. Dr. Jones is senior vice president, Harold Brown Chair, director of International Security Program and director of the Transnational Threats Project here at CSIS.

I look forward to a great program. And over to you, Dr. Jones and General Smith.

Thank you.

Seth G. Jones:

Thanks, Admiral.

Thank you, Admiral.

I just want to, before we begin, just as Admiral Daly noted, just to thank the partnership with USNI and HII for their support. If folks didn't see it, we had a great discussion last week on the hundredth anniversary of the aircraft carrier.

So, General Smith, welcome to the Center or welcome back to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. We appreciate – the last time you were

here we did not have an audience and we were sitting just on the other side of this plate glass wall. But we are now moving into a public discussion as well so this makes things, I think, a little better and our –

General Eric
Smith:
Dr. Jones:

It does, indeed.

– conversation better.

Let me just start off. When we had Lieutenant General Heckl in maybe a month or two ago, we were just about a week before the annual update was released. We talked a little bit about it but since it hadn't been released yet, you know, there was – we couldn't go into too many details.

So can you talk a little bit about what are the big takeaways from you from that update and how would you characterize the evolution then of Force Design 2030?

Gen. Smith:

Sure. That I can do, Seth, and, again, thanks for having me here – HII, Admiral Daly, USNI – and for being here. Thank you for taking the time to listen.

There's a couple of key things out of that Force Design update. First, I would remind everybody that the virtuous cycle, if you will, starts with a concept, which is you bring in some thinkers, some strategic thought experts, and you come up with a concept which has to be based on both your assigned mission and the threat which you face to accomplish that mission.

You then war game, and the war game can be done through what I would consider some fairly standard methods of computer-generated models, tabletop exercises – TTXes. From that, you move to field experimentation and those experiments then yield results, which feed back into the mechanism. Adjustments, and then you make changes, start again at concept refinement, wargame that, go and experiment with that.

So I would say the biggest things that came out of the last several years of wargaming and experimentation are a change to the infantry battalion, and this was a hot topic, has been. We put out an initial marking round, in artillery speak. We put out a marking round of about 730. We're at 896 now. That's an infantry battalion. Please go look at 730. Can you do it? Can you be that small? Which is driven by a low signature requirement. If you have a high signature, you're going to be targeted.

Each division – all three divisions took a battalion and experimented in their different climes and places. They all came back and the consensus was we can't do 730 but we don't need to be at 896, and so our commandant settled on 810, and, of course, that may modify again as they continue to go into this virtuous cycle. So that was a significant change.

We also added one VMM, a tilt-rotor squadron, to go to a 16. We also added two cannon batteries back to towed-cannon capacity. I would say those are the biggest pieces that you would see in the Force Design update.

And, of course, it then really pivots to training, education, and talent management. But those are three exemplars of how the virtuous cycle of concept, wargaming, experimentation, feedback loop, and that never stops because the pacing threat of China is constantly evolving and moving and if you're static you're not going to do too well.

Dr. Jones: So we'll come back to various components of what you just laid out over the course of the discussion, including to the Chinese and the Indo-Pacific.

But I wonder if we could start, briefly, before we get to a lot of those kind of operational level details about – in Europe right now, which so, you know, we've discussed this a little bit recently is the Russian war in Ukraine.

What are the lessons you were identifying, if not learning, from the current war in Ukraine? I mean, certainly, one of the most interesting ones is on logistics in a contested environment where the Russians particularly struggled early on in the push to Kyiv but also in Kharkiv, which they failed to take as well.

But whether it's logistics in a contested environment or other aspects, can you talk a little about what the lessons you're learning from? We haven't seen the Chinese engaged in war, at least yet, but we do have the Russians now.

Gen. Smith: Right. Well, I think any discussion of Ukraine should always start with condemnation of Russia for unprovoked, naked aggression against a peaceful neighbor. You should always call that out every single chance we get because that's exactly what's happened there.

So I think the lessons that we learned – and I'll start at the bottom and work up – one, the character of war changes but the nature does not. The fighting spirit and willing to commit and die for a cause is still the most important element of combat and the Ukrainian soldiers have demonstrated that across the board.

And so for us, it reminds us and reinforces that we build individual Marines. At Parris Island and in San Diego we build tough, resilient warriors who can operate in contested environments and are able to execute their missions under almost unimaginable circumstances. So we reconfirm that that's how we should continue to build Marines.

Second thing we learned is that if you fight today's war using yesterday's formations, tactics, techniques, procedures, using yesterday's technology, you will die. There's a reason that senior Russians are being killed – because they sit in command posts, which look like command posts, and they emanate signatures that look like command posts. If you wish to do that you will continue to be struck.

It also told us that armor has a purpose, to kill other armor, primarily, and when the tank main gun round goes 4,000 yards and we can kill it with a drone at 90,000 yards, then you probably don't want to be sitting at a tank.

Logistically, to your point, Seth, don't bite off more than you can chew logistically. A five-pronged attack with weak logistics was inept in every regard and it reminds us that while our pacing threat is China, our pacing challenge, our pacing function, is logistics, and I don't want to undersell how difficult logistics will be if we transpose that into the Pacific theater where the expanse of the Pacific and the distances create genuine – not intractable but genuine wicked problems for us.

So I don't want to oversell that we can fix all logistical problems right now. We are working mightily to fix them and to improve them. But those are some of the key lessons that we have taken thus far at the unclass level from the war in Ukraine.

Dr. Jones:

I wonder if you could talk about two others just because, you know, they're, certainly, involved in the broader discussion of Force Design 2030 and the broader debate.

One is artillery, which is where we're at right now, the attrition going on on the front lines or the lines of contact right now, particularly in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts are – we're seeing a significant amount of artillery, including Russian artillery, medium and long range as well. And the second are UAVs or UASes.

So how are you thinking about the role of artillery in warfare and UASes, and on the UAS side we're seeing both sides using them for bomb damage assessment, for spotting, including for artillery, for ISR collection, kinetic activity themselves.

So how do you see artillery, first, and then UASes or UAVs as part of your evolution?

Gen. Smith:

Sure.

What I would say is artillery is a thing. A capability is long-range fires, and so what we're focused on is long-range fires, and longer-range fires is better. You want to be able to outstick your adversary.

So the introduction of HIMARS for us – High Mobility Artillery Rocket System – is absolutely vital, as is our NMESIS, our Navy Marine Ship Interdiction – Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System – Naval Strike missile, which is in excess of a hundred miles and we'll just – in this forum, we'll just say in excess of a hundred.

The capability that's brought by long-range fires is what we seek. So towed artillery has a max range. It just does. It also has a mobility issue because for those that trailer things like boats or U-hauls, things that are on a trailer are not as mobile as individual vehicles. That's why, again, the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System is so good, and I'll kind of feed that into the drone piece.

You have to be able to fire and move immediately. You no longer have six minutes, which is a really well-oiled gun crew artillery, from pulling the last round to you're on the move. You know, six, seven minutes, you're pretty well oiled. You're good.

What we have to see now is that there are autonomous loitering munitions that are looking for that signature and as soon as they see that signature – we call it a POO, a point of origin – they've already got lethal authority to strike that. You don't have six minutes to move. Whereas a HIMARS you can shoot and be gone in, literally, seconds, less than a minute. So that is a key lesson learned for long-range fires.

The drone piece it's both AI – artificial intelligence – the ability to use a drone for spotting, although that's – I mean, that's five years ago. The Houthis struck the motor missiles Swift in the Red Sea in the Straits of Bab al-Mandab using a drone at ranges in excess of, we'll just say, about 80 miles. That's years ago. So this is stunningly old technology.

Now it's a matter of using the algorithms that connect what you see to joint all-domain command and control, which is something that the Department of Defense works on daily so that every sensor on the battlefield is fused to then provide that intelligence, that target-quality data, to the best possible shooter be it a HIMARS launcher, be it a fighter, be it a bomber. You pick it. So that's what we've also taken out.

And the final thing – I know it's a long answer but it's a wicked question – the ability of those drones to be nearly ubiquitous across the battlefield because they're so inexpensive you have to contest with that and you have to drop

your signature. If you're seen either because you radiate or because you're physically seen, you're targeted almost immediately.

Dr. Jones: So just a follow-up on the drones, as we've looked a little bit at the purchases from the Army and the Air Force, they've invested in pretty significant numbers, moving forward, of drones. That includes the loitering munitions you talked about.

Some assessments of the Marine Corps numbers are a little bit lower. Can you talk a little bit about not just the importance of them but what kind of funding and how you're viewing, you know, purchasing of UAVs for the future?

Gen. Smith: Sure. The largest that we're procuring now is the MQ-9A extended range – the ER. That is an airborne quarterback to pass data, because when we are cut off from the space layer for short periods of time in a maritime environment or any environment, we have to be able to operate inside that bubble, if you will, to pass data back to our Navy and joint partners, back to an Aegis system or back to an Air Force passing fighter. So that's the biggest. That's a Group 5.

Then the other ones we would focus on are – we would refer to them as OPFM and OPFI – organic precision fires mounted and organic precision fires infantry. Those are the loitering munitions that you're talking about at ranges in excess of 80 kilometers for the mounted and probably in excess of 15, 20 kilometers in case of the infantry.

The capacity is always a question of budget. The first thing we have to do is prove the concept and so we did that. We struck five for five targets for organic precision fires mounted last year. We struck five for five moving targets. That means armor killers at ranges in excess of 80 kilometers. Five for five. So test done.

Now it's about how much can we procure using the budget we have because we have to balance the Marine Air-Ground Task Force. So would I seek more munitions? Yes, but they are fairly prominently called for in our budget. The '23 budget just went across and the '24 budget is working through the department right now. In fact, I'm actually going to brief it tomorrow afternoon to the deputy secretary of defense. But you'll see those capabilities required and purchased.

Dr. Jones: A former CSIS person herself. So –

Gen. Smith: She, indeed, is and I have learned a lot and found you should show up having done your homework if you're going to engage in a conversation with Dr. Hicks.

Dr. Jones: One of the interesting things about the MQ-9As that you talk about too is they provide an ability to collect intelligence surveillance, do reconnaissance, but also to strike so they – and the sensor suite that those have also provide a lot of opportunities to do the whole range of missions that, I think, where folks are looking for UAVs to perform.

Gen. Smith: At a much higher classification level. And I'll be mindful here, but that platform, the MQ-9A extended range that's out, it is collecting constantly. It's cataloging signatures so that targets are held at risk always. We're building a catalog. Much like a submarine would catalog another submarine based on its acoustic signature, everything out there has an electromagnetic signature.

So when I begin to catalogue what this ship, what that ship, what that command post looks like because that aircraft, because of its long loiter time, is collecting and building a catalogue, I'm able to pass that data to all of the joint force. That is JADC2 – Joint All-Domain Command and Control.

So when that signature reveals itself on the battlefield everyone knows what that is and then this asset, the MQ-9, can pass target-quality data, and we've proven that last year at the Army's Project Convergence, that concept of passing long-range data. And we also have systems that produce no signature. We would call them passive radars and we've invested in those as well and then – and that's as far as I'd go on that one.

Dr. Jones: Before we leave the European theater and then we'll hit a number of other topics, I did want to talk a little or get your thoughts on how Force Design might apply in other areas than just the Pacific theater. So if you could talk a little bit about Task Force 61 – I think it's -2 or /2.

Gen. Smith: 61/2.

Dr. Jones: Some of the work maybe Frank Donovan has been involved in on experimentation with Force Design. So how are you thinking about this in other theaters than just the Indo-Pacific?

Gen. Smith: Yeah. That's a criticism that, frankly, is unfounded, that you're exclusively focused on the Pacific. Nothing matter – further from the truth. We are a Pacific-focused Marine Corps. That is where our bread and butter lies as a maritime component.

But in the case of the European theater, what we did is the commandant had the wisdom to task 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force out at Camp Lejeune. That's a service-retained force who focuses on SOUTHCOM, AFRICOM, and EUCOM, and it's Lieutenant General Bill Jurney. And he said, hey, General

Journey, I want you to lead the experimentation for reconnaissance and counter reconnaissance.

So we put Task Force 61/2 together underneath Major General Frank Donovan. They took it in to the European theater and executed experimentation and operations in support of then Lieutenant General Wolters, now Lieutenant – General Wolters, pardon me, and now General Cavoli.

So Task Force 61/2 at one point had operational control – OPCON – of the Marine Expeditionary Unit. They were underneath their command. Sixth Fleet, 61/2, underneath 61/2 was our Marine Expeditionary Unit.

So they did some unbelievably unique disaggregated work with some of our allies and partners to, again, sense, make sense of what was happening in that theater, gain and maintain custody of targets in very disaggregated environments. But they led the effort, and those exact things that they used to the advantage of EUCOM are what we will then take to the Pacific.

So it's actually the opposite. As opposed to build in the Pacific and see if it'll fit in Europe, those things were built in the European theater and we'll take them to the Pacific because they're ubiquitous. They would work in the Straits of Hormuz. They would work in the High North. They work in the Pacific.

Dr. Jones: Well, we'll talk about, I think, a couple of other issues that you mentioned in a moment, but I wonder if we could turn for a second to amphibious requirements as it has been a subject of both the Marine Corps and the Navy, for that matter.

So can you talk for a little bit of what's the Marine Corps' amphibious required, particularly for large amphibious ships, and what is that based on and how are you talking with the Navy about that as well?

Gen. Smith: Sure. Our requirement is 31 traditional L-class ships. That is 10 big decks, LHAs or LHDs, and 21 LPDs. That's the requirement. Both the commandant and the CNO have said 31 is the number. That is based off of the most recent study, which was directed by the secretary of the Navy, which included the ability to have assets with which we can train because it's not just what you need to daily operate but how do you train for that? How do you allow wet well operations to happen such that Marines aren't exposed to an amphib the first time – for the first time when they're on their way to war – deck landing qualifications for helicopters, et cetera.

So 31 is the number. We also will require up to 35 light amphibious warships. Now, those are MLR specific – marine littoral regiments – but the

traditional amphibians 31. And, again, fortunately, both CNO and the commandant agree on that number. How long it takes to get to that number, that is a fiscal question.

But the requirement, which was a U.S. Navy-U.S. Marine Corps joint study – in fact, that was the thirteenth study, I believe, in the last – just over a decade – all of which come out to about that number, 31, and there it is. It used to be 38, which is based on two expeditionary brigades. That is no longer a requirement for plans.

So, hence, we made a modification and we base that off of day-to-day crisis response missions, which we are required to do. The sense of the 82nd and the 114th Congress was that we are the most ready when the nation is least ready.

It was actually a position of the Congress, pardon me, and those Marine Expeditionary Units that combatant commanders continue to ask for second only to submarines is something that the American people have come to rely on as well to evacuate embassies, conduct crisis response, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and to strike, as they have done in Syria.

Those assets also can aggregate into the Pacific and then in order to deliver credible combat power throughout the First Island Chain. Those are – in fact, I'll go down here in just a week or so to christen the Fort Lauderdale, our newest LPD. General Bellon quoted just a couple weeks ago that we fight so hard for those ships because we have to fight from those ships, and that's what keeps the naval integration alive. So 31.

Dr. Jones: So one question that has come up, particularly since the war in Ukraine started but even before that, is the readiness of the amphibious fleet for deployment. I mean, there were some – there were some – there were public note that the U.S.-European commander had asked for a Marine Expeditionary Unit – folks, I'm sure, saw this in the news – an amphibious-ready group to deploy as a hedge. But there was a question about whether the Marines could meet the request. How do you respond to that and, more broadly, what's the readiness of the amphibious fleet?

Gen. Smith: Sure. What we shouldn't do is have an intramural firefight with Navy and Marine Corps because we are a Navy and Marine Corps team. We are naval. The Marine Expeditionary Unit was and is ready to go.

Where we all acknowledge we have a capacity gap is that with any platform when you have a OFRP – optimized fleet response program readiness – we didn't – we had Marines who were readier. Readier; it's that word from Texas. (Laughter.) More ready. Sorry. Texas –

Dr. Jones: I think we say that in New England, too, so it's OK. (Laughs.)

Gen. Smith: OK. I feel a little better about myself. Who were more able to go right now ahead of schedule than the ship was. The ship was not ready to go ahead of schedule. The Marines were. That's a mismatch we don't want. No one wants that. I don't think anybody in the Marine Corps or Navy wants that.

So the readiness of the vessels that we have is a challenge. It, historically, is around 67 percent. It's actually much lower than that right now, which is why, you know, you need newer vessels. Newer vessels, newer aircraft, tend to be more ready because they're newer. New cars break down less than old cars. I mean, it's – I don't really need a study to show me that.

So we have ships that are approaching end of service life in our LSDs, which is why we need to procure newer ships.

Dr. Jones: So I wonder if we could shift gears a little bit location wise. We've already started moving into the Indo-Pacific, and I know we've got some questions on talent management in a second.

But what are the Chinese learning – we have the – from the war in Ukraine, and just, more broadly, about warfare? We had the Australian deputy prime minister and the minister of defense and the Australian chief of defense and the Australian head of intelligence in last week. Most of that was all on the record sitting in this room.

The Australians were – have expressed significant concern about what they see as a revisionist China that has moved into an area, the Solomon Islands – that the Marine Corps has a long history and a successful one in World War II. But these are areas that are near and dear to our American and our Marine Corps heart.

So can you talk a little about where you see the Chinese headed and then concerns – any concerns about revisionism?

Gen. Smith: Yeah. I think we're the – and I'll be mindful, you know, of my lane as a force provider, as the assistant commandant, versus Admiral Aquilino – "Lung" Aquilino – who's the Pacific – INDOPACOM commander.

But I can tell you that any senior leader should note that where China's heading is continued bad behavior – I mean, continued bad behavior, making declarations about things that are outside the international rules-based order.

They most recently, I believe, said that the Taiwan Straits are now, you know, theirs. Well, the newsflash would be, no, they're not. We recognize 12 nautical miles around anything, any feature, island, et cetera. So they're heading to a place that would seek to deny the free and open transit of trade, of exercises, preparation, and training, and that is not where we see the Pacific.

We've been defending a free and open Indo-Pacific since the end of World War II. We're not going anywhere. We have a lot of friends in the area. I would say China has quite a bit fewer friends. We don't buy our friends. We work with our friends. We're not transactional. We build relationships. So I think that's the biggest difference with regards to the Solomons.

I was in Guadalcanal – on Guadalcanal for the 75th anniversary of the battle there, and it is a critical location geographically as you enter the First Island Chain from the south. And I would hope that the chapter with all of our friends through the Solomons is not yet written – the final chapter – because it's vital that we have –

Dr. Jones: It's a contested environment, in a sense.

Gen. Smith: I would say we're, certainly, competing for access and for – well, for access. But I don't think that chapter has been written yet either because we've been in the area, again, since the end of World War II and we're not going anywhere.

Dr. Jones: So if you look at – we've translated a number of Chinese documents into English, trying to gauge what they're learning that would – from the Russian war in Ukraine that might apply to you in the Indo-Pacific.

They've talked a lot about the Russians losing the element of surprise just because there was so much unclassified – declassified intelligence that came out about their movements. The importance, as you noted earlier, of long-range strike, the use of UAVs.

What are you looking at the Chinese, potentially, learning as you compete?

Gen. Smith: Yeah. I mean, I, certainly, wouldn't speak for them for what they may learn at the geopolitical level or down to the tactical level. What I would hope they take away is we're not Russia. The logistical catastrophe, that is not on our menu. The long-range fires, we possess them.

And the other piece is first you have to find and right now we have – the Marine Corps has a thing called the stand-in force. That is, simply, a force who already is standing in the weapons engagement zone. This is nothing new. Third Marine Expeditionary Force is on Okinawa and in mainland

Japan. We have about – we’re on an agreement with the government of Japan to bring that number to about 10,000.

But on any given day, you’ve got 20, 24,000 Marines west of the international dateline with low signature lethality and high mobility. We’re working to improve all of those. And if you can’t account for all of the things that are out there that can lethally strike you, that can sense and make sense of what you’re doing and report on it, report nefarious activity to the world, which happened in the Ukraine. That should be another thing, is the declassification of information and passing it to the world to show the aggression that Mr. Putin was taking, which I do think changed the calculus in the early part of the war. We’ll be doing that throughout the Indo-Pacific as well. We’ll be first with the truth.

And so those assets that are very low signature and you don’t know where they are but you must respect them in small numbers, strategically placed, not strewn about the Pacific – it’s strategically placed – you’re going to have to account for that and if you can’t find that, perhaps you’ll wake up and say to yourself, maybe today’s not the day for more nefarious behavior because I don’t know where everything out there is that can hurt me or that can report on the nefarious things that I’m doing.

That is the stand-in force concept and, again, those forces are already there. Third Marine Expeditionary Force is there. Third Marine – the third littoral regiment is already in Hawaii. We’re not creating anything new. We, simply, modernized an existing regiment to be task organized, to sense, make sense, and strike.

That’s what I hope they take away, which is, today’s probably not the day.

Dr. Jones: I want to go to – there are two questions from folks virtually that are similar in many ways. So I want to start with Hope Seck from the Marine Corps Times.

Gen. Smith: Sure.

Dr. Jones: And Hope asks the question, the Marine Corps just met its retention goal early for the first time in a decade, but like all the military services has been facing additional challenges this year when it comes to recruiting. To what do you attribute the Marine Corps’ success thus far in meeting these challenges and what changes do you expect the service to have to make, moving forward, to achieve annual recruiting goals?

Gen. Smith: Well, first, the whole point of talent management is that we cannot recruit our way out of our future challenges but we can retain our way out. If we

have an individual who seeks to serve their nation, makes it through entry level training, gets additional training, we want to keep that person.

Why would I want them to go away and then I have to go seek another person? That just adds to the problem. So you can't recruit your way out but you can retain your way out.

And as far as recruiting, I just spent a significant amount of time this last couple weeks with Major General Bohm – Jason Bohm – who commands Marine Corps Recruiting Command. I have a son who's a recruiter right now, and I think the biggest thing is people will say, well, other services are giving really big bonuses, you know, 50, \$60,000. Why aren't you?

Our biggest bonus we ever give, and we don't give many to enlist, is about \$8,000 because the bonus is you get to call yourself a U.S. Marine. And that's not false bravado. That's who we are. That's our brand. That's who we recruit.

What we do is we make sure that we are out there as a face. Seventy-one percent of our enlistment contracts come from face-to-face contact from seeing a Marine with operational experience who's tough, tested, fit, ready to fight, who's out there in the public square to engage with students.

What I think we can do – students and those who have already graduated – I think what we can do and need to do is work closer with the Department of Education and administrators, educators, to really reinforce the value proposition of service.

I happen to be a career infantry officer. I'm very proud of that. We have air traffic controllers. We have jet mechanics. We have intelligence specialists. We have logistics specialists. I just promoted Colonel, now Brigadier General, Maura Hennigan. She was promoted today. She's a logistician extraordinaire. She could take that skill and go make probably five times what we're going to pay her out on the civilian world but she chose to stay a Marine.

And so we have to show the value proposition of service and, frankly, counter a narrative that, you know, the Marine Corps or service in general is not fulfilling, you'll be physically broken, et cetera. Not so. We're a valuable thing and it's a valuable service to the nation.

Dr. Jones:

Ryan from the Marine Corps has a question that sort of gets to the later stages, too. This does get to retention. What are you doing – what is the Marine Corps doing to prioritize and fund a modern personnel system that encompasses the entirety of a career? So he's talking also about the, you know, retention at later stages.

Gen. Smith: Absolutely.

Dr. Jones: Promotion.

Gen. Smith: So the biggest thing we just cut – when you wanted to reenlist a year ago there were 22 steps that you had to go through. Hi. I'm Lance Corporal Smith. I'd like to reenlist. I'm coming up at the end of my four years. Twenty-two. That's down to one because we do use the technology that is available to streamline those systems.

The biggest thing we've done is if you wish to reenlist and you're a qualified Marine, the answer is yes. We don't – what we don't want to do is what we've done in the past and said, well, Lance Corporal Jones wants to reenlist. She's fully qualified. She has great skill. But I'm not yet sure who else wants to. So let's hold for four months and let's get everybody who wants to reenlist and then I'm going to rack and stack them.

That is not a way to retain people. I'd like to be part of your team. Call me in four months. Unwise. So now it is an immediate. If you want to reenlist and you're qualified, we're reenlisting you because we value your service. That is talent management.

It's also you've been in for eight years and your spouse works, and you say, hey – the question we have to ask is what would it take to keep you. OK. You've been in for six and you're thinking about leaving. What would it take for me to keep you?

I'm not saying I'm going to pay that bill, that I can pay that bill, because at some point the Marine Corps will issue you a set of orders and we're kind of not negotiating orders these days. Well, we're first going to have a conversation. But if you said, hey, sir, I've been at Camp Pendleton for three years and my spouse is a lawyer and I'd like to stay here for three more years, OK. We can do that.

Now, if you said, I never want to leave Camp Pendleton and I want to stay here for 20 years, that's probably a no. But what would it take to keep you? Sir, I want to go to jump school. OK. We can work with that. I want to change MOSes. We can work with that.

But it's really just about managing talent as opposed to here's the cookie cutter. That will not work in the future environment where so many of our – in our society are not qualified for enlistment to be a candidate or don't wish to enlist. So we're trying to make sure we can reach the maximum people in society and that we give them opportunities and show them the value proposition of being a U.S. Marine.

Dr. Jones: Well, that's an issue, obviously, everybody, including this institution, always has to deal with is the retention.

Gen. Smith: Absolutely.

Dr. Jones: So thanks for your thoughts here.

Gen. Smith: Yes, sir.

Dr. Jones: There are a couple of other issues that I did want to touch on before we go to audience questions. And Christine will have a microphone, so when we get to that point if you could just raise your hand and we won't – I don't think we'll have enough time to get to everybody but we'll try to get to as many as we can in the time that we have.

Gen. Smith: And I'll try to be short. I'm from Texas so I might be a little long and slow. But I come by it honestly. (Laughter.) So I promise I'll be pithy and concise as I am able to be, from Texas.

Dr. Jones: Me, too. I'll try. We will ask you to be the same.

Let's talk, if we can, a little bit about tanks.

Gen. Smith: Sure.

Dr. Jones: Some have argued that even with the threat of long-range fires, tanks still continue to be an important component and useful in land warfare, which is why some have argued that, despite the targeting recently, both Ukrainians and the Russians continue to use them and Ukrainians continue to ask for more help, including from the U.S.

Second, there's been a discussion about to what degree other services, particularly the Army, would be willing to provide those tanks or would be willing to help out or would be available to help out if and when the Marines need them.

So can you talk through some of the pushback that you've heard on tanks along these lines and explain where your thinking is going on this?

Gen. Smith: Sure. Well, I think, starting with the second point, the Marine Corps doesn't ask the Army for help with tanks. The joint force commander, who has access to the Army and the Marine Corps, combines his or her force to accomplish the mission. So it doesn't work that way that we would say, hey, Army, can you give us tanks?

When I was in Ramadi as a battalion commander, I worked for an Army brigade who worked for a Marine division. And my tank support came from a guy named Rogie Brogelan, 1st of the 32nd Armored, and that's where I got my tanks. So it doesn't work that way.

The second piece about other – still being used, Russians and Ukrainians, well, I understand that. I would say that what's missing in this debate often is the opportunity cost. Remember, the Marine Corps has M1A1s, not A3s. M1A1, the first version of the M1. Those are getting little dated.

They do not include active or did not include active protection systems, which add weight. Seventy-two tons. Now you add some active protective and you're at, say, 74 tons. I have nothing that can move a 74-ton vehicle across the water. Well, an LCU – a landing craft utility – can move one, and the opportunity costs that come from the size and weight of a tank – its refuelers, its retrievers – is massive.

So what can I bring in place of tanks? Normally, we send a Marine Expeditionary Unit with four tanks, and you're moving heaven and earth to put four tanks in an expeditionary unit.

What could I bring lethally that can kill things at 10, 20 times the range for 74 tons of one tank, and the answer is a lot. There's a Texas version of that that I won't use in public of a lot. But that's the value proposition. Nobody said tanks didn't have their – didn't do great things, but in the maritime environment you can't move that kind of weight, not with today's technology available, to kill things at a longer range.

And I would note a final thing. In World War II when they were teaching bayonet and knife fighting, there's actually a quote from the training manual that says your goal, Marine, is to kill the enemy long before you ever got to get this close. I'm going to teach it to you but this isn't what you want. I don't want to be 4,000 yards from anybody. I want them dead. I don't ever want to go to a fair fight. I want them dead 90 kilometers away. Fifty kilometers. I don't want to get closer to 4,000 (yards). If we do, I have other ways to kill you.

But the tanks did great things but they're not useful in the fight that is our pacing threat.

Dr. Jones:

So on new developments there's been a lot of press recently about the successful test on an air defense system using Iron Dome launcher and missiles and a relationship that the Marines have with, among others, the Israelis.

Can you talk about what you're envisioning, going forward, and how successful it appears, anyway, the recent test was?

Gen. Smith: Sure. It's called medium-range intercept capability based on some of the missile systems, and I can say it – you know, Tamir missiles. In fact, I met with a particular Israeli officer whose first name is Tamir, which I kind of like that. First name means – it doesn't mean missile, by the way. The missile is named after the trait that is Tamir, which is true.

We successfully tested three out of three. We actually were against moving drones. We actually were set up to go four but the drone that we were shooting broke so we didn't have any to kill with the fourth shot. So we went three for three instead of four for four.

That moved us beyond the Stinger, which is what I have now – fairly short-range air defense capability. We needed a longer-range air defense capability to be able to cover these highly mobile units and we asked for a wicked solution to a wicked problem. High mobility, lightweight, and much longer range, and the MRIC – medium-range intercept capability – provided that to us, and we just proved it and tested it and now we're going to start moving out to procure that system.

It's been in the works for a while, and I would note that we held on funding for that for almost two years until you could prove it. Now it was proven. Now we start procuring it. It is the thing that was most needed to complete the toolkit that our commanders in the Marine littoral regiments will need to be most effective on the modern battlefield and I'm pretty excited about it.

Dr. Jones: Last question before we go to audience questions.

There's been some pushback on stand-in forces. So I'll read a few of them and would be helpful to get your response.

Gen. Smith: Sure.

Dr. Jones: Some argue that a loss of tanks as well as decrements to cannon artillery, rotary-wing aircraft, infantry Marines, makes the Marine Corps less lethal. We've heard it here in this building from retired General Zinni, Van Riper, who have made this argument.

The question is, how would you respond? I'm not talking about people, but how would you respond to the argument of less lethality?

Gen. Smith: Yeah. I would counter that.

OK. The first piece is you have to get to the fight. The current threats that are out there require you to be lighter, more mobile, and have a lower signature or you can't even start the fight. The stand-in force concept – again, the forces that we have in the Pacific we're not leaving. That's where they live. The 4th Marine regiment, 3rd Marine regiment, 12th Marine regiment, who will become Marine littoral regiments. Third Marine regiment has already become 3rd Marine littoral regiment. Those forces already are standing in. They have long range, low signature, and we're building the organic mobility.

If you were waiting for us to have the perfectly formed, perfectly built product, and then go out and begin to introduce it, you will never get there. You will never arrive. You must take risk in the near term to be ready when the time of maximum danger comes, which is later in this decade.

So if you accept risk in the '21,'22, '23,'24 timeframe in order to be ready by the later half of this decade, which is what our combatant commander is asking for, that's the value proposition.

I think the other piece on stand-in force, that force is part of a naval and joint force. While we have lethality, one of our greatest contributions as the force who is always there, omnipresent, might be – might be – that we can sense and make sense of what is happening and pass that information to the joint force. That is the concept of Joint All-Domain Command and Control.

So the fact that we have less towed artillery, what's usually not called out is that we added High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems – basically, one for one. Cannon battery out, High Mobility Artillery Rocket System battery in, plus naval – Navy Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System.

We just added back a squadron of transport VMMs. We've also – will add a squadron of KC-130Js into the Pacific. That often is left out. And the battalion size – again, 896, test at 730. Let's go back to 810.

So I just – I don't discount the argument. I always welcome harsh constructive criticism. But those units have some significant lethality to include the G/ATOR radar – Ground/Air Task-Oriented Radar – which can sense, make sense, and pass data at range against targets that wouldn't have been seeable some time ago. I'll just probably leave that at that.

Dr. Jones:

Yep, and we look forward to questions here from the audience. Got one right here in front.

If you could just identify yourself and then just a brief question. We don't have time for –

Guest question: OK. Thank you so much for this main event. My name is Norma Zarubin (ph). I work – did some projects with the United Nations.

And very short questions. From your perspective, is it possible to predict what American steps can somehow provoke Russians – Russian side to use nuclear weapon in conflict between Ukraine and Russia in the near future?

Gen. Smith: Could you repeat the very first part, please? I missed a word.

Ms. Zarubin: So this question is about the usage of nuclear weapon from the Russian side. Is it possible to predict it can be in the near future?

Dr. Jones: And how to prevent the use of nuclear weapons?

Ms. Zarubin: And how we can, yes, prevent it.

Gen. Smith: Yeah. So what I would say is, without getting into lanes that are not mine, the fact is there are multiple nuclear powers. The threat of nuclear weapons is – the threat of using them is unacceptable. In today's society, it's unacceptable.

So the saber rattling, et cetera, I think, is unwise because there are multiple capabilities within intelligence departments, writ large, across our allies and partners who assess that very thing, which is why our strategic command is always adjusting their threat posture based on the likelihood that this threat is real or simply a provocation.

And I'll probably just leave it at that.

Dr. Jones: There's a question from someone virtually – Christopher Woody from Business Insider – who asks, the new Marine littoral regiment conducted its first exercise this spring, which took place in northern Luzon.

How does that unit and that area of the Philippines fit into the Corps' planning for the defense of the First Island Chain?

Gen. Smith: Yeah. It fits exactly where we had anticipated it would fit. Colonel Brady, who's the commander of the littoral regiment – I was there when we converted it from 3rd Marine regiment, my first regiment when I was a lieutenant, into the littoral regiment.

It is purpose built for doing what it must do. Here's what I mean by that. The Marine Corps is known as a MAGTF – a Marine Air-Ground Task Force. The fact that we now have 3rd Marine regiment as 3rd Marine littoral regiment the A, the air, still provided by 1st Marine Air Wing, as it always was. That's where you get the air from. That littoral regiment doesn't have its own air nor did 3rd Marine regiment.

What's different is the threat. Normally, when we organize a task force we take a piece of air defense, a piece of artillery, piece of infantry, a piece of air. We put it together. We train it. We work it up. We get it on a ship. We deploy it. And that may take weeks or, in the case of an expeditionary unit, six months of workup.

You don't have six months when you have limited unambiguous warning from a peer adversary, a pacing threat like China. You may have a number of days before you have to respond. That unit must live, eat, sleep, breathe, as a task-organized unit to be able to go tomorrow or tonight.

That's the difference in a stand-in force and that's exactly what 3rd Marine littoral regiment is designed to do and how they operated throughout Luzon with one of our five treaty partners in the Indo-Pacific.

So it's purpose built for that, and I think if you asked Colonel Brady he would say, hey, we have a lot to learn and experiment but this is where we have to go. You cannot wait until that is fully baked and done and then say, OK, now we're going to go forward. That's why we're only converting one regiment at a time. We will learn from 3rd and then apply that to 4th and 12th. So we're doing this in a systematic but not plodding way. If you use the force development process to do Force Design, you will be spinning your wheels for three or four or five years. And people say the force development process is great, works like a champ. It works because there are some legal requirements. But this is the same system that took us a decade to build an airplane, that took, you know, years to come up with a new howitzer. We don't have that kind of time. You have to move faster.

Dr. Jones: Thanks.

Gen. Smith: Yes, sir.

Guest question: Hey, General Smith. Thanks for taking the time with us today.

I'm Mike Wure (ph) with S&C, and I have a question for you.

We talked about the Marine Corps' desire to sense and make sense, support the maritime component commander and, particularly, to be a better, you know, maritime domain.

Could you describe – you know, other services have invested quite a bit in ISR – you know, the ability to target the adversary at distances. Can you describe, briefly, broadly, you know, the Marine Corps' vision for how you're going to sense?

Gen. Smith:

Yeah. A couple of ways, and mindful of the classification level. We talked about the MQ-9A extended range. That is one mechanism. We also have the G/ATOR radar, which is built to be internally transportable by organic assets – C-130, KC-130Js that we have. Those are ours. The G/ATOR radar has some significant capabilities that can sense and make sense of what is happening.

We also have a passive radar system that I'll just – again, I'll just kind of glance off that target here – but a completely passive system that has proven highly effective in some experimentation at the joint level.

Those are three examples of ways to sense and make sense. Much of it also revolves around being present. You actually still have to be on the ground to gather information. So those units that operate repeatedly and build relationships with allies and partners, that's how you expand sensing and making sense, too, is with allies and partners – how to be interoperable with those allies and partners who have their own maritime domain awareness mechanisms and equipment so that we can get a complete picture and then pass that information.

Those are just three examples. There are a few others that have a different classification levels that, I think, make us unique and what really makes us unique is organic mobility – the 31 amphibs we talked about, our KC-130s, our 53Ks, our MV-22s. That organic mobility is something that is vital because if you present an adversary with a linear target, meaning there's no one forward with organic mobility who can strike you, who can sense and report on what you're doing, all you have to do is break the chain of military sealift or strat lift and you've disrupted us.

We make you think about and spend resources to try to pin down this force that is always out there forward deployed, ready to strike, ready to sense, ready to make sense, and pass data. If you have to split your view between these two problem sets I've doubled your problem set, and that's what we want to do.

Dr. Jones:

I think we have time for one last question here at the second row. Sorry, folks.

George
Nicholson:

General Smith, George Nicholson. I'm at Global Special Operations Forces Foundation.

Outstanding presentation. I was at an event with Secretary Kendall and one of the things he talked about is leveraging technology and what General Raymond's doing at Space Command. Techniques that they've got of opening up the green door, providing that tactical support – how are the Marines looking at integrating with that?

And the other thing, I was at a meeting with Mike Esper last week and I brought up Nicross and Teutoburg Forest, and he completely agrees with what you and General Berger are doing. But one of the comments he made is the next war is going to start in space. He says our adversaries realize how dependent we are on SATCOM for communications and for navigation, and he said the other thing is we've had freedom of logistics support, not only the theater but, you know, where are those C-17s going to come from? Where are those Navy ships – and our adversaries realize where they're going to come from and how do we protect those, and what are your comments on that?

Gen. Smith: Yeah. So what I would say on the space piece – and I'll kind of focus there with both General Dickinson at USSPACECOM and then, obviously, the chief space officer, General Raymond – space will be something that is targeted and I trust the fact that our Space Command will, in fact, reestablish those links as fast as they can.

But when we are cut off for periods of time, that is why we are working with the Navy and the joint community on building alternate precision navigation timing networks. That's what the MQ-9A extended range does. It builds an alternate PNT network that can be used for hours, days, in order to accommodate or make up for the fact and mitigate the fact that you've lost SPACECOM.

We have space-trained Marines who are part of those forward forces because – again, with the unclassified setting – proximity matters. People always think space is, you know, is – it can be done from anywhere. There are requirements to be in the beam, so to speak. When a satellite is looking at you, you have to be in the beam to be seen but also to affect. And so proximity matters. And those individual Marines, those units who are forward, have to have that capability either provided by Space Force or trained. And, in fact, I just spoke to General Dickinson last Tuesday and he noted that you, Marines, you need these – this capability. Some of your Marines have to be there to bring this capability to enable yourself.

And I'm glad you saw Dr. Esper. He's one of two secretaries of defense that we have briefed on Force Design, both of whom said, you should do that and do it faster. So I always appreciate the fact that both Dr. Esper and Secretary Austin have said, do that.

Dr. Jones: Last question –

Gen. Smith: Frankly, the threat requires it and so does the National Defense Strategy. And, again, we're not in the business of negotiating lawful orders in the Marine Corps. We also like to follow them, and the National Defense Strategy is pretty clear about what we are required to do. Sorry.

Dr. Jones: No. No. No. Waiting for the National Defense Strategy to come out. The two-pager has been released. I've read the whole thing. Will be nice to actually see that because I think it talks to a lot of what we've been talking about today.

Let me – one last question and we're out of time. So it's a complex question but you only have to be very brief, is –

Gen. Smith: When you're going to tell somebody to hustle up and shut up, that's how you do it right there. (Laughter.) Just providing that for you for future reference.

Dr. Jones: No. We're out of time. We promised to get people out of here. Is, can you talk just briefly about how you're viewing global employment of a force?

The reason I ask that is there's a lot of talk about the Indo-Pacific. We see the Chinese are building bases and trying to get access in the Middle East, in UAE last year, not just Djibouti on the west coast of Africa, significant trade and satellite capabilities. They're building in Latin America. So global ambitions.

During the Cold War, the pacing threat was the Soviet Union but we fought them, at least indirectly, in Latin America, Africa, Asia. So how are you viewing, briefly, the global employment of the force, not just in the Indo-Pacific?

Gen. Smith: Yeah. So the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force and 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force are Pacific facing. They are. They're in California looking into the Pacific and they are in Japan.

The 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force and Marine Corps forces reserve, 36,000, give or take, Marines are combined for our service retained force. Those forces cover the rest of the globe.

The way that you use a relatively small force to provide global coverage to counter nefarious behavior – Latin America, Africa – is you use those Marine Expeditionary Units. You use training opportunities but always reinforced by amphibious shipping, in my assessment, because you bring with you national sovereignty sitting outside the 12-mile range. You bring with you the need to not have to use specific ports because you can fly things in. You bring your own supplies.

That's how you counter. Presence does matter. You know, actual – virtual presence is actual absence. So having those amphibious forces there, those task groups there, and, in our case, the amphibious ready group – Marine Expeditionary Unit – those forces are useful all up and down the coasts of Africa and throughout South America, Central America.

We do that with UNICAS. We do that with several exercises through Africa and, of course, we do that in the Middle East through the Straits of Bab al-Mandab and the Strait of Hormuz, all around the Horn of Africa.

But I think that's actually our contribution, in addition to unit deployment pieces. We have aircraft operating in the Middle East and, of course, we have a significant presence up in the High North. In Norway, we have a periodic rotation of units there in addition to what we have in the Pacific from Australia in Darwin all the way up through Japan.

We are a global crisis response force, and the mobility that comes from the amphibs and our own organic mobility is what enables that. That's why it's so vital to us.

Dr. Jones:

Well, General Smith, thank you so much for such a wide-ranging discussion.

On behalf of Admiral Daly and USNI, as well as the generous support of HII, we really appreciate your willingness to talk frankly amongst a group that's not just virtual anymore but also back in person.

So if everyone here can join me in thanking General Smith. (Applause.)