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TRANSCRIPT

Event

Global Security Forum 2024: Gathering Strength in a
Gathering Storm

Keynote Discussion with General Charles Q. Brown Jr.

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FEATURING

General Charles Q. Brown Jr.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

CSIS EXPERTS

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Transcript By

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Seth G. Jones: All right. Welcome, everyone, to the afternoon session and thanks for participating both online and in person.

My name is Seth Jones. I am the director of the International Security Program at CSIS and I have the distinct honor of briefly welcoming our keynote speaker C.Q. Brown. General Brown is the twenty-first Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the highest ranking military officer in the U.S., the principal military adviser to the president, to the secretary of defense, and to the National Security Council.

Prior to becoming chairman on October 1st of last year General Brown served as the twenty-second Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force. I have to say, one month after General Brown became the chairman I was at the Canadian embassy to celebrate U.S.-Canadian defense cooperation and General Brown was asked with Wayne Eyre, the chief of the defense staff, to come up on stage.

He was given – they were both given hockey sticks and jerseys, and there was a puck that was going to be dropped. They were doing a face off. So I was a little bit worried. I mean, if this had been General Milley, as people know he had been – you know, he was a hockey player at Belmont Hill and then Princeton.

But, sir, you did a great job. So at that point I knew all was going to go well.

Well, really grateful to have you and I will hand off to our moderator here. That's Kari Bingen. She's the director of the aerospace security project at CSIS. She's also a senior fellow.

Kari was the deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence and security at the Pentagon. Also spent time in the commercial sector at HawkEye 360 and also spent time at, among other places, the House Armed Services Committee where she was in many positions including policy director.

So, Kari, the floor is yours. Thank you.

Kari A. Bingen: Great. Thank you. Thank you, Seth, and it's just such a privilege to have General Brown here today.

I was fortunate to get to work with him and first meet you when I was working on the Hill and you were the commander of the air – Combined Air Operations Center out in the Middle East, but then also very fortunate to work with him when I was in the Pentagon and I very much valued the candid conversations that we had. So very

much appreciate everything that you've done and congratulations –

General Charles Q. Brown Jr.: Thank you.

Ms. Bingen: – again on your chairmanship.

So I want to start, really, with your job description which is in Title 10 of U.S. Code, and when I was supporting members of Congress in 2017 we updated the chairman's responsibilities in law as part of a broader Goldwater-Nichols reform.

I want to cite our House report language that year where the committee said, quote, "It believes that the chairman should remain focused on strategic direction, strategic planning, and contingency planning for the chairman is the only senior military leader that independently and holistically looks across the military services and the combatant commands," so end quote.

I guess where I want to start then is your reflections now the first six months on the job, your transition from service chief to chairman, and then your ability to stay at that strategic and holistic level.

Gen. Brown: Well, thanks, Kari. It's been a pleasure to work with you as well and I'm really – a pleasure to be here as you were talking about this. I was hoping I'd be like the guy that came out of central casting to fill in the role the way you described it.

But the way that language is laid out and the way that I think about my role as a chairman are very well aligned and part of it is based on my experience, having worked in the – on the joint force and always thinking – I try to be more proactive in thinking strategically and thinking long.

And so one of the things I've really tried to do as I've come in as the chairman and been in the job nearly seven months now is, you know, how do we look at everything that's going on in the world, particularly when you think about the five challenges in the National Defense Strategy? All of them are active right now, in some ways interconnected. I've got to be able to step back from this and be able to take a broader, bigger picture as I engage with the combatant commands, as I engage with the Joint Chiefs, and then how I provide advice to the secretary and the president.

And so I do focus on that. And I really focus on that aspect with the joint staff as well. And so what I've really tried to do is ask questions

in a different way about how do we approach these broader challenges, and not just solve today's problem but make sure that we are thinking about, you know, how some of these things are interconnected, and then how that impacts us into the future as well. And I've often talked about, you know, how we balance risk over time. You can pay me now or pay me later, but I've got to have kind of a balanced approach of how I look at things to address today's challenges. At the same time, making sure we have the capability and capacity to do what the nation needs in the future as well.

Ms. Bingen: And I'll come back to risk, but I want to hit on what you just said – which we have five – there were five challenges identified in the National Defense Strategy. They all seem to be active at the same time right now. So we have this key theme emerging from this forum, which is simultaneity. And not just those five regions, but you now have two nuclear peers, technology diffusion, pandemics, many years now that you're starting the year under a continuing resolution. So as you look at the strategic environment and these trends, and I guess how precarious of a position are we in? How urgent is the situation that we're in?

Gen. Brown: Well, you know, I've been – I've been wearing the uniform for 39 years. And I would say, as a senior officer, this is probably the most dynamic, most challenging that I've seen it. But I'm also confident – I'm confident in the capabilities of our U.S. military. I'm also confident in the relations we have with interagency. I'm confident in the – what we're able to do with our allies and partners. And, most of all, I'm confident our joint force and our service members. And it's a combination of those that we can, you know, look at these very challenging problems and be able to think about how we address them.

Now, I know everything won't go perfectly. But I do know we're focused on the areas addressed, as you look at the potential for things happening in a simultaneous manner. But I really believe, and I've talked about this in the past as I've talked to various staffs I've had a chance to work with and lead, is we can't predict the future, but we can shape it. And so there's things we can do to help, you know, buy down some of those challenges. Part of that is being – you know, thinking proactively.

And the way I've often described it, it's like a slow-motion car wreck. There's several things you can do – you can break, you can swerve, or you can brace for impact. And I think we need to be thinking about how we approach these various challenges and take the appropriate action to decrease so many things happening at the same time, to the

best of our ability.

Ms. Bingen: And then with that simultaneity and these – there's this interconnectedness of these threats. Can you talk a little bit more about what you're seeing in that interconnectedness? But then also maybe the interconnectedness of our actions? So actions that we're doing vis-à-vis Ukraine right now, what does that mean for the Indo-Pacific?

Gen. Brown: Well, sure. I mean, when you think about the five challenges in the National Defense Strategy – you know, People's Republic of China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and violent extremists, as you highlighted they're all active right now. And in some cases, working together and somewhat interconnected, you know, with the PRC and Iran supporting Russia and North Korea supporting Russia. And so you do see that aspect.

But on the flip side of that, I also see greater interconnectedness with our allies and partners. I've been in the job nearly seven months now. I've had probably about 160 engagements with my counterparts. I'm probably doing three to four a week. We are always talking. And what I've also found is nations in Indo-Pacific are focused on what's going on Ukraine, and nations in NATO and Europe are also focused on the Indo-Pacific. And I've watched that kind of occur over the past several years.

But what I would highlight here is that as the world gets more challenging, there needs to be increased dialogue. And I think that's exactly what I'm seeing. And that aspect is important, because we all contribute together to ensure not only for the defense of Ukraine, but how it looks more broadly. Aggression that goes unchecked will actually lead to more aggression. And we've got to, you know, work together for not only our national security, but the national security for our allies and partners as well. And I see that day-in and day-out, based on the conversation I have. And when I get out of the – when I get out of Washington, D.C., and get a chance to see our allies and partners and our servicemembers, I see the same.

Ms. Bingen: OK. Good. So with all those challenges, we are now winding down all the combat command posture hearings on the Hill. You know, we've both seen commanders raise these – this perennial challenge of I need more assets in my theater. You have this tension between supply and demand. I need more assets than assets are available – ISR, air and missile defense, air wings, ships, et cetera. So given, you know, you are that senior military official that looks holistically across the force, what are your thoughts on how – how do you tackle that global

force-management challenge, trying to address all those different command needs?

Gen. Brown: Well, it takes us being a little more creative in certain areas. And one of the things that, as I've talked to the staff and I've talked to the combatant commanders, you know, the first typical response if there is a crisis is to ask for more capability. And what I've said is before you give me a list, how about giving me the risk. Let's talk about the risk, because what happens in one part of the world for one combatant commander naturally is important to them, but I've got to step back and see not only what is happening for that combatant command but all the combatant commands, because the risk that one combatant commander may be experiencing may not be as high as the risk in another combatant command. And so that's where the dialogue has to happen.

As we look at this, as well, I think we have other levers that we could pull besides just global force management and additional capability. There's things we can do with our allies and partners. There's things we can do with the interagency. We can look at different authorities and how we do that. And then we can also take a look at how we balance the risk between combatant commands or between combatant commands and the services and their modernization and readiness. But we need to have good conversation on all those, what are all of our options, and then how do we work together with the interagency or allies and partners to address each of these crises. Because each of the crises is not just solely a military problem with a military solution; it takes, you know, all of us together to address these very complex challenges.

Ms. Bingen: Well, and are you getting help in thinking through on how to, I guess, maybe more quantify what that risk looks like? And how do you communicate it? Because I remember being in the building, and every combatant commander – and love our commanders and know, I mean, they –

Gen. Brown: I love them, too. (Laughter.)

Ms. Bingen: – know how much is on their plates. But if they didn't get the asset, they say it's high – everything's high risk.

Gen. Brown: Everything is high risk, high and significant risk. Well, I've found that if you don't say it's high or significant risk, don't bother showing up to the meeting. If you say moderate or low, then you don't even compete. And so we actually really have – I've personally tried to take an approach that changes the dialogue by asking questions differently.

I'm using our various meetings – one of the meetings we have is at the Tank with the Joint Chiefs and the combatant commands, and as a matter of fact the one we have on Friday we'll spend time talking about big-picture risk in the future. Because this is a problem that we have to solve not just for today, but for the future. And so what I'm really trying to do is drive the conversation so we all kind of see aspects of the same things that I have to deal with as the chairman. I want them to have an understanding, because of those dynamics, by having that dialogue it's actually helpful for all of us to see where the tensions lie, and then how do we collectively address this challenge. And there's going to be give and take between combatant commands, and I just – you know, as I've worked as a senior officer, I realized that if you so something where one side's really happy and the other side's really mad you probably didn't do it right, but if they're all equally happy, equally mad you probably have done it about right. (Laughter.) And so I know I'm going to upset, you know, in my recommendations to the secretary and the president, that it may not lie perfectly with the combatant commands, but those are the things we've got to do to make sure we as a joint force, with interagency, allies, and partners, are doing, you know, all the right parts, but at the same time ensuring that we are able to address today and still have capability and capacity to address tomorrow as well.

Ms. Bingen: Well, and I wonder, does a combatant commander – do they need to actually own that asset at all times, or are there different models or constructs to think through?

Gen. Brown: Well, there are. I mean, we've – you know, we've seen that in various areas. In, I think, you know, current events in the Middle East, we're seeing that between United States Central Command and United States European Command because of the back and forth that has to occur based on how those events meet right at the intersection of two combatant commands. And AFRICOM is – you know, I can include them in there as well. And so we do have to go back and forth. And this is where, I think, in my role as the chairman with the Joint Staff to take a look at this and step back from it and go, OK, there's a way to do this, and they don't – you know, you don't try to solve the problem by yourself. You know, I like to say success takes – failure you can do alone. And so the success of the joint force, we've got to work together on this. And there is some give and take as we – as we work through these various challenges.

Ms. Bingen: And we just had all the vice chiefs of the military services in this morning and they talked quite a bit about integration, so this theme of interconnectedness and integration, you know, I can start to envision scenarios where a crisis may start regionally but expand globally, or a

conflict starts conventionally and then goes nuclear. So these are challenges that are really bleeding across these combatant command boundaries. So given your role and responsibility for global military integration, how are you thinking through these handoffs and seams across combatant commands?

Gen. Brown: Well, the goal is to minimize the seams between the combatant commands, and so we have the Unified Command Plan that actually lays out how the world is divided up amongst the combatant commands, and the way I describe it, the lines between the combatant commands are not solid lines; they're dash lines. And there's more gaps between the dash because the threats and the challenges do not care which combatant command commander is responsible for that responsibility, and so very quickly it can move – a threat or a challenge can move across those lines. And so the key part here is how we flatten communication across the combatant commands, how I as the chairman with the joint staff can step back from this and see – you know, where a combatant commander may be focused on one area, we can see that the two of these might be converging, and then how do we work and come up with solutions and recommendations on how best to approach – and also bringing in the combatant commanders to talk about. You know, one of the things – you know, as you might imagine, there are certain combatant commanders I talk to on a regular basis based on current events. The others I talk to on a regular basis. I keep a battle rhythm of talking to one or two combatant commanders a week and just talking to, what are they looking at, what are they seeing, at the same time sharing some of the bigger picture of the things I'm seeing, so we have a shared understanding and shared perspective.

Ms. Bingen: And can you talk briefly about this joint warfighting concept? I guess 3.0 recently came out.

Gen. Brown: Sure. It really helps us to define more broadly where we want to go as a joint force, you know, focus primarily on an Indo-Pacific-type scenario but also more broadly. At the same time what it's done is actually help with – the services have their concepts, get us more closely aligned, because it's important that, you know, we don't have a joint force that's pieces and parts in silos, but it's a joint force that we'll be able to bring together, all moving in the same direction, going same way, same day. And the other part, as we look at the joint warfighting concept, we've also defined, you know, some concept-required capabilities to ensure that the concept and the joint force can do what the nations ask it to do. And we use that as a way now to feed into our resourcing decisions and help to lay out – and we prioritize that across the joint force as well, to help shape, you know,

the future capabilities we need to pursue and then the capabilities today that we may need to divest of or retire just based on their relevance to the threat.

Ms. Bingen: And then on integration, we had some conversations earlier in the day that, you know, China's clearly on a wartime footing preparing for 2027 or what comes. That may put us in a position, just knowing how long it takes to get our programming, budgeting process done, is we may very well be in a position where, you know, we go with the kit that we have today, which places a premium on integration. But yet, you know, the services tend not to – or agencies tend not to want to fund integration because it doesn't directly benefit them. Are you seeing this shift happen with things like the JADC2, Joint All-Domain Command and Control – are you seeing more of a departmentwide focus on integration? And then your earlier points on allies and partners: Where do you see those other instruments coming into play?

Gen. Brown: I do. But as you just kind of highlighted, I mean, this is a bit of a journey, but it's a dream. We need to speed up the – or get into our destination. And what I mean by that is, you know, as the Air Force chief I wrote "Accelerate, Change or Lose." When I wrote – when I came in as the chairman, I messaged to the joint force on my second – actually, first day in the office, on 2 October, and I talked there about we need to modernize and aggressively lead with new concepts and approaches. And so the aspect "accelerate, change or lose" I still believe in. We have to work very closely together, and one of the key words in there was collaboration. It's a collaboration with the services, it's a collaboration with industry, it's a collaboration with Congress, because if we don't work together on this, we will not be prepared and fight with the kit that we have, which may not be the kit that we need based on the threat we're up against. And so there's got to be – there's got to be some more give and take there on some of these, and how we prioritize across the joint force. And I think my responsibility as the chairman, I've got two key documents that Congress has asked me to put together. One's the chairman's program recommendation and the other is the chairman's risk assessment.

And I want to make sure the two of those are tied to I, as a chairman, looking at our joint capabilities and saying, here's what we need. And then when we get to the end of the budget cycle, to be able to articulate, how did we do? And then use that as a way to help inform Congress, who writes our checks, on the – ensuring we're working together to achieve the capabilities that we desire and do it at a faster pace. And that's an area that I'm focused on as well as working, you know, with our defense industry and our defense industrial base.

Ms. Bingen: Well, and on that point, that force design development modernization, you did several tours in CENTCOM, in the Middle East counterterrorism operations. Can you just give us a better appreciation of just how significant the changes underway from twenty years of counterterrorism to really this high-end conflict, and what the implications are for the joint force and the – you know, the preparedness, the force capabilities needed to do that?

Gen. Brown: Well – and I'll, you know, part of this, you know, I've served in a lot of joint jobs. Particularly the United States Central Command, like as you described. But as an Air Force officer, and flying fighter aircraft, you know, in our counterterrorism we didn't have an air threat, OK? And if you get into a high-end fight, there is going to be an air threat. I think there's also – you know, we had losses in the Middle East from servicemembers that, you know, raised the hand, and take an oath, and made the ultimate sacrifice. If we get into a major conflict, there's going to be more of that. And it'll be more challenging.

And so from that perspective, because the threat's going to be different, it's going to challenge us a bit differently. There's not only the high-end piece that, you know, with higher-end capability. But if you think about what happened here a couple of weeks ago, a number-one way, uncrewed aerial systems that were launched out of – out of Iran towards Israel. That's another threat that's low end. And so we got to have a range of capability.

And so I often talk about ensuring that we have both capability and capacity, because you're going to have high-end exquisite, but because of expense you only have so much capacity. But you also need to have, you know, lower end. So we have to have a range of capabilities and capacity to ensure we can do what the nation asks us to do.

Ms. Bingen: Well, and we're seeing a lot of attention on autonomy and mass. We were told that the Air Force is going to make an announcement later this afternoon on CCA, the collaborative combat aircraft.

Gen. Brown: I'm looking forward to that one. (Laughter.)

Ms. Bingen: I hope you know –

Gen. Brown: No, I don't. They haven't clued me in yet. But I can only imagine.

Ms. Bingen: But how do you think about now adapting the joint force to what is coming in terms of that mass, that autonomy?

Gen. Brown: Well, it's going to be – I think it's going to be a force multiplier. Because with levels of autonomy, being able – and you think about all the data we have. And I joke about it, it's – we have data, if it's on somebody's shared drive you don't know how to get to it, OK? So how do you take that data and then use that data to do the analysis and speed up the process that will provide us options much faster, and cull through some of the things that are maybe distractors, maybe disinformation, maybe deception, to get to not only senior leaders that make decisions at the strategic and operational, but down to the warfighter at the tactical level, to speed up their process and decision making, to ensure they're using the right capability at the right place at the right time?

And so I see that there's great value there in autonomy, in artificial intelligence, how well use our cyber capabilities, how space will play into future conflicts. And so they all have a factor. And I think the last thing I'd say on this is just the amount of innovation that happens in this country, not necessarily now inside of DOD, it's how do we bring the two of those together? And how these – how we take the prototypes and turn them into a program of record much faster than we do today? And then how do we scale? And then also, how do we adapt? Because the threat will adapt, and we need to be able to adapt very quickly to the threat as well.

Ms. Bingen: Now I want to start weaving in some participant questions here into mine, because they dovetail very well. So, the first part of the question then – given we're on the topic of technology, from Jesse Hernandez is where's AI on your priority list? And I just want to expand that. You made the comment earlier, you know, your mantra as Air Force chief was accelerate change or lose. You had a toolkit in the Air Force to actually implement that. Do you have a toolkit in the joint staff to implement that same mantra within the joint force? So AI and implementation.

Gen. Brown: Sure. Well, AI – I think we're still in early stages. And, you know, our journey right now in AI reminds me about 15 years ago our journey with cyber, where it would show up on every PowerPoint slide that, you know, cyber was going to solve all of our problems, just like AI's going to come in and it's going to solve all our problems. I really think AI – we're still going to be able – we still need to be able to do our basic things that we do. AI's just going to make it better, OK? And we got to understand how best to use AI, because there will be some benefits and there may be some detractors. And I think those are the things that we've got to – you know, deeper understanding across the

force. And you know, I think we need to be careful about just saying AI as if it's going to solve everything. We got to put it in the right place at the right time to make sure it's going to be effective.

Moving forward for the joint force, I also did a memo to the Joint Staff that I talked about the things that I wanted to focus on as the chairman. It came out here about a month ago.

You know, the first is balancing risk, and it's the conversation we already had earlier about how do we balance risk between what we need to do today and what we need to do tomorrow.

Second was aligning our strategic processes. And what I see is – it's interesting, I see some charts with all the different, you know, boxes and lines, and we sit in meetings. But how do all of those various processes align to get to an end result? And I think in some cases we have processes that – and programs that were established over a number of years, and we've never let them go. And I sat down with our historian and read through the history of Joint Staff strategic planning processes back to when the Joint Staff first stood up, and it's interesting to watch the pendulum swing back and forth, and the fact in some cases we have processes we're doing that lead to a dead end, so when they're done with it, where does it go? And so what I would ask the staff is: Where is your input and what is your output, and who uses it? And if it – if it looks pretty good you can be very proud of it; but if no one's using it, it begs the question why are we still doing it.

And then the last thing I put in was how we advance joint force design modernization and development. The design piece goes into each of the – you know, what the joint force design looks like, supporting the Joint Warfighting Concept, how that comes together with the service concepts, how we modernize to meet those concepts. And the last part of development is how we develop our servicemembers. And as you're probably aware, our joint – in legislation, there's things that we have to do for our officers for joint training. We don't have the same for our enlisted force or for our civilians. And so I'm working very closely with my senior enlisted advisor on how do we ensure that we have – we have the strongest NCO corps in the world, but I want to make sure they're even stronger by how we develop them as well as we develop our officers with our civilians to be the force we need to be in the future.

Ms. Bingen:

On the tradeoff between readiness and modernization, you wrote a commentary back in 2021 with General Berger, but my takeaway was – is we need to reconceptualize how we think about readiness and it wasn't just the fight tonight. So how are you thinking about now

readiness not just within the Air Force, but that joint force writ large and those tradeoffs that we inevitably have to make?

Gen. Brown: Well, there's – typically, right now we tend to look at readiness in – by weapons system, by a force element, and we tend to look at it in a – you know, a short snapshot of time, like, you know, here in the next – you know, what we look like today. I think we need to shift it in a couple areas. One, it's a balance between today and how you move this out into the future. And then, we don't fight alone; you need to do it by mission area.

And the thing I've thought about – and this is based on experience, having been an air component commander twice. And in that role, I was the area air defense commander, which is, you know, that commander who has responsibility for integrated air and missile defense. When you look at integrated air and missile defense, the Air Force or the air component has airplanes. They do cruise missiles. But we also did the command and control. We had Patriot and THAAD that was done by the Army, and we have Aegis BMD ballistic missile defense ships done by the Navy. You could look at each one of – the readiness for each one of those capabilities in a stovepipe, but how do you look at readiness across that mission area for integrated missile defense? Because we're only as strong as the weakest link. But we – if you don't put it together, you will look – if you don't look at it in that concept, you'll go – you may miss understanding that you actually have a dip in readiness in your ability to do integrated missile defense. And so we need to look at readiness not only from the – you know, the force element or weapons system, but how does that weapons system contribute to a mission that we're going to have to be able to do as well.

Ms. Bingen: OK. Industrial base. And Seth Jones, who started, he – earlier here with remarks – he's done great work on highlighting some of the munitions shortfalls that our industrial base have. Mark Cancian here has done some great work on wargaming and how we could be out of - (inaudible) - in a week or so in a China-Taiwan scenario.

So Secretary Kendall has said China is preparing for a war and specifically for a war with the United States. It's been interesting to see how Russia has recovered its production capacity with China, reportedly supplying an array of components, Iran and North Korea supplying weapons.

Do we need to be on a wartime footing with our industrial base as well?

Gen. Brown:

Well, what I would say is we need to improve on our defense industrial base and there's things that I've been thinking through in the – a couple months ago I had a chance to go visit a couple of places – actually, three places over the course of time I've been the chairman.

I've been to a shipyard. Went to a place where we build HIMARS and then we went to – I went to an ammunition depot, and I think the resounding answer I got from each one of them is a consistent demand signal with consistent resourcing would be really helpful.

And so there's a balance between what we do as the Department of Defense to give them a consistent demand signal. It's the aspect of making sure we get a budget on time. You know, I've been a general officer 15 years and a third of that has been in continuing resolutions.

That's not a way to have consistency, and when you don't have that consistency it makes it difficult for our industry partners to ensure they've got their supply chains set up and their facilities set up, the workforce set up, and their lower level vendors that are going to provide pieces and parts.

And so consistency is going to actually increase trust and drive down costs for us. When we have uncertainty it decreases trust and it drives up cost because, you know, I can imagine a company has got to – we'll do that but we want to make sure we have a bit of an insurance policy for when there's a dip in the demand signal or if there's a dip because of funding.

I know there's quite a bit of focus here and I think that the thing that we as a department will have to do is ensure that we have and provide industry the right – where we need to prioritize and then we need to follow it up with the resourcing and then stay consistent throughout on the – what we're going to need from the defense industrial base.

Ms. Bingen:

OK. So I have two questions here from reporters on – this is on Ukraine and given the congressional vote last night that – and the president signing military assistance packages is I understand we're starting to flow – you know, pretty quickly move here and flow weapons forward. So I guess there was an announcement on U.S. decision on moving forward with ATACMS.

Can you talk through what you anticipate seeing here and how quickly you think aid is going to flow to Ukraine?

Gen. Brown: Well, as you might imagine that what we do in the Department of Defense is plan and we plan a lot, and we're always trying to stay postured to stay ahead of any type of decisions and knowing, you know, the supplement has been something we've been focused on. This national defense level has been something we've been focused on for a while and seeing that we were getting closer and closer, particularly last week when the House passed.

We're well postured with the authorities and movement of munitions to Ukraine. So we've already leaned pretty far forward on a lot of areas and – you know, and I understand the president signed it here just over – I think over lunchtime. So we're moving out and we'll get capability to Ukraine as quickly as possible.

The one thing I would highlight is think about what Ukraine has been able to do when they've been resourced. You know, early in the conflict they were able to take back 50 percent of the territory that they lost after Russia's initial invasion against a much more capable force and, you know, our support from the United States but, really, from all the nations that are contributing do make a difference to Ukraine because it matters, because what happens in one part or world doesn't stay in one part of the world and we've seen that via history and I think what we're collectively doing in support of Ukraine is important.

Ms. Bingen: And also in Ukraine there's been much heavier use of electronic warfare weapons. We've seen ports targeted. So there's also a question here from David Winks. As we and our adversaries move towards electromagnetic weapons how are we protecting the infrastructure that our bases and ports rely on?

Gen. Brown: Well, this is a key area for not just our bases and ports but just to be able to operate in a pretty dense electronic warfare environment because with that jamming it creates, you know, fog, friction, and confusion.

We want to make sure we're able to do the same to our adversaries and protect ourselves from that capability as well, and so as we look at the capabilities we have today and the capabilities we are pursuing in the future how do you – we want to make sure we're putting in the capability to defend ourselves and the flexibility. You know, many of the things we want to be able to do, for example, is software-defined radios where you can very quickly reprogram once the adversary has done something to jam your weapon system – the ability to reprogram fairly quickly, which is why it's so important to have, you know, strong engineering talent that's supporting what we're doing as

well, to be able to counter that threat.

Ms. Bingen: There's another great question here from Dana Linnet, who's a retired diplomat, a foreign service officer.

I have your change or die slogan from last year's electronic AFA on my personal email signature. But how do we change that slow acquisition system and calibrate it responsibly now? Will that change happened in our lifetime?

Gen. Brown: I sure hope so. (Laughter.) You know, I think it's interesting. There's a lot of conversation about the fact that we need to change. We need to change our approach to acquisition. I've sat down with members of Congress. We all have the same conversation. But talk's not going to make it work. And, you know, there was a study on our budgeting – a commissioner did a study on our budgeting process. And I think there's some room for – there is room for improvement. The thing is, we got to – we got to step forward and realize that we have a crisis on the horizon. We have a crisis right now. And I think the thing we got to be thinking about is we don't want to be in a position later on where we go, god, I wish we'd have changed, I wish we'd had done something. We need to be pushing harder on those things right now.

I think the other area that I would highlight – and this was something that I was very fortunate as the Air Force chief to work with Secretary Kendall. I have a deep operational background, zero acquisition. He's got some operational background, but he's got a lot of acquisition. And we both have engineering degrees. And I think the key aspect is how we take an operator who knows what they want to be able to do, sitting with, you know, someone with technical expertise, sitting with an acquisition professional. Because there's – you know, for the operator, they want everything they can get their hands on. The technical person and go, here's what's technically possible. And the acquisition person is going to be, here's how we can pay for it and how we can get it all together.

And there's going to be some trade space in that dialog. And those are the things that we got to be able to do. You just get the right people in the room to talk about the operational risk, the fiscal risk, and the technical risks to bring these capabilities much more – forward much faster. And I think in some cases we don't necessarily have that, because we don't. You know, we're talking in our own circle and we don't get so we can start moving forward. And at the same time, we got to be engaging with our members of Congress early in the process to get their support, and so they better appreciate the things that we need to do collectively and to work together.

Ms. Bingen: Yeah. I want to come full circle to a fundamental question, given all that we've discussed here. When you have all of these national defense strategy challenges happening near simultaneously, are our defense and military strategies adequate for the threat and the environment that we face?

Gen. Brown. Well, I think they are. You think about the five challenges in the strategy, I think we pretty much nailed it. You laid out, you know, People's Republic of China, Russia, Iran, North Korea and violent extremists. And those are the key factors that are driving challenges to our national security. Now, the – with any strategy, it's only as good as the implementation. And that's where we need to continue. And we are making progress. The past several budgets that we had from the Department of Defense have been in line with the strategy. The key part is you want to make sure that the funding comes so you don't spend so much time on a continuing resolution.

A good example, you mentioned munitions earlier. In the '24 National Defense Authorization Act, we have multiyear procurement formations. But you can't do that if you don't have the funding. And so we didn't take – we weren't able to take full advantage of that authorization. But it's those kinds of things that we got to work together on, to help us move forward, to ensure that the strategy that we've laid out, we're going to be able to execute. Even so, I am confident in our joint force. I'm confident in the work that we're able to do together.

I'm confident – you know, but I don't want to wait till we get to a crisis that we go, OK, now we can – you know, now we have to react because it will be a little bit timely. And so my goal is to try to spend as much time talking about where we need to go, but also looking at opportunities to drive action to the best of my ability with the tools that I have as the chairman, as I provide my advice, and those things that I – you know, as I said – my program recommendation, risk assessment, and other forms as well to move forward.

Ms. Bingen: Well, and then are there – would there be issues or assumptions that you might encourage we revisit in these strategies as we look ahead? Not asking you to comment on the election here, but you know, whether it be – this administration does an update to their current NDS or you have a new team that develops theirs, are there going to be certain things that you want them to take a hard look at and challenge?

Gen. Brown: I think it's just the implementation piece is probably the biggest piece, because you think about the 2018 National Defense Strategy versus the 2022, it didn't change dramatically; same five threats, maybe some minor adjustments. And I would say whatever strategy comes out with whatever administration follows this one, I think the threats are going to be the same. Our approach won't change dramatically. But there could be room for improvement. And, you know, I'm happy to work to ensure that the strategy we have today moves forward, and whatever strategy come to follow. That's where my focus will be.

Ms. Bingen: Well, I'm going to integrate another question here. Anthony Cannon, who's a national defense fellow, asks how do you plan on staying focused on being apolitical in an upcoming election that has drawn the military leadership into politics recently?

And if I can tag on to that, the congressionally established National Defense Strategy Commission back in 2018, in a consensus report, had observed an unhealthy trend in terms of civilian-military relations. So as you've come in now into the chairman position, can you talk to us also about the health of civ-mil relations in the department and how you and the joint staff are approaching that?

Gen. Brown: Sure. Let me first say that, you know, my focus as the chairman is focus on warfighting. And the memo I put out, Honing Our Warfighting Skills, that's primacy in all we do. That is my focus. And the – you know, for our military members – and when I go out – you know, in the building, but also when I go out and visit our servicemembers, they're also focused on getting their job done. And I would say that, not that we've come into politics, but politics has pulled us into the conversation.

I also think it's important that I lead by example, that we know and follow the rules. I've encouraged our servicemembers and all of us to read through the letter that was written by previous secretaries of defense – the open letter written by previous secretaries of defense and chairmen of the Joint Chiefs that lay out 16 aspects of what a healthy civ-mil relationship looks like; and then, for all of our servicemembers, to really stay true to the oath that we took. So that's the real focus area here.

On the health of civ-mil relations, you know, for me personally, I think it's pretty good. Now, there may be some friction points here and there. But as I said when I wrote Accelerate Change or Lose, the key word there is in collaboration. And that's because that's how I operate. I'm a collaborator. I'm a team player. I'm a team builder. And part of that is how do you fatten communication? There will be times

we disagree. I got that. But we need to be in the same room to have a conversation, because there are some things we agree on.

And I really believe we need to focus on things we agree on. We need to move that forward, build the relationship. And as you build that relationship, the things that you thought were a big deal, that you disagreed on, you can typically figure out a way to work through. And that's the things that we have to do as military leaders is to sit down with our civilian leadership and understand, you know, how do we help them do their job so they can help us do our job? And, you know, I feel it's pretty good, to be honest with you. And I've got great relations with, you know, many of the members within the building, our civilian leadership. And, you know, I just – I want to set the example, again, that that's how important that is.

Ms. Bingen: OK, General, I've got two more questions for you here. As part of your joint force development responsibilities, you have a policymaking role in Joint Professional Military Education, JPME. So given all the challenges we've discussed, what do you want to see out of our Joint Professional Military Education, and maybe what would you want newly commissioning officers, new enlisted servicemembers, to know from where you sit now as they embark on their careers?

Gen. Brown: Well, I think there's two things. I want them to really get at whatever their primary skill is, but at the same time to realize how that primary skill fits into the bigger picture. And the more that we put that in our – you know, in some of our PME at lower levels to show that there is a bigger picture.

Naturally, there is some service rivalry. But in the big scheme of things, we're on the same team. And the better we understand how to operate together as a team, that makes us and continues to make us the most combat-credible, most respected force in the world. And there's always room for improvement. And I think, you know, because of – as we look at the threats – and it's interesting, when I go out and see our young – some of the questions I get are pretty deep. Like, when I was a captain, I don't think I could have ever asked a question that deep. (Laughter.) But they're really thinking about these bigger issues, and we got to make sure that our personal military education is keeping pace because they have access to so much more information. You know, I got my first email address as a captain, you know, and you know, smartphones didn't come out until about 2007. And so this crowd of young servicemembers are pretty in tune, and I think we've got to make sure that we're doing the things to make sure that that joint team is better prepared for the future.

Ms. Bingen: OK. So last question, which is better than my last question so I'm going to ask it. This is from Madeleine Chang. She's a visiting fellow here at CSIS and one of those next-gen thinkers. And she asks: What are the most surprising changes you have observed in the culture of the U.S. military since you joined 39 years ago? And I'll just add as the last word, you know, what gives you optimism here going forward?

Gen. Brown: Well, I think how sharp our young generation is. You know, I just talked about how in tune they are with current events. The question that he asked, their curiosity. You know, I've done a little study on Gen Z. As a matter of fact, I have a dinner tomorrow night at my house to talk about American education and tomorrow's workforce. And what I'm really finding is this younger generation wants to do something bigger than themselves. They want to be part of a team. They want to collaborate. Not that we didn't do it when I was much younger, but you know, when you step back and see it, you see the immense talent that they bring.

And you know, one of the things I do focus on and think about is the – you know, when I talk about trust is the foundation in our profession, it's the trust that we do right by them – that we provide them the opportunity that they can all reach their full potential. And I mean, they're just immensely impressive in the things that they are able to do and the questions that they ask. And I enjoy it, partly because it challenges me and I always learn something. One of my goals is to go home every evening smarter than when I came into the office, and – because some of the tough questions I get, I've got to get a bit smarter. And I just appreciate the talent that we have not only in uniform, but in our nation that's committed to serving and ensuring our national security.

Ms. Bingen: Well, Chairman Brown, thank you so much for all the time you've given us. I can attest firsthand to the collaborative approach that you take. And thank you very much for the leadership that you exhibit, but also the leadership by example that you exhibit. So, sir, thank you very much.

Gen. Brown: Thank you. Thank you. (Applause.)

(END.)