

Foundation for Defense of Democracies
Conference | Rising to the Threat: Revitalizing America's Military and Political Power
May 8, 2019

Remarks by General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr.

Speakers:

Introduction by: Bradley Bowman, Senior Director, FDD's Center on Military and Political Power

General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander, U.S. Central Command

BOWMAN: All right, well thank you again for being here. We hope you enjoyed the morning portion. If you liked the morning portion, I think you're going to like the afternoon portion as well. Welcome back from lunch. I hope you got something to eat.

It's my pleasure to help get the second portion of our conference started today. Again, thanks for being here. Please feel free, as the podium says here, to use hashtag CMPP. There's a discussion already underway there online, and you can follow us at FDD_CMPP. I had to say that.

OK, so later we are going to hear from, as you may know from looking at the program, Lieutenant General Ed Cardon, and then we'll conclude with a conversation between Cliff May, our founder and president, and H.R. McMaster.

But first, it is my honor to introduce General Kenneth McKenzie, Commander of U.S. Central Command. Most of our audience will know that CENTCOM is one of our nation's war-fighting combatant commands. Its area of responsibility extends from Egypt to Pakistan, Kazakhstan to Yemen, including countries like Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan.

General McKenzie has deep experience in the region. He served as the Commander of the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit for 44 months, deploying and commanding them in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq. In fact, he is the longest serving MEU commander in the history of the Marine Corps.

He previously served as the J5 of CENTCOM and MARCENT Commander, which gives him an acute appreciation of the dynamics of the Middle East and Central and South Asia.

As the Joint Staff J5 and then Director of the Joint Staff, he served as one of the architects of the current national defense strategy, which has been brought up here several times already today, and he's extraordinarily, as a result, knowledgeable regarding the concepts of dynamic force employment and how it will enable the Department of Defense to set the globe to meet future challenges.

General McKenzie in short is a warrior, leader, and student of history. Given everything going on in CENTCOM area of operations, we are extraordinarily pleased and honored that General McKenzie can be here and speak today. Please join me in welcoming General McKenzie.

(APPLAUSE)

MCKENZIE: Good afternoon, everyone. I need to talk to my agent about how I got the coveted after-lunch speaking slot.

Before I really get started with my remarks, I'd like to take just a minute to recognize the Center on Military and Political Power. I know this is their premiere launch event, and I'm honored to be invited here to assist - to assist kicking it off because I think the got some of the most knowledgeable people in the world that are associated with it and have spoken here earlier today.

I've always tried to have a bias for action. It's a phrase that we use in the Marine Corps, and I appreciate how the Center on Military and Political Power isn't intended to be a group of luminaries just sitting around admiring the problem set but rather is an organization that's actively working to promote understanding of the strategies, the policies, and the capabilities we need to maintain our vital national interests. That bias toward action speaks to me, so I appreciate the endeavor that's underway here.

I had the privilege awhile back of serving as a fellow for Michèle Flournoy from 1999 to 2000 on the projects she undertook to build intellectual capital in advance of the 2001 QDR. And that was one of the - one of the most formative years of my career and it gave me a much more nuanced view of long-ranged defense planning, policy, and nexus between the two.

So Ms. Flournoy - the Honorable Ms. Flournoy, Ambassador Edelman, Dr. Kagan, General Keane, frankly everyone who's proceeded me on this stage today all represent the best and brightest in their fields. They're people that make things happen. They're people that just don't talk about making things happen.

So I mentioned my - mentioned my foundational time working with Ms. Flournoy on the QDR, and Brad already noted some of my other experiences on the Joint Staff as the 5 and as the Director. And so, I wanted to let that set the stage for what I want to talk to you about today, which is really the national defense strategy, the NDS - and I'll use that shorthand throughout - and what it means to United States Central Command.

I'm going to start by telling you a little bit about what the NDS is and also what it isn't. I know many of your are already well-steeped in defense issues and are, therefore, quite familiar with the NDS. Nonetheless, there's some debate about what it means and the purpose that it serves.

In my previous roles on the Joint Staff, I was present at the creation, so I'm intimately familiar with the document, how it was built, and what it was intended to do, and I think I'm well-qualified to discuss it in depth and also to look at it from the perspective of a combatant commander, and I'll try to do both of those today.

Let me begin by saying that even before the NDS was written and through today our military has the capability to absolutely meet all of its commitments and protect the homeland. We maintain a competitive advantage over any potential adversary. That's a fact, plan and simple.

But it's also true that gaps that were once large are narrowing. The department realized several years ago that if we didn't begin to make some fundamental changes, we might eventually lack the ability, in five to seven years, to project power when and where needed in order to protect our vital national interests. I agree with that assessment.

In my confirmation hearing with the Senate Armed Service Committee last December, I also agreed with the NDS Commission's assessment that over the last two decades our principal adversaries, competitors and potential adversaries - Russia and China - have carefully studied us while we've been engaged in counterinsurgency warfare, principally in the CENTCOM theater.

They've also watched us in Desert Storm and they saw how we projected power. They watched us in 2003 in Iraq and every other conflict we've engaged in since then. During that time, they've looked at what they've perceived to be our vulnerabilities and they've develop capabilities that are designed specifically to disrupt our ability to project power and operate freely across every domain.

In essence, they've used that opportunity to steal a march, making their investments based on a very careful study of us. And all that time, they have not had to spend precious resources the way we've had, resources expended in a - extended significant counter terror fight.

This allowed our adversaries to make significant adaptations and accelerate their modernization programs frankly assisted by a staggering degree of outright theft of U.S. intellectual property. All of this designed to asymmetrically counter our ability to project power.

All this while our capacity, the size of our force has declined, and our capability has diminished due to budget instability and the challenges of a decade's long campaign against violent extremism, all of which adversely affected our own modernization and capability development efforts.

Once we owned every major domain - land, air, sea, space, cyber. We used to be able to look up to the stars with the absolute knowledge that we were dominant in space. We never use to question our - our complete dominance in the cyber world, but today all

of those are contested areas, and if we don't adjust now, we're going to lose our competitive edge.

Today's strategic environment is extraordinarily complex involved, and I know that's been brought up by many of the speakers that you've already heard today, but the threats to our national interests are actually pretty clear.

The NDS characterizes and prioritizes our strategic challenges with the two plus three framework that you're all familiar with, naming China and Russia as the primary challenges, the placers if you will, along with North Korea, Iran, and violent extremism.

The NDS is meant to be a framework that provides a benchmark against which we can measure our capabilities. It's not intended to be predictive of future crises or armed conflicts -- rather it's an important tool for planning, managing risk, and developing capabilities.

If you take nothing else away from my remarks today, understand that critical point. The NDS isn't a predictive tool, it's a planning tool. It is directive in nature, certainly -- and across the Department we created a variety of ways to measure how we're doing against the NDS.

Nevertheless this planning must embrace a global perspective that views challenges from all aspects and enables execution of military campaigns with a flexibility and speed that outpaces those of our adversaries. And we will have to manage this, and manage the force in a manner that allows us to also meet day-to-day commitments, while maintaining readiness and flexibility to respond to major contingencies and the unexpected.

The key concept to remember is global. I don't think it comes to anything of a surprise to anyone in this room when I say that the nature of conflict has fundamentally changed over the past decade. Any major fight that we're going to be involved in will, in all likelihood, be trans-regional versus regional. It won't be isolated to CENTCOM or to EUCOM or to INDO-PACOM. It will cut across multiple combatant commands and it will involve all domains.

So we have to look at how we posture ourselves globally, because we simply don't have sufficient resources to be where we want to be in the right numbers, every place we want to be, all the time. And certainly not from the combatant commander's perspective, for which I have a renewed appreciation. And that's very important -- you can't make global decisions from the perspective of a single combatant command perspective. Only the Secretary of Defense can make those kinds of global decisions. And it's the responsibility of the Secretary, assisted by the Chairman, and the joint staff to ensure we're correctly postured, and the globe is set in accordance with our nation's strategic priorities.

Let me put that into a practical perspective. A couple of weeks ago, instead of handing a carrier strike group operating in the Arabian Sea, in support of CENTCOM, and then one in the Med, we had two carrier strike groups, the Abe Lincoln and Stennis, operating in the Mediterranean. What does this mean as far as setting the globe?

It means we have two carrier strike groups positioned to provide strategic support to three combatant commands -- EUCOM, AFRICOM, and CENTCOM. As all of you know, and I'll address it later in my remarks, that central position if you will, for those two strike groups gave us the strategic flexibility to rapidly flex a strike group to CENTCOM when circumstances dictated.

Would the CENTCOM commander -- any CENTCOM commander -- like to have his own carrier strike group in the theater on a 1.0, heel-to-toe basis - to use a term of art that we use. Of course, I would.

But from a practical standpoint, we don't have the luxury any longer of stovepipe ownership of strategic assets. Properly positioned, these assets -- and particularly those with global mobility -- they can provide capabilities and deterrents against multiple adversaries and threats while operating across and between multiple COCOMs. That's something you've just seen happen.

And this is what we refer to in the NDS as the dynamic force employment construct. Setting the globe with the ability to project power wherever needed to safeguard our national interests and those of our allies and partners.

So let me use that point to sort of transition, to go a level over and talk a little more directly about CENTCOM and our particular challenges in the theater. CENTCOM AOR is one of the most complex, richly diverse regions in the world.

Nearly 600 million people, 20 countries, three of the world's five major religions, the most energy-rich region in the world, and three critical maritime strategic chokepoints: the Suez Canal, the Bab al Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz. All make points for energy and trade, and the ability of commerce to transit those global commons and chokepoints associated with them is vital for the global economy.

Since 2001 in the aftermath of 9/11, CENTCOM has been charged with the responsibility of commanding multiple, often simultaneous, combat missions in our region. During that time, confronting terrorism and defeating violent extremist groups has been the primary objective of U.S. national power in the region. Eighteen years later, CENTCOM is still the only geographic combatant command conducting multiple, active combat operations.

So we recognize the strategic importance of the Central Region to our national interests. There are four key things that I think argue for why we need to remain engaged in Central Command.

First, and most importantly, we must not allow another attack on our homeland. The CENTCOM AOR is the world's epicenter for terrorism and VEOs. The 9/11 attacks, based on al-Qaeda's safe haven in Afghanistan, was a wakeup call that terrorism could be exported from anywhere in the world.

Second, we can't allow violent extremist organizations or rogue nations to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Our active presence in this region prevents VEOs from coming together toward that purpose, and it also helps prevent the proliferation of WMD, or weapons of mass destruction materials.

Third, instability is contagious. It does not respect national borders and it grows and spreads if left unchecked. A stable Middle East underpins a stable world. In an already volatile region, our steady commitment to our allies and partners provides a force for stability.

As the President's National Security Strategy states, we must also "work with partners to neutralize Iran's malign activities in the region." Let me be perfectly clear as I reinforce that point. The long-term, enduring, most significant threat to stability in the Central Command AOR is Iran. And the Iran -- Iranian regime's malign ambitions across the theater and, indeed, globally.

The fourth reason is the reemergence of the great power competition, the main challenge highlighted in the NDS. China and Russia seek to dominate and influence not just their own geographic regions, but the Central Region as well. Just as great power competitors looked to influence energy and trade in the Middle East following the first World War, China and Russia are working very hard today to reshuffle the balance of power in the CENTCOM area of responsibility, trying to displace the U.S. from our current position of influence in the region.

We understand that adjustments in the global force posture, and our ability to manage it, are going to force us to accept additional risk. But as we approach our evolving role in CENTCOM, we'll approach it with intellectual agility and determination. Acknowledging the priorities, and our missions outlined in the NSS and the NDS -- and knowing that we can't be the main effort of our nation's scarce resources in perpetuity. We recognize that.

Now I want to go back and talk just a little more about the third point that I made about regional instability. The long -- and I'll say again -- the long-term challenge we face in the Central Command theater is Iran.

Their hegemonic ambitions, their misbehavior, their threats to us and our partners in the region, have been consistent elements of the regime's policy for many years. The United States has levied diplomatic information and economic efforts against the regime, in an effort to convince them to cease those unproductive behaviors. My responsibility is the military element of our whole-of-government approach. As part of that, our forces conduct freedom of navigation operations in the Strait of Hormuz. We continue our

commitment to the stability of the government of Iraq, and our efforts to build the capacities of our regional partners. In these and other ways, our military forces complement all other government efforts to counter Iranian malign influence in the Middle East.

As you consider military forces, keep in mind that our strategic strength has never been -- has never rested solely on the volume of material we bring to the fight, but rather on the partnerships, the alliances and the whole-of-government efforts that frankly no other country in the world can match.

That's a great advantage that we seek to apply in the Central Command area. We've been working to build a strong coalition of nations to deter Iran's threats in the region and around the world, ensure freedom of navigation and convince the Iranian regime to end its destabilizing activities. Those include the Iranian regime support to militant partners and terrorism, its proliferation of advanced weapons, including ballistic missiles and unmanned armed aerial systems, its malicious cyber activities and unprofessional naval actions. These activities across the region exacerbate our partners' challenges in an already complex and volatile environment.

The Iranian regime directly engages in far-reaching terrorist activities. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard -- most prominently or most preeminently through its Quds Force -- is the Iranian regime's primary means of directing and carrying out its global terrorist campaigns; providing funding, equipment, training, and logistical support to a broad range of terrorist and militant organizations. Today as I am speaking to you, the Iranian regime is providing support to many designated terrorist groups, including Hezbollah, Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq, and the Al-Ashtar Brigades in Bahrain.

And as we witness the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, it's important to remember that Iran is behind the irresponsible behavior that actually led to the overthrow of the government of Yemen and created the crisis we now have in Yemen. The humanitarian tragedy that we confront in Yemen is the child of Iranian ambition and their support for the Houthis in trying to create a Hezbollah-like state in Yemen.

Now we know that the Iranian regime knows what our military capabilities are, and they have a healthy respect for them -- and that's good. And while they have avoided direct military conflict with the United States and our partners, they have demonstrated the willingness and ability to attack our people, our interests and our friends and allies in the confusing, complex zone just short of armed conflict.

For example, during Operation Iraqi Freedom, we assessed that at least 600 U.S. personnel deaths in Iraq were the result of Iran-backed militants. These casualties were the result of explosively formed penetrators, improvised explosive devices, improvised rocket assisted-munitions, rockets, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, small-arms, sniper. and other attacks. All directly the result of Iran.

The Iranian regime has smuggled ballistic missiles into Yemen and assisted with their construction and deployment. And they're employed by the Houthis against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as well as against the United Arab Emirates, threatening our partners as well as Americans who live and work there. They've also irresponsibly fired missiles into the Bab al-Mandab and the Red Sea, where vital commerce and oil transport occurs.

Iran has also increased funding for its cyber efforts twelvefold in recent years, as well as increased espionage and targeting of U.S. government and commercial entities.

Earlier this week, the White House and the Department of Defense announced that in direct response to a number of troubling and escalatory indicators in warning, we would adjust our military posture -- deploying the USS Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group as well as a bomber task force -- to the Central Command region.

Ladies and gentlemen, make no mistake, we're not seeking a fight with the Iranian regime, but we do have a military force that's designed to be agile, adaptive, and prepared to respond to a variety of contingencies in the Middle East and around the world. We will continue to operate wherever international law allows. We will continue to work with our partners to ensure freedom of navigation and a free flow of commerce in international waterways.

This recent forced movement should demonstrate three points for our friends and potential adversaries alike.

First, it sends a clear and unmistakable message to the Iranian regime that any attack on U.S. interests will be met with unrelenting force. General Dunford, the current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has pledged never to send our sons and daughters into a fair fight. And if a fight is to be had, we'll be fully prepared to respond and defend our interests -- and it won't be a fair fight.

Second, while we do not seek war, Iran should not confuse our deliberate approach with an unwillingness to act. We field an experienced, ready, battle-hardened force with the best equipment and training in the world.

The third point goes back to the National Defense Strategy and what will become the new norm for posturing our forces around the world. As I mentioned earlier, there are those who think the NDS will realign much of our military power to the EUCOM and INDO-PACOM theaters. And we are going to reposition significant assets into those theaters.

I was -- I -- as I told you at the very beginning, I was present at the creation, so I'm very well aware of that and I understand it and fully support it. But also, the reality is that with dynamic force employment, we have the ability to set the globe to deter any adversary or defend our interests and those of our allies, friends and partners anywhere,

including in the Central Command region. And to our allies and partners that we work alongside every day and to our potential adversaries as well, we say, rest assured, we aren't going anywhere.

I'll leave you with a quote from General George Washington, who, as president, in his first inaugural address to both houses of Congress in January of 1790 said, "To be prepared for war is one most effectual means of preserving peace."

We hope and pray for peace but we've set the globe to remain vigilant and prepared.

Thank you. Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE)