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Fireside Chat with General CQ Brown, Jr.

General CQ Brown, Jr., Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff

Moderator: Jennifer Griffin, Chief National Security Correspondent, Fox News

Jennifer Griffin:

General Brown. I'm so glad to be here with you. I know you just got off a plane from Asia, meeting with our allies there, but first I want to just remind the audience about some of your background. You began your career in 1984, graduating from Texas Tech Air Force, ROTC. You're an F 16 fighter pilot, 3000 flying hours, including 160 in combat. You've served in top leadership positions in Syncom, Ucomm, and Paycom. In fact, from 2018 to 2020, you were the top Air Force commander in the Pacific. And I think what is notable, particularly in this time of divisions in this country, to remember that in 2020 you were confirmed by the Senate unanimously, and that is when you became the first African-American to serve as a service chief, the head of the Air Force. So thank you for being here today.

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

My pleasure. Thank you. Thank you.

Jennifer Griffin:

Let me start with some of the news headlines this morning. We all know about now the widespread internet outage that was caused by what seems a glitch, not a cyber attack per se. We learned that this morning. How has it affected US military operations? Has it affected the US military?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, as you may imagine, I was made aware of the situation on the airplane flying back here to the United States for all reports. I have right now no impact on DOD operations, but I will also share with you, I mean, this gives you an indication of how important cybersecurity, how we use our software, how we use our tools is important, and the things that we do, particularly in DOD, to protect our capabilities to ensure that we can still protect the nation even when you have, whether it's a glitch or an attack that would be best postured to be able to support

Jennifer Griffin:

And should it be a wake up call for Americans. Many don't realize that if the US were to find itself in a conflict with China, it is largely believed that a cyber attack would hit the homeland in those initial hours. And we see this is just a little taste of what could happen. What do you think Americans should realize from this incident?

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General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, we all know how dependent we are all on cyber and the tools that it provides for us just to make our day-to-day lives easier. But when you have something like this, this should be a reminder to us of why it's important from a cybersecurity piece, not only at the governmental level all the way down to your local homes to protect ourselves and be best postured because I am sure our adversaries are looking at this as a way to, I would say, put sand into gears if we're trying to generate combat power to go to respond to a crisis anywhere around the world

Jennifer Griffin:

Overnight, a modified Iranian made, Samad, three explosive laden drone struck, slammed into Tel Aviv about 300 feet from the US Embassy. How did this happen? The Houthis took responsibility for it. Why wasn't it shot down?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, I'll have to defer to the Israelis on why it wasn't shot down. I also realize there was, I think one life loss. And so my condolences is there, Israel has the right to defend itself and the Houthis have, as we've seen since October, have been stirring up activity against Israel in the Red Sea, in the bottom of men dead impacting commercial shipping, having sunk a few ships, kill several mariners and just continue to be caused challenges there in the region. The key part is we want to make sure that Israel can defend itself the same. We want to be able to defend ourself and defend our forces that are stationed in the region.

Jennifer Griffin:

The Wall Street Journal is reporting this morning that general Eric Carla, the head of CENTCOM, has sent a letter to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, in which he says that the military strategy against the Houthis is not working and he's seeking permission to broaden the target set. Do you agree that the strategy is not working against the Houthis?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Here's what I would tell you is it is going to take more than just the military strikes to change the Houthis. It's going to take more of the inter agency, it's going to take more of the international community to put pressure on the Houthis to stop what they're doing. They tied it originally to in support of the Palestinians in Gaza, but that is somewhat broadened, so it's going to take more than just a military campaign to take the Houthis off track what they're doing. And so that's what I encourage that we continue to work broader parts with the inter agency, work with our allies and partners and the international community to put pressure on the Houthis because it does impact the activity and just commercial shipping. As I've talked to some of my partners in the region, they're starting to see the impacts based on goods and services because of what the Houthis have been doing there in the region.

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Jennifer Griffin:

There are some, and including some sitting senators on the Senate Armed Services Committee who have said it is time to strike Iran and to stop these houthi attacks to send a message to Iran or that it is time to sink, for instance, their spy ship, which has been shadowing our ships and helping the Houthis target these ships. Is it time to send a stronger message to Iran?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, here's what I do. When I think about this as my role to provide advice to president and secretary and the National Security Council, we could look at things individually and go, and because this happened, we should go do X. I'm looking at it from not only X, but what happens with Y and Z because once you do that, what are the second authority impacts of that? I think I have a responsibility to be thinking strategically about the actions we take, the recommendations I make, and what the risk is of a further escalation of broader conflict. You go back to what happened in October, that was one of the objectives the president laid out, is not to let the conflict in the Middle East broaden. I think we've been effective doing that and want to continue to do that, but I'll also say we are prepared if need be to do if the nation calls to take action.

Jennifer Griffin:

You talk about not escalating, but wouldn't it be escalatory if one of those missiles were to hit a US warship? You've got aircraft carrier sitting there in the Red Sea. The USS Carney had to defend itself against 100 incoming missiles and one night a few months ago, it's been very skilled and lucky, but they're also pushing the US military to deplete its stockpiles of very expensive million dollar missiles with thousand dollar drones. Shouldn't you reconsider what it will take to deter Iran because they don't appear to be deterred at this

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Point? Yeah, well, first thing, lemme tell you how proud I am of service members. One of my expectations that I laid out when I came in as a chairman was honing our board. Finding skills has primacy in everything we do and all we do. And because of that and what was happening before I became the chairman, the Kearney, the other ships, our service members, our aircraft have being able to do exactly that, to be able to defend themselves and do it extremely well. I appreciate the investments we've made in the high-end capability to go against these particular threats, but I also think about the balance of capability and capacity that we continue to work on to ensure that we have the high end capability but capacity against some of these lower end threats as well. And so this is where as we look at innovation and bringing in directed energy and non-kinetic capability, how we move that forward faster so we have a mix of capabilities to go against the Houthis or whoever else may want to challenge us, I think is very important.

Jennifer Griffin:

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There's also a report that US Intelligence is suggesting that Russia is planning to provide anti-ship missiles to the Houthis and that it may be possibly in response to us providing weapons, long range weapons to Ukraine. Is that report accurate and what is your message to the Russians?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, as you might imagine, I'm not going to share and validate intel reports here on stage, but I will tell you this, we do pay attention to the activity that they, not just the Russians, but anyone else that is actually causing challenges that's going to impact regional and global security. And so myself with the rest of the joint staff with the combatant commanders are staying really focused, really all around the world. And I'll just tell you that just based on, I see Jean Richmond sitting in her front row, the work that she's been doing in Southcom, but also the fact for me personally, really over the course of the past month, I was in Botswana with 31 of our partners at the end of last month. We at the NATO summit here last week, or at least not in my counterparts were in town that I had a chance to engage with. And I just came from the Indo-Pacific where I was in the Philippines, my counterpart there. And in Japan I was there with my Japanese counterpart and Republic of Korea counterpart. We were all focused on all the various threats around the world and just trying to all collectively stay on top of them and for each of us provide advice to our political leadership on the actions we take.

Jennifer Griffin:

Do you have a message for Russia if they cross this line?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

We prefer them not to do that. Okay. Because all that does, there are some Nations, they'll do what they do, but the key point is we don't want to broaden the conflict and them supporting the Houthis if that's what they're doing. It helps to broaden the conflict and just makes it more complicated in the Middle East.

Jennifer Griffin:

Ukraine's defense minister told the Aspen Conference in the Aspen Forum earlier this week, we are asking our partners to lift any bans on using long range weapons targeting inside Russia. Why not let them?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, that's a policy decision for the policymakers to decide. My job as we do this and I provide the advice, is also understanding what the risk is and what the second, third order impacts might be based on where the Ukraine strike as we continue to work to allow Ukraine to defend itself. And there's been not only capability from the United States provided, but with the Ukraine defense contact group, there's over 50 nations that continue to provide capability to Ukraine to be able to defend themselves, and we

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will continue to work with Ukraine to provide them the capabilities and do the things to help them defend.

Jennifer Griffin:

The Brits have not imposed such limitations on their long range weapons. Isn't there a moral component to this? If Russia fires at a children's hospital from an Air Force base that's just across the border or where you know that it's located, the laws of war suggests that that is a legitimate target of self-defense, why shouldn't the Ukrainians be able to do that? I remember during Afghanistan, we used to criticize other NATO allies for having caveats. Aren't we putting caveats on the Ukrainians right now?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, in every conflict I've, I've had an opportunity to lead in conflict. Every nation has certain caveats on how they want to approach things and as we work together as a coalition, and that's one thing I realized during coalition warfare is we have to figure out how to bring all those together to be an effective team. And I'll just tell you that we probably agree on more things than we might disagree on with these caveats, and that's the beauty of being able to work with our allies and partners in building coalitions with those who aren't part of an alliance. It's something we continue to work through, and even in this case we'll continue to address and figure out how best to approach

Jennifer Griffin:

Do you think Ukraine can win? And what is your response to those who have said that the US military is slow rolling these weapons systems to Ukraine?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, I mean Ukraine matters because unprovoked aggression, one part of the world, it doesn't stay in one part of the world and the things that we are doing to help Ukraine defend itself, not just with the United States, but the 50 nations that are providing capability is hugely important. I think when you look at it, when Putin went in, his goal was to take Ukraine very quickly and fracture nato. Neither one of those occurred. He's still fighting in Ukraine and NATO is stronger, not just by two nations stronger, but the dialogue within NATO is stronger than it's ever been. You have more nations that are putting forth funding for defense. 23 of the 32 nations are now at 2% GDP, where a while ago was only up to 10 or thereabouts. And so what you're seeing here is this type of aggression has actually strengthened allies and partnerships. That's what I see in nato. That's what I saw just this past week when I was in the Indo-Pacific, and it's very important that we all stay together and focus on maintaining global security by the actions we take and how we work together.

Jennifer Griffin:

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So that may be true up until now, but the nation finds itself at a key inflection point. The Republican National Convention just ended. We heard very clearly from former President Trump and from his vice president JD Vance that they've made basically halting support to Ukraine, a part of their platform. What would be the impact of such a policy shift if you have to implement that?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, that's a hypothetical I'm not going to necessarily get into, but

Jennifer Griffin:

What would be the impact? I think we can talk generally about if you were told tomorrow to stop support for Ukraine, what is the impact from your

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well I perspective, if collectively we stop supporting Ukraine, Putin wins, and what that allows is it also emboldens others to go. We have credibility that's at stake associated this not just the United States, but nato, the west. If we just back away and that opens the door for Xi Jinping and others that want to do unprovoked aggression, I think it's important that we continue to provide support to Ukraine so it doesn't go there into a broader conflict as well. Our leadership matters. It gets watched. It's something that I sense when I engaged with our allies and partners around the world.

Jennifer Griffin:

JD Vance also says that the West can't outproduce Russia in terms of ammunition and weapons. Is he wrong?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, I'll tell you, one of the things I'm really focused on and having been even as the Air Force chief in my nine plus months as the chairman is our defense industrial base. We have the capability to outproduce. I've seen this in our nation. You can look back in history where we've been able to go out and outproduce, but there's some things that have to happen to make that come together. There's got to be consistency in demand signal from the Department of Defense and our all as partners of what we need. There has to be consistency in funding to be able to do this. Getting budgets on time is important. Okay. Continuing resolutions do not help us actually have consistency in funding.

As we do that, it provides those contracts as well. And in the FY 24 NDAA, we had six weapons to do multi-year procurement. I'd like to see more multi procurement because that gives that consistency. Once you have that consistency, that builds trust with the defense industrial base because now they know how much workforce they need, how much of facilities they need, how much of the supply chain they need. That drives trust, increases trust, drives down costs, and improves delivery times so that we

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can put capability into the hands of the war fighters much faster than we do today. So we have the capacity to do it. We just got to make the commitment to do

Jennifer Griffin:

It. Do you think the nation and the industrial base needs to be on a war footing right now?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, what I would tell you is I see that the industrial base, the supplemental has been very helpful to do this in what some may not realize with the supplemental. Much of that money is going into the defense industrial base to provide build capability that not only helps Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan, it helps us as well. And so it's important that we continue that consistent funding to bring in that capability.

Jennifer Griffin:

President Trump, but former President Trump has said that he can negotiate the end of the war in 24 hours. Is that possible?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, if he can get it done in 24 hours, that'd be great. I mean, it stops the conflict. I mean the, and then we get back to more global security.

Jennifer Griffin:

The elephant in the room here at the Aspen Forum has been, will the US find itself in a war with China or can it deter such a conflict, particularly over the Taiwan issue. You've just returned from a trip to the Pacific. You met with your Japanese, south Korean and Philippine counterparts. There is brewing tension over a little island that many people, I don't even know if you call it an island, the second Thomas Shoal is a flashpoint where explain to us to the forum why it's significant and why it could become a flashpoint and pull the US into a conflict with China.

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Okay, well, first I'd say is I don't see that a conflict with the people's Republic of China is imminent or inevitable, but we're going to make sure we stay ready. The second Thomas Shoal is just off the coast of the Philippines in the South China Sea, as most of us would call it in the Philippines. They call it the West Philippine Sea. And it's really about, it's inside their exclusive economic zone and the debate between the nine dash line and claimants on that particular shoal. And this is about sovereignty for the Philippines. And then the challenge to that sovereignty by the PRC and this ship that is there that has been beached, actually has a number of Filipino service members. And one way that the Philippines maintains that sovereignty is by staying on that particular shoal. And so that is what I'd say somewhat emblematic of the other because nine other, excuse me, eight other shoals similarly off the coast of the

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Philippines that are in a bit of the same situation. So it's important when you start thinking about sovereignty and having a free and open Indo-Pacific and not letting this be a flashpoint, but it's emblematic of things that could happen if we don't pay attention.

Jennifer Griffin:

So does the mutual defense treaty that you've signed with the Philippines require the US to come to Philippines aid if the Chinese continue harassing their ships and maybe even sink one of those ships or kill some of their service members?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, as our politicians work through that and military defense tree, there are aspects that as we work through defense and our support to Philippines continues part of their conversation when I was there in the Philippines meeting with their national advisor, their Secretary of National Defense and my counterpart, our relationship continues to bill and the minimum continues to bill and our support if the mutual defense tree is ever called up upon is going to be there.

Jennifer Griffin:

There are a number of authors here who have written recently about a potential flashpoint over Taiwan. We have David Sanger, he's written New Cold Wars, Demetri El Pervi and Garrett G. Graff has written World on the Brink. Matt Pottinger and his Hoover Institute staff have written the boiling moat. I do not recommend these for bedtime reading if you have any anxiety, but the question is, can the US win a war against China if Beijing tries to take Taiwan from your military perspective?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Yes, I'm fully confident in our force. I am fully confident in our force. You should be too. We, we are the most lethal, most respected combat force in the world, and every nation I go to wants to be like us. We got to be a role model now. It's going to take all the nation. If we go to conflict with the PRC and I'm confident if we're challenged, we will be there. And I have full confidence in our service members.

Jennifer Griffin:

Rear Admiral Mark Montgomery was the responsible for strategic planning at Paycom. He's gone through six war games over this kind of scenario and he says, and I think it's widely agreed, that in the first month there could be 30,000 American dead. If this were to happen and that maybe Americans don't realize there will be no golden hour, there will be no rescue aircraft, carriers will be sunk. 3000 people lost at a time. The distances very different from any other war that we've been involved in. And yet there's also a new report from Japan, from the Japanese government suggesting that the assumption that you'd have a month to respond and build up that President Xi may have taken some lessons from President Putin's invasion of Ukraine to move quickly. And that new Japanese report suggests that China, based on the

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exercises last year that they saw that they plan to take Taiwan in a week, not a month. What would that do to US military planning and is that a fair assessment? Is that an accurate assessment?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, let me, if I could, I would address maybe what Admiral Montgomery did say, and I'll tell you that if you go back four years ago when I became the Air Force Chief of staff, I wrote Accelerate Exchanger Lose. If you go back and look at it, I said pretty much the same thing. The future conflict is not like the conflicts we've been having for the past 30 years. These will be major conflicts akin to what we saw in World War ii. And so we've got to come to grips with that one two, the PRC knows where our advantages are and the combat capability we can bring to bear. And my sense is they'll want to go quick so they can do it before we can bring capability there, which is why we were focused on the capabilities that we have for it, how we look at our logistics change well before any type of conflict. As the Air Force Chief of Staff, my last major conference with my leadership back in June, we did a logistics tabletop exercise and then I wrote a letter to the chairman knowing I was nominated to be the chairman waiting to get confirmed. So it was really a letter to myself

That we need to focus on logistics. And so what I've been working with with my J four, my director for logistics, is additional tabletop exercise to really ring this out. The more we can show that we can get there fast is greater deterrence.

Jennifer Griffin:

Matt Pottinger and many of the former president's advisors have said that Taiwan is not buying the right weapons. Former President Trump himself said this week, Taiwan needs to spend more on its defense indicating he may not defend Taiwan. Do you agree that Taiwan needs to spend more on its defense and what are you doing to make sure that they buy the right weapons?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, we're engaged with Taiwan on their future procurement. Procurement they've already had in place, but also weapon systems that will make them very effective in the defense. The thing that I've seen over the past several years is that the character warfare has changed, the nature hasn't changed. It's a test against Wills political will, but just the fact when you look at technology and you look at the use of drones, you look at the use of cyber, all these other factors that come into play that it not be the high-end capability that we're used to using, but a mix of capability that can create a greater defense for Taiwan and make them a much tougher target and much more challenging for the PRC.

Jennifer Griffin:

Let's turn back to the Middle East next week. The Iraqi leadership is coming to negotiate whether the US troops will be able to stay in Iraq. What would happen if US troops were forced to leave Iraq? There's

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indications that ISIS is there are twice as many attacks in Iraq and Syria by ISIS this year alone is ISIS reconstituting?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, part of the reason why we're there is why we went back in 2014 was to defeat ISIS and I had a firsthand piece of that as the air command commander, but also a deputy commander United States Central Command as we defeated ISIS. The key part is not letting that resurgence occur and our ability to as the Coalition for operation inherent resolved to continue, but then transition to a bilateral relationship and to continue to have the relationship with the Iraqis as well as the other nations that have relationships with the Iraqis to maintain the security there. At the same time, we're paying attention to ISIS there that emanates out of Syrian in other parts of the Middle East.

Jennifer Griffin:

So if the US were forced to pull out, what impact would that have? You'd have to pull out of Syria also

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Correct. It would've impact on our ability to actually put pressure on ISIS and we'd have to look at how we would do it in different ways. Part of our job is to be able to flex and we'll continue to plan and provide options to the president and the secretary if any decision comes one way or one direction or another.

Jennifer Griffin:

It's been said that Iran has never won a war and never lost a negotiation and that it will fight to the last proxy for the first time in months. Iranian proxies have targeted US base in Iraq. What do you make of the timing of those attacks?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, there's a couple things I make of is we watched after, before seven October, our forces were very rarely getting attacked, and then after seven October of last year, a lot of attacks on our bases. We spent a lot of time and effort making sure we were doing the force protection. Unfortunately, we lost three service members back on the 28th of January and as a result we had a pretty strong response back. And so the last time before just recently was about seven February, so it's been almost six, seven months now since the last time we were attacked. Those proxies have been chomping at the bit to be able to strike against them. Every once in a while they'll do something kind of a one-off. I don't see this as them breaking away from the guidance that they've somewhat from Iran not to attack us.

Jennifer Griffin:

Maybe it's a little message before negotiating in Washington on Monday.

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General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Could be. I don't know. The key part is we're going to continue to defend ourselves and then we're going to respond appropriately at a time and place of our choosing.

Jennifer Griffin:

Secretary Blinken just told the forum that it's still US policy is stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, but he also said that they're one to two weeks away from breakout. Are you prepared to stop Iran militarily? If they decide to pursue and breakout?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

We have options to do so. Okay. We stay ready.

Jennifer Griffin:

Alright. How worried are you that America's adversaries will become adventurous after November 5th or even in this unstable timeframe of raucous election if US elections are contested or one party doesn't accept the results, some have called it an invitation to conflict. How are you preparing for that?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Well, I'm looking at this day in and day out, not November, not January, not February. I mean I'm looking at last week. What I mean by that is if you look at our national defense and national Security strategy, there are five key challenges outlined in those documents. Peoples of the public of China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and violent extremists, all of them are active right now and in some areas working together. And so my day-to-day focus, no matter what day it is, is to ensure we are best prepared for any one of those that might create a challenge for us.

Jennifer Griffin:

Before we go, I need to ask you, when was the last time that you met in person with President Biden and how was he mentally?

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

I last met with him, that was last week. And let me just say that I realize there's a lot of debate and I don't want to get into debate. My job is to provide advice to the president, secret Defense, national Security Councils, and the rest of our national security apparatus. And on all the times I've engaged with the president, he's been engaged, he's asked very pointed questions and made decisions and I'll just leave it at that.

Jennifer Griffin:

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We have about a minute left. Do we have time for one question? If we maybe from one of the, anybody. Don't be shy,

Question 1:

Sir. What do you see as the greatest emerging threat you would like to train your troops to that they're not

General CQ Brown, Jr.:

Currently? I think I just named all five of them. I mean, I'm serious. I mean, part of this is expect the unexpected. This is exactly why when I wrote the memo on two October the second day, I was as the chairman holding our water fighting skill has primacy in all we do. I want our service members to be so focused on their individual skillset, how they bring that individual skill together as a team in their units. How we bring together as a joint force, how we do it with our allies and partners. We exist to fight and win our nation's worse. That's why we exist. We don't want to be so good at what we do that our adversaries never want to mess with us. And if they do, we want to be the worst nightmare. Personally and professionally. I do not play for second place. I mean, I play to win and I'm going to do everything I can to make sure it's an unfair fight. That's my focus. And so we got to stay nimble on this kind of look long. And that's the other thing I try to look at is how do I want to be more proactive than reactive? Okay. I do not want to be surprised. The only time I like a surprise is on my birthday and Christmas.

Okay. I'm really focused on how do we stay ahead of these things and make sure we're doing everything we can to be ready and be ready when the nation calls.

Jennifer Griffin:

Thank you to the Aspen Security Forum, and thank you General Brown for your excellent comments today. Thank you.