

Anja Manuel ([00:00](#)):

... General David Berger, who, of course, is the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, and George, maybe you can ask your question again this time but General Berger and Courtney Kube, if you want to join us up here please, thank you.

Anja Manuel ([00:22](#)):

General Berger assumed the duties of Commandant of the Marine Corps in 2019, and he has commanded our forces at every level, including, of course, the 1st Marine Division Forward in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom and many, many other locations. He's a great soldier and a great patriot. And we have interviewing him, one of the most experienced journalists in Pentagon and defense affairs, NBC News Correspondent covering the Department of Defense, Courtney Kube. So we'll let you take it from there. Thank you both.

Courtney Kobe ([00:57](#)):

Thank you. Thanks very much, Anya, and thank you all for ... Oh wow, I'm really loud with this mic on. Thank you all for being here. I want to start where this event actually started yesterday and that was with my colleague, Lester Holt, talking to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Mark Milley. They talked a lot about China and one thing that I was surprised to hear from General Milley about was it seemed as if he shortened the timeline for the possibility of some sort of a conflict, some sort of China potentially moving on Taiwan. What is your assessment of it? You have spent more than half your career in the Indo-Pacific, what is your assessment of what China is going to do with Taiwan and when?

General David Berger ([01:50](#)):

Probably two ways to look at that, one, when will they have the capabilities relative to whoever they think is going to try to stop them and the second part would be the will, the willingness to do it, two different parts to that answer. I think it's pretty clear that President Xi is on a path to get the capabilities in place sooner, not later, not willing to wait until 2049 but faster. As far as the timing, the willingness, I don't have that crystal ball and I think it's a combination, as it always is in international relations, it's a combination of things inside China and things outside China that will drive that. Long way of saying I think I would agree with the Chairman, though our role in the military side is to make sure relative ... In the military sense, we don't make it easy for them sooner.

Courtney Kobe ([02:45](#)):

What about ... I know that you obviously are Commandant of the Marine Corps but you are a member of the Joint Chiefs. How would you assess that the U.S. military is postured in the region? Are they well-postured for the potential for some sort of a conflict and if not, what else does the military have, whether it's move forward, is it personnel, is it equipment, what else needs to be done so that they are ready in the region? I know that's a big question.

General David Berger ([03:10](#)):

No, that's okay. If you interpret posture meaning where are our forces, our bases, our forces, then I would say, since the end of the Korean Conflict, we've been postured very well to prevent another Korean conflict. If you look from California across the ocean towards the peninsula, it's designed to make sure we can get forces there fast, stop anything from happening pretty quickly. So it was intended

to be there quickly and to prevent another ... Any other conflict on the peninsula and that has contributed to just that.

General David Berger ([03:49](#)):

That's not the only or main threat perhaps going forward, so most, me included, would say we need to adjust that posture. It needs to be more distributed, more spread out for a couple of reasons. One, militarily, we need to be always in a position where we can best deter and then if something goes wrong, where we can respond pretty quickly, but it's a bigger problem set than the peninsula. So, obviously, the posture, the lay down, the bases and stations will have to ... We need to adjust that, but the second part, I think, which is harder, perhaps, for some to get their brain around is where do you need to be relative to your allies and partners. Sometimes they are the same answer. Sometimes there're two different lenses to look through.

General David Berger ([04:38](#)):

I think our posture needs to be a defense in depth more than a line drawn from California to the Korean Peninsula. Now, it becomes much more of a defense in depth, much more of a spread out, distributed footprint but the difference probably being in concert with the allies and partners that are in the region and factor in what's best for them as well.

Courtney Kobe ([05:05](#)):

One thing you've said in the past is that it's important that the military, should there be some sort of a conflict with China, it would most likely be regional, at least at the beginning, right? It would be happening right there near China but you've said in the past that it's important not to have to fight your way in but to be there all the time and I'm curious if you think that ... I mean again, does that mean that there needs to be ... The Pentagon's in the midst of this global posture review of deciding whether there needs to be more forces in the region and I think there's pretty good assumption that there will be some sort of a request for some more forces in the Indo-Pacific region but what is your assessment of that? Do you think it needs to actually be a relatively large influx of additional personnel and where specifically in the region do you think they should go?

General David Berger ([05:57](#)):

When you're trying to match your posture with a strategy, I think you have to do it with an understanding of what the PRCs strategy is. Theirs is an active defense on the PLA and on the military side, it's an active defense. So, our approach, we can take one of two approaches, either match that symmetrically, force on force, surface on surface. I would not recommend that. Or you can take more of a maneuverist approach and say don't play to their strengths, don't counter head-on-head but actually take on their gray zone strategy. Don't allow them to expand in the coercive way that they're doing right now. You need to be prepared with a capable force, I think, to match what they may throw at you but the mistake would be matching symmetrically head-on-head exclusively, trying to match surface-on-surface.

General David Berger ([06:51](#)):

We need to find the gaps, create the gaps. I think it is a forward force, for sure, but it can't be the big heavy footprint that some host nations can't ... They can't tolerate politically or otherwise. So I think it has to be lighter on the footprint that goes ashore, more maritime, more air, that's the kind of theater that that lends itself to.

Courtney Kobe ([07:17](#)):

Do you think that, right now, the U.S. military is equally matched with China or do you think the U.S. military, right now, still has any kind of a strategic advantage over China?

General David Berger ([07:30](#)):

We have a strategic advantage. I mean, obviously, the PLA, their goal is to close that as rapidly as they can. The advantages we have, we have some regimes, some domains where we have a technological advantage. We have a training advantage. We have an advantage in that we have history, 20 years of operating as a joint force, we have all that going in our favor. The biggest advantage, I believe, today and going forward is the individual. That's the big individual.

Courtney Kobe ([08:02](#)):

That the U.S. has over China, the individual?

General David Berger ([08:03](#)):

Clearly, absolutely yes.

Courtney Kobe ([08:05](#)):

So that actually ... You made a little news this week with your new talent management report that focuses more on the individual, which is really a cultural change for the Marine Corps. I mean you don't necessarily think of the Marines as when you're in the Marine Corps, you are part of the corps, you are part of a group, you are not an individual Marine and it seems as if you're trying to change that with this new ... Is that a fair assessment and I'm wondering if you think ... Who do you think you might get resistance from about this cultural change?

General David Berger ([08:39](#)):

The inside, the soul, the kind of character inside Marines won't change, that doesn't change but what has changed, clearly, is a couple things. One is what we think Marines will have to do to operate in a really complicated, not just technological but in a lot of ways, a different environment than we had to in the past. I grew up operating only exclusively focused on military, that was it. That's all you needed to worry about. But the way that countries like the PRC are expanding, you have to now understand a wider breadth of things than I ever did. So we have to develop that talent.

General David Berger ([09:21](#)):

The second part of it is we have to keep that talent, which we didn't really worry about before, we just brought a young Marines, young high school graduates and college graduates in and then four years later, got another batch of new ones. That's not going to meet what we have to do going forward. Every Marine that goes through basic training still puts themselves at the bottom and the unit, the mission way above that but we, as an institution, I have to ... We have to look at each individual and find out how to use their talents better, how to keep them in the Marine Corps, because there's competition for them.

Courtney Kobe ([10:00](#)):

So, you want to build an older Marine Corps is what it comes down to, instead of being the youngest force, you might have-

General David Berger ([10:06](#)):

I think it will absolutely be a little bit more mature, for sure, yes.

Courtney Kobe ([10:11](#)):

And that is due in large part to the need to retain Marines who have certain capabilities, right?

General David Berger ([10:17](#)):

Right.

Courtney Kobe ([10:19](#)):

One of the other things I was really struck by in this new talent management report from you is the idea of an extended parental leave.

General David Berger ([10:29](#)):

Yeah.

Courtney Kobe ([10:30](#)):

Up to a year for parental leave for Marines?

General David Berger ([10:33](#)):

Yeah.

Courtney Kobe ([10:33](#)):

Do you think you'll actually get that enacted?

General David Berger ([10:35](#)):

I don't know, and obviously, it won't be my decision but I'm trying to drive ourselves to help the Department of Defense become competitive in a competition for talent outside the military. So we have to keep pace with that. We have to keep pace with that when it comes to salaries and when it comes to benefits. If we don't, it's going to be hard for us to keep the people in the military when they can look outside and go, you're not even close.

General David Berger ([11:04](#)):

We talk pretty frequently in the military about trying to avoid the fork in the road, like you've asked me before, between I can either have a successful career or I can have a family. I don't see a way where I can have both. We have to find a way where, yes, you can have both.

Courtney Kobe ([11:22](#)):

Yeah, I read this interesting article from Council on Foreign Relations. It was from April, and it said the Marine Corps is not equipped, trained, or organized to fulfill the role in the Joint Force and they must be fundamentally redesigned and that's something that you've actually really taken on over the last couple years as the Commandant with your Force Design 2030 and that focuses less on land operations, more on this maritime environment, potential contested maritime environment and expeditionary force. I wonder if, this is a smart audience here, but I'm wondering if you can explain to us in very simple terms

how the Marine Corps of the future will look different than the one today based on your Force Management 2030?

General David Berger ([12:09](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Different than today? It will be a little, age wise and maturity wise, it'll be beyond what we have today. Each person will have multiple skillsets, not one. We'll teach them or we'll train them in a different way than we do today. Why? Because we learn at different paces. We have to match that the same way that colleges and everybody else does but we're stuck still in the all of us are going to show up for the same course on the same day and we're all going to graduate on the same day and learn at the same pace. We need to move on beyond that.

General David Berger ([12:49](#)):

I think, certainly, we'll have different equipment but the way that we'll operate will be much more distributed, much more dispersed, which means each individual leader has to be able to make decisions at a higher level than they do today. In other words, the decisions that a lieutenant colonel makes today, I think, entirely feasible in six, seven, eight years, a captain will be making the same decisions. Why? Because they'll have the capability and we will have trained them to a higher level and they'll have the repetitions, the maturity to make them.

Courtney Kobe ([13:22](#)):

So, I mean this ... It's a pretty big sea change from the Marine Corps of the past to where you're going forward.

General David Berger ([13:29](#)):

Yeah.

Courtney Kobe ([13:29](#)):

I mean, again, who do you think you're going to face resistance on these changes?

General David Berger ([13:34](#)):

Well, rightfully so, I think some of my peers and retired Marines, they should ask me, are you sure? Before you make such a fundamental change, before the Marines Corps mows in this direction, are you sure? What's the risks? And there are always risks. I think there're risks in any private organization that makes fundamental changes to make sure they're competitive in the future. It's not without risk but it's not a gamble either. So, I think it is, rightfully so, those who grew up in the Marine Corps understand how it was so successful in the past, and it was, and my job, I think my role is to paint a picture for what the future operating environment is going to look like and why we have to be in front of that, not behind it.

Courtney Kobe ([14:19](#)):

And the future operating environment being potential for conflict with China or Russia and less emphasis on terror, right? On a counter-terror fight?

General David Berger ([14:28](#)):

Yes, switching from a land force to a maritime force, a refocusing on being the crisis response force for the nation that we were intended to be.

Courtney Kobe ([14:39](#)):

Are you worried that some people will look at you as the commandant who created the kinder, gentler Marine Corps?

General David Berger ([14:46](#)):

I don't think so. I understand the logic behind the question, I do. There is no less a demand, I don't think, going forward for the toughness, the physical parts of being a Marine, the perseverance, the need to be able to operate in really austere environments where there's not a Starbucks and there's not pallets of food and everything getting flown in. There's none of that. You have to be able to operate with nothing and survive and operate and win. That part's not going to change at all.

Courtney Kobe ([15:23](#)):

I want to turn to COVID. The latest numbers out just this morning for the Marine Corps have somewhere in the neighborhood of about 13,000 active duty Marines who have not yet been vaccinated. In some cases, they may not have recorded their vaccine status. They have until November 28th for all active duty Marines but that's still a pretty good chunk of people who haven't been vaccinated. Are you concerned about that, that they ... And can you give us any sense of how many of these 13,000 may be refusing to get it as opposed to just not haven gotten theirs yet?

General David Berger ([15:55](#)):

Yeah, clearly there are some who, like you know, some who have submitted across all the services for either a religious or a medical waiver and those are being actually answered pretty quickly within a week they'll get an answer back. Very few have been granted. The ones who flat out refuse, I would ... You have to ask each individual Marine their reasons why but I think we're challenged by disinformation 12 months ago that swirls around about where the genesis ... How did this vaccine get approved? Is it safe? Is it ethical? All that swirls around on the internet and they read all that. They see all that. They're very, very well-informed.

General David Berger ([16:41](#)):

Am I concerned about it? Yeah. I'm concerned about it because we have to be ready to go every day, all the time. Every Marine has to be ready to deploy. We are trained, we're taught that your unit is more important than you are, so our focus has to be on you need to get the vaccine to take care of your self, your unit, your family. I mean we are the ready force. We have to be ready to go.

Courtney Kobe ([17:08](#)):

And the Marine Corps Reserve numbers are pretty low, 56% have been fully vaccinated. They have almost two months, the end of December before ... But I mean that's a pretty big number, nearly half of the Marines in the reserves still have to be vaccinated. Are you ... Is the Corps going to do anything to encourage this or what will you do over the next few weeks?

General David Berger ([17:30](#)):

Reserve, each month typically, most months, they come together to train. So the numbers that we track, it's really difficult to track because they may have gotten a vaccine last week, we wouldn't have known. Are we still concerned? Yeah, absolutely, because they're spread across, of course, all of America. Getting them vaccinated is ... We are one Marine Corps, active duty and reserves, so it's important for them to get vaccinated as well. We are concerned, though, about the disparity, the difference between active duty and reserve. That's got to close. We got to catch up.

Courtney Kobe ([18:04](#)):

And it's that way across all of the services-

General David Berger ([18:05](#)):

Yeah, absolutely is.

Courtney Kobe ([18:06](#)):

... the guard and reserve. The Marine Corps issued a MARADMIN on October 21st that I was pretty struck by and it said that Marines refusing to get the vaccination will be processed for administrative separation. It also talked about delaying promotions. Anyone who refuses it will be ... May not serve in command. They'll be processed for administrative separation and even potentially face a general court marshal if deemed appropriate.

Courtney Kobe ([18:29](#)):

We had heard when Secretary Austin made the decision to make the vaccine mandatory, there was a lot of talk at The Pentagon how this was going to be. There would be a counseling and they were going to have a very supportive approach to members of the military who didn't want to get it right away but it seems like the Marine Corps is taking a pretty tough approach with that MARADMIN. Is that the case? Do you think that you are taking a ... I guess it was issued by General Furness but he does work for you, do you think you're taking a tougher approach with Marines to make sure that they get ... And I'm curious what potential ... I mean let's ... At least 13,000, this could affect readiness. Are you really prepared to administratively separate potentially thousands of Marines over this?

General David Berger ([19:11](#)):

I don't think it will be thousands of Marines. We'll have to wait until the end of November to see. The approach we took is take all the ambiguity out of it. All of it. It's black and white from the Secretary of Defense, we need to protect ourselves. So we wrote that instruction to make it clear all the way down. There is no gray area. You must get vaccinated. If you don't have an exemption, if you don't have a waiver, you must get vaccinated, which, I mean Marines understand, so do soldiers and sailors. We have to get, just to get through bootcamp, you've got to get 12 vaccinations. I mean this is not new. So, for us, just take all the gray out of it, all the confusion out of it, just black and white. You need to get vaccinated. Secretary of Defense, it's a lawful order, you need to get vaccinated.

Courtney Kobe ([19:57](#)):

And do you have any sense yet of how many may potentially be refusing already? I know they have a couple more weeks but ...

General David Berger ([20:04](#)):

We do but it's changing every day, partly because you're a younger force and they wait to see how the leaders do and then when the leaders do, then they get in line quickly. So, I think it's really hard to predict because it's not a straight line between now and the end of November.

Courtney Kobe ([20:22](#)):

I want to ask a little bit about Russia. They have been ... Russian troops and equipment have been spreading out along the border with Ukraine. There seems to be an increasing amount of concern about that at The Pentagon. They're certainly watching it. What is your sense about what Russia's doing?

General David Berger ([20:38](#)):

Yeah. I think Russia ... We watch the exercises that they do, of course, year-round, just like the other competitors that the U.S. has. When they leave their forces in place after an exercise, it gets everybody's attention because normally, they would go home. When they don't, when they just stay along the border, okay, we're paying attention and that's what's happening now. It could be a couple of things. Of course, it could be a preparation for something, which is what we always have to anticipate. That's the hardest case, so what we have to be prepared for that. It could be rehearsal for something later on. It also could be a test. It's a way of poking your adversary just to see what they do to measure their response.

General David Berger ([21:26](#)):

So, I think that General Wolters, the Commander in EUCOM, is calibrating a response to make sure that they know we're serious but not overreact either because if it is a push to see how the U.S. responds, you respond proportionally, nothing more, nothing less.

Courtney Kobe ([21:45](#)):

How is the U.S. responding to it? I mean we've heard ... I think General Milley spoke about it a little bit yesterday. He said it was pretty significant buildup but then he didn't say that he thought that it meant that Russia was about to invade Ukraine.

General David Berger ([21:58](#)):

Here, I think, the physical parts, of course, is General Wolters making sure that the forces are ready if needed and he were asked to direct it to that they could respond, and they are. They're ready. The second part, I think, is the messaging that we don't see in the open press between nations, what are you doing? Here's what we're doing? In other words, the communication that's not in the open channels, equally important, between any great power, us-China, us-Russia, that's really critical.

Courtney Kobe ([22:32](#)):

Do you have communications with your Russian counterpart? Is that ... Do you have phone calls or-

General David Berger ([22:36](#)):

No.

Courtney Kobe ([22:37](#)):

Nothing like that? It's just on the General Milley level? Yeah.



General David Berger ([22:41](#)):

I don't know. I know that General Milley does. I don't know the CNO, Chief of Staff of the Army, Air Force, I don't know that they do or don't. I don't know. We have talked about it but I've never asked him that question.

Courtney Kobe ([22:54](#)):

I also want to touch on Afghanistan. Anya mentioned that you, of course, served in Afghanistan. What are you ... Let me start with you, the withdrawal, a lot has been made of the withdrawal and how chaotic it was and the impact that it had on service members and veterans. What was it like for you as somebody who served there to watch it and particularly, I mean, of course, there was the deadly attack, Marines were killed at Abbey Gate, but then there were also all these Afghans who were left behind, all these years? I mean Afghanistan's a very personal war for a lot of Marines, Sangin and Marjah, I mean there were extremely deadly periods for the Marine Corps in Afghanistan. What was that like to watch that withdrawal for you?

General David Berger ([23:43](#)):

I won't speak for other senior leaders, they can plenty well speak for themselves. We learn to compartmentalize. So, for me, I parked that off to the side. For me, who were we sending into the airport to set up this evacuation? Do they have what they need? Is there tactical support in place? Do the command relationships make sense? Don't worry about the politics. Don't worry about the legacy, the history, park that off to the side. Only focus on what that commander at HKIA, at that airport, what do they need and are we doing our job as Joint Chiefs to make sure that it's setup right as best we can for success.

General David Berger ([24:30](#)):

Longer term, I think when you look over your shoulder through a historical lens, then you can, with a little distance, then you can start to weigh things and my experience is, when it's this close, sometimes emotion and a lot of other things get in the way of making sure we can make the right decisions, helping the Secretary of Defense, the President, have good options. So I park all that off to the side.

Courtney Kobe ([24:54](#)):

It's been about 10 weeks or so, a little over two months now, since the complete withdrawal. Have any Marines in your travels when you meet with Marines, have any of them brought up to you how they felt about it and are you ... Has there been any sense that it's had a real impact on the emotional health or the mental health of Marines?

General David Berger ([25:14](#)):

They have. Not an awful lot but Marines are not bashful and several have asked Sergeant Major and I, I mean point blank, is this worth it that I deployed? Was this worth it? And you're really grateful that they have the willingness to ask that question of a senior leader and they should. I think it's absolutely a fair ... They're wrestling with ... It tells you they're wrestling with it inside, right? And they just want ... They want some help trying to wrestle that to the ground.

General David Berger ([25:47](#)):

I don't hesitate. I tell them absolutely yes. I ask them, "What did you do there?" "I was a platoon sergeant," or "I was a company commander." "Did you feel like you made a difference?" "Yeah." "Okay. Then you can sleep. When you put your head on your pillow, you should feel good about what you did because you absolutely made a difference." In the bigger scheme of things, that's for somebody else to sort out.

General David Berger ([26:10](#)):

So, I think a long way of saying when you're a senior leader, part of our job, I think, is to make sure that those that were involved in Afghanistan or Iraq, they know that what they did was good, made a difference, all that stuff and do not lose any sleep. Don't wrestle with politically, at a higher level, is this going to work? Don't worry about that. Did you save lives? Did you make some family's life better? Yeah, absolutely. No question.

Courtney Kobe ([26:40](#)):

It's possible, if the U.S. decides to recognize the Taliban and actually open an embassy there, that would mean Marines back in Afghanistan. How would you feel about that if the administration were to come to you and say we want to open an embassy in Kabul again? Would you support sending Marines there as MSGs?

General David Berger ([26:58](#)):

I'm trying to remember when it was when we reopened the embassy in 2000- somebody in the room will know, '03 or '04?

Speaker 4 ([27:08](#)):

Three.

General David Berger ([27:10](#)):

Three? It was 2003, right?

Speaker 4 ([27:11](#)):

Yes, sir.

General David Berger ([27:12](#)):

Yeah.

Courtney Kobe ([27:13](#)):

See, I told you this was a smart group.

General David Berger ([27:16](#)):

And the only reason I'm bringing that up is that year, I was the commander down in Camp Lejeune and it was 4th Anti-terrorism Brigade. We were part of that unit and one of my companies was a company that reopened the embassy in Kabul.

Courtney Kobe ([27:32](#)):

Oh wow.

General David Berger ([27:32](#)):

So, I fly over there to visit them because they're doing just a great job. I mean this is kind of off your question a bit, I was struck by the whole embassy. It's like its frozen in time. Like they closed the doors and it's like preserved. Magazines, newspapers from a decade, 15 years before. Marines cleaning up, getting ready for the ambassador. If that happens in two years or 12 years, same thing will happen. Marines will go there, we'll open the embassy back up. We'll put Marine guards at post one in dress blues and we'll start all over. It's what we do.

Courtney Kobe ([28:09](#)):

Could you see that happening anytime soon?

General David Berger ([28:12](#)):

I don't know. I really can't answer ... I don't know.

Courtney Kobe ([28:14](#)):

Yeah. I want to leave some time for questions. I'm sure there are a lot of questions in the audience. Let me do one more before we get to that but start thinking of your questions now. One more about, I guess, the state of the Marine Corps. There was a Marine lieutenant colonel who made a bunch of headlines over the summer for speaking out very vocally on social media about the withdrawal from Afghanistan and ultimately, offering to resign his commission over the way that it was done and calling for accountability. Again, I wonder, in your travels, in your meeting with younger Marines, if you hear that same kind of sentiment from Marines? Not necessarily that they're going on social media or Facebook and talking about it but do they ask you, is anyone going to be held accountable for the way that the U.S. left and the chaotic nature of it?

General David Berger ([29:06](#)):

I have not personally. That doesn't mean they haven't had that discussion but nobody has asked me why didn't you quit, why didn't the Chairman quit, why didn't somebody get fired? Nobody has asked me that question, no. But that doesn't mean that they haven't thought it but to answer your question, no, no one has asked me that.

Courtney Kobe ([29:28](#)):

All right, I want to take a few questions from the audience. I think there're microphones some place. Oh good, there's one. Do we have any questions? If not, I can keep going. Oh, right there.

Aidan Quigley ([29:45](#)):

Hi, it's Aidan Quigley from Inside Defense. Thank you for your time. My question's on Force Design. I'm wondering what the biggest lesson you've learned in the past year of Force Design has been and what your top priorities are for the next year of Force Design?

General David Berger ([30:00](#)):

Probably the biggest thing we've learned, probably two or three things, one, the value of war gaming and experimentation and learning fast, as fast as we can. Speed matters right now and there's going to

be risk in doing that but we have a way to do that logically. Second part, I think the value of, as Ms. Kube pointed out, the value of that forward kind of stand-in force, that forward force that the U.S. has, in terms of doing what we would call reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance or scouting and counter-scouting, basically trying to get a picture of what's in front of you and trying to prevent them from doing the same, huge value going forward.

General David Berger ([30:45](#)):

Lastly, third part, not lastly but the third if you were to ask me what's the third, the challenge of logistics. In a contested environment, which means they're trying to prevent you from logistically sustaining your units, that's hard, really hard. We have had protected logistics for decades. We don't assume that going forward.

Courtney Kobe ([31:10](#)):

You mean you assume that ... Again, let's talk about the potential for some sort of a conflict with China, you think that you would have a situation where they would cut off your lines of communication, stop logistics from getting forward to the region?

General David Berger ([31:23](#)):

There's a number of ways to slow down your adversary. One of them is to ... It doesn't have to be sinking ships. In other words, there's lots of different ways where we can slow down each other. Could be through offensive cyber actions. Could be in another way but we assume they will try to make it very difficult for us to logistically sustain a very distributed force. We're going to do the same to them. We're not going to make it easy for them, any adversary. You're going to make it very difficult for them.

Courtney Kobe ([31:55](#)):

Do you think that would include trying to take out communication satellites?

General David Berger ([31:57](#)):

It's possible, absolutely.

Courtney Kobe ([32:00](#)):

Right here.

Megan Eckstein ([32:07](#)):

Good afternoon, sir. Megan Eckstein with Defense News. Speaking of logistics, sort of globally right now, we're obviously seeing a lot of issues with goods being stuck on shipping barges and raw materials not making their way to factories where they're needed and I wonder to what extent you're seeing that affect the Marine Corps or any of your prime contractors. I know there's a lot of acquisition happening right now, so I wonder if you're feeling the effects of this in any way?

General David Berger ([32:31](#)):

Yes, feeling the effects. No, it hasn't, in a large way, affected readiness but we have definitely ... I think the whole Department of Defense and especially the military, A, a real attention, a real focus on the industrial base and supply chains and the fragility aspects of some parts, absolutely a lot of discussion that I don't remember happening two years ago, now it is. And we're talking about parts that are made

in one manufacturer in one town or one overseas ... One place that make it single point of failure. So there's a lot of discussion that I don't remember happening before. That's a good thing in terms of education, understanding, having multiple supply chains parallel rather than single.

General David Berger ([33:20](#)):

It has not negatively affected us in a great way but clearly we have a much clearer picture now from big platform down to small component, every step of the way, we have a much clearer picture now than we did before. I will offer just one example. Earlier this week, went up to York, Pennsylvania where they make some of Marine Corps' amphibious vehicles and Army vehicles in York. It won't surprise you. When I asked them the same question, like what's the big challenges? Labor. That fast. Like labor. And some of the components, some of the materials, but labor, really fast. It's a production line, it's a factory and labor is everything there and they went on to explain four or five aspects of that, fascinating to me. This is a part I have to understand as a service chief, that's why I went there.

Courtney Kobe ([34:19](#)):

Any other questions? I'll keep going if not. I actually want to go a little bit further into the supply chain issue and more specifically about concerns about back to China, China, how ... When you're war gaming, how do you factor in the possibility that China will be able to cut off your supplies, the people moving forward and do you see that, again, in these war games with a potential conflict with China, do you see that conflict remaining there in the region or beginning to spill out here? I guess could it potentially be some kind of a conflict that would end up coming here when you're going through these war games? Like does that eventuality ever happen?

General David Berger ([35:14](#)):

Probably part of the goodness of war games ... Let me paint it a different way. Sometimes, in the past, war games have been the fight starts on Tuesday, what do both sides do? Okay, and that's very helpful from one perspective. Equally or more perhaps helpful is what happened the 60 days before that, the six months before that. If you take a country like China and what some would call the gray zone competition, below conflict in other words, we have to focus there. We have to get the things in place then, not symmetrically, not force-on-force but actually lay the groundwork for how we're going to work in that environment every day, build the supply chains you're talking about way before day one. So that on day one, you're not single point of failure anymore, not that.

General David Berger ([36:11](#)):

So, now, I'm watching more of the war games focus on the front end, which I think is very, very helpful to us. It illuminates the challenges that aren't as easy to talk about as big blue and red arrows going at each other but it's actually, in some cases, it determines how the outcome is long beforehand.

Courtney Kobe ([36:32](#)):

What about North Korea? A couple years ago, actually at the Aspen Forum, I feel like we were talking so much about North Korea and now we barely even discuss it. What do you see as the threat from North Korea right now? What do you think that they're doing? I mean they're not really testing as much anymore and when they are, they certainly aren't ICBMs. What's your assessment?

General David Berger ([36:53](#)):

Boy, if somebody in the room has that crystal ball, right?

Courtney Kobe ([36:58](#)):

In this room, they probably do. There probably is someone who does.

General David Berger ([37:01](#)):

Perhaps the most opaque country that we have to deal with. What are they doing? Well, I really don't know. I do know we have to treat them with a serious approach because they have serious capabilities and are moving beyond what they have had in the past. That you have to address right upfront. The difference is, of course, the proximity for South Korea and North Korea makes it a whole different problem set. So, long way of saying I think you have to be very strong against North Korea. You cannot give ... The deterrence factor that's held for 70 years has to be just as strong going forward. You can't back away from that. Where they're going, I don't know.

Courtney Kobe ([37:48](#)):

Are there any new capabilities that you're aware of that we don't know that haven't been made public that you could share?

General David Berger ([37:57](#)):

That they may have or they're developing?

Courtney Kobe ([37:57](#)):

That they're developing, yeah.

General David Berger ([38:02](#)):

Their development of cruise missiles clearly is not new but it's on a path to take them to a level they don't have right now that should concern us, absolutely, both in terms of range and the missiles themselves and the trajectory those missiles, all that should concern us, yeah.

Courtney Kobe ([38:22](#)):

How about Iran ... Oh, sorry, go ahead. I'll just keep going if you don't raise your hand. Flag me down.

Speaker 7 ([38:30](#)):

I won't stand because of the camera. This is [inaudible 00:38:33] American Defense. Has the U.S. Marine Corps ever done joint exercises with their Chinese counterparts in, let's say, the recent past? If so, what did you learn from that and do you think that reengaging if you've stopped would actually be good for relationships?

General David Berger ([38:56](#)):

Not to my knowledge, no. If we have, not to my knowledge at all. The Taiwan Marines I have worked with for decades but not the PLAN, no.

Courtney Kobe ([39:06](#)):

I don't know if it's allowed under the NDAA, I'm not even sure if it's legal for joint mil to mil with China and [inaudible 00:39:13].

General David Berger ([39:14](#)):

I can recall in my past, not operating together but going on each other's ships at different times, like their admirals visiting our ships and ours visiting theirs but not in a training exercise that I can recall at all. I would not recommend it, no.

Speaker 7 ([39:30](#)):

But we do have joint space programs, I think. But I'm just curious as to-

General David Berger ([39:41](#)):

On the pure military side, none that I know of. No.

Courtney Kobe ([39:45](#)):

One quick one on Iran, with this increased focus on maritime environment, that's one place where the U.S. really does come in direct contact with Iran relatively frequently. I mean how do you see the Marine Corps playing into some sort of potential ... Are you worried about the potential for some sort of a miscalculation at sea with Iran or how do you see the Marine Corps potentially playing into or playing a role in a possible conflict even with Iran?

General David Berger ([40:17](#)):

Because of the terrain, the geography there, absolutely yes. I would agree with you 100%. Do we worry about a miscalculation, a misjudgment? Yes. That could be by direction or it could be some officer in the Iranian Navy that just, on his own, does something and that can be a huge problem. The amount of restraint shown by our commanders on our ships is phenomenal and aircraft the same way because on occasion, they're pretty close. If you didn't have experienced, mature people, it could've been a different outcome we'll just say.

General David Berger ([40:58](#)):

Some of that, clearly, I think is testing, testing, testing us, testing our reactions, testing our defenses, just testing how close inside this bubble can we get because they can learn from that. They can learn our response, our reaction, every one of those is a learning venture, so we've got to be really careful about not letting them get too far in where they learn too much. But not overreacting, we're way out there and some rogue Iranian leader decides to try something, we don't overreact and actually it snowballs.

Courtney Kobe ([41:31](#)):

Yeah, because there's some people who believe that some of these rogue IRGCN commanders, if they do something, if they test the U.S., they could actually get promoted for it, as long as it doesn't really turn ugly.

General David Berger ([41:44](#)):

It could be either way. They could get promoted for it or the deniability like we never gave them those instructions, we didn't give them that command, I don't know what he was doing.

Courtney Kobe ([41:53](#)):

Yeah. Do we have any ... Oh, right here.

Paul Bezerra ([41:58](#)):

Sir, thank you for joining us. Paul Bezerra, United States Air Force Academy. First and foremost, I'm a big fan of the structural changes you're seeking. Rather than soft, I think of it as mental speed and agility and sharpness and edge. To that point, an element that I can't recall hearing about today is mental health up to and including suicide prevention. Can you speak to these topics in the Marine Corps?

General David Berger ([42:19](#)):

Yeah. First off, I would agree with the way you laid it out ... The first part of your comment, it may not be true but I assume that in the future, we will not enjoy a technological advantage or a numerical advantage. Now we may, but I'm assuming we will not. So if we don't have those two, then it comes down to the individual intellectual edge that we need, which is what we have to bank on. Back to Courtney's question, the individual.

General David Berger ([42:57](#)):

Suicides, mental health, being very self-critical as a military leader, I think slow to respond and I'm talking about over years, right? Over eight, 10, 12 years, slow to respond, slow to react. Slow to accept that there is a stigma because in our minds, we want to believe that if they have a problem, they'll come and talk to me. So, slow to be realistic frankly. The key to unlocking that, there is no silver key that gives you all the answers but part of it, I think, clearly is the conversation, frankly. In other words, the trust, the confidence that a Marine can say I got a lot on my plate without everybody looking at him as the weak link.

General David Berger ([43:55](#)):

Because we're taught from day one, right? You go to Officer Candidate School, you go to Parris Island, you're taught that it's all about the team. Everybody has to pull their fair share. There's no room for one person on the team not pulling their load. So if that's the way we're trained from day one, how can you say three years later, hey, I got a lot on my plate? Because it goes completely 180 out but that's what we have to be able to do. The ones who, I think, raise their hand, the ones who step forward, the ones who ask for, okay, I got more on my plate than I can handle, everybody watches how that plays out. If that's handled professionally, if they're promoted later, if all those things happen, then okay, it's okay. That will not happen overnight.

General David Berger ([44:45](#)):

You have to have the mental health professionals, of course, that goes without saying. In the end, it's not going to be ... It's never going to be easy outside the military or inside. Right now, it's on the rise outside the gate and inside the gate, both. Sometimes I think, in other words, a different way to look at it, early on, I think we viewed mental health as a medical condition that you needed to send somebody to the hospital, get evaluated, get a professional opinion and that was our nation's sort of view on it. What we learned is after I go to the hospital and a doctor says there's nothing really diagnostic to the level that we'd commit him and keep him here overnight, then what happens to me? I go back to the barracks. What is a unit supposed to do then?



General David Berger ([45:44](#)):

We have a lot of work still to do. I'm very confident, though, that our junior leaders are way past the stigma part and the discussion, the dialogue, it's in a completely different place than it was five years ago, in a better way, but it's not going to turn around quickly at all.

Speaker 9 ([46:04](#)):

[inaudible 00:46:04]

Courtney Kobe ([46:05](#)):

You escaped my last question, which was going to be what was your advice for a young Lieutenant Berger or First Lieutenant Berger but I think we're out of time. So I'll ask you that next time.

General David Berger ([46:14](#)):

Fair enough.

Anja Manuel ([46:15](#)):

You can ask that one. He can answer that one.

Courtney Kobe ([46:17](#)):

Can I? We have time? Okay, so that's my question, what would you, looking back, what would your advice be to ... Well, let's see, we have someone from the Air Force Academy.

General David Berger ([46:24](#)):

Yeah, true.

Courtney Kobe ([46:25](#)):

What would your advice be to the young Lieutenant Berger now?

General David Berger ([46:29](#)):

Wow, I think the things that make people so successful, in the military or out, is they don't change who they are, but they listen to people. I think early on, we're brash, we're supermen, right? I learned the more I'm around, even after decades, I listen a lot more. I would've listened younger, let me just say. I wouldn't have been any less confident but I would've been listening more because I think the clues, the mentoring was there, but sometimes my ego probably got in the way because I didn't want to look weak. Now, I do a lot more listening than I do talking.

Courtney Kobe ([47:15](#)):

Excellent. Well, thank you very much, General Berger-

General David Berger ([47:18](#)):

Yes, ma'am.

Courtney Kobe ([47:18](#)):

This transcript was exported on Nov 16, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

... We all appreciated listening to you here today and thank you all. Thank you for the questions as well.

Anja Manuel ([47:24](#)):

Thank you so much. Thank you, General Berger.