Notes: This transcription is smooth format, meaning that we do not transcribe filler words like um, er, ah, or uh huh. Nothing is rewritten or reworded. Transcriber notes such as [*cross talk*] are italicized and contained within brackets. A word that the transcriber could not understand is indicated with a six-space line followed by a time code like this \_\_\_\_\_\_ [0:22:16]. A word that the transcriber was not sure of is **bolded**. Punctuation is to the best of our ability, given that this transcript results from a conversation.

**Key:**

Pope Moderator, J. Paul Pope, Senior Fellow at the Intelligence Studies Project

Gordon Susan M. Gordon, Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence

Thomas General Raymond Anthony Thomas, USA, Commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command

Olson Admiral Eric Olson, USN, Ret.; Former Commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command

McRaven Admiral William McRaven, USN, Ret.; Former Commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command

AQ Audience Question

Pope: Okay, as Will said we're not going to have a break. Move around and do what you need to do. But I'm going to go ahead and get started in the interest of time introducing my panel and getting this started. This panel is going to have a slightly different flow. We're going to begin with two plenary speakers. First will be Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence, Sue Gordon, and then we will hear from the Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, General Tony Thomas on our response to the threats that Sue's going to tell us about. And then our two distinguished speakers will be joined by two former commanders of U.S. Special Operations Command, Admiral Eric Olson and Admiral McRaven.

As previous moderators have noted, you have the bios in front of you and so we're going to move pretty quickly. But let me begin by introducing Admiral Eric Olson. Admiral Olson was the eighth commander of U.S. Special Operations Command and this culminated a 38-year career in which he commanded at every level. He's a highly decorated officer. He's an inspired and inspiring leader and we have something in common that we will be watching the football game next week, but we won't be pulling for the same side I don't think.

Our next panel member, Admiral McRaven, needs very little introduction. At the University of Texas, he's our former Chancellor, former Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, and even a brief summary of his accomplishments would take a while. They're in your bio packs, but I do just want to make one special shout out to you, sir, and that is your support to these programs and the National Security Programs at the University of Texas. And I just don't think we would be where we are without your support. [*applause*] And Pam wanted me to thank you that I make my bed occasionally. And I've asked Admiral McRaven if he would introduce his old friend, General Thomas, when it comes to General Thomas' time to speak.

So now it's my distinct privilege to introduce the Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence, the Honorable Sue Gordon. Ms. Gordon's had an extraordinary career. You should read it which consistently put her at the cutting edge of innovation and adaptation, the very kind of challenges that we were just hearing about is what she has spent her career doing. She's held positions in all four directorates of the Central Intelligence Agency and I think a lot of the ground work that she did enabled to stand up to the fifth directorate, the directorate for digital innovation. Prior to her current job, she served as the deputy director of the National Geospatial Agency.

From personal observation, I know her to be not only brilliant and fiercely committed to the mission, but a people person, a defender of the IC's people, and a positive and inspiring colleague. With all these accomplishments and I worked with Sue a lot, somehow, I never knew you were the captain of the Duke basketball team. And when I read that I thought, “Okay, this is not a real bio. This is something that a fiction writer wrote except it's not realistic.” No, Sue's had an amazing career and she's raised two adult human people who are serving their country and are responsible citizens. I don't know how you did all that, Sue, but we are particularly excited to have you here today with us to talk about the threat and then we will talk about the responsive threat with General Thomas. Welcome Sue Gordon. [*applause*]

Gordon: Actually, what my friend Paul said was that I'm old, lucky, and grateful. I'm so delighted to be here. I was honored at the invitation and daunted by it at the same time to follow Senator Sasse and his remarks to get the chance to sit on a panel with these luminaries, not only my friends but in many cases, my idols and to be in front of you all who are practitioners of National Security each in your own domain is quite an honor.

I represent the intelligence community. I characterize what we do in intelligence, it's another truth to see beyond the horizon and allow leaders to act before events dictate. I don't think there is anything about that that is going to become passé. Can you imagine a future where we don't need that? I cannot. Can you imagine how difficult those three things are today? It's hard to imagine. So the whole of the conversation as you're listening to it, think about those things: knowing the truth, limiting the ability to mis-see things, see beyond the horizon. How in the world, when the horizon is increasingly digital, are we going to provide that clarity? And provide the ability to act before events dictate? Have such clarity and **[TIME CODE 0:05:00]** precision in what we do and so know the policy constrict that we're trying to perceive that we can provide something useful. That's the whole of what we're trying to do.

I'm going to do a quick romp around the world in terms of threats. Senator Sasse did such a good job. I won't take as much time as I might have before to do that and with his speed round of recommendations, I would say yes, yes, no, maybe, absolutely not, could be, let's work on it. [*laughter*]

So here are a couple of points I want to--before I go to my romp around the world. I don't think I'm a narcissist but I'm quite confident saying this is the most different world I've ever seen. I think it's changed. I think it's such a world that our ability to draft off the work of our predecessors is exceptionally limited and whether it is that from a policy perspective, from a capability perspective, from an intelligence perspective, from an understanding we are going to have to create where once we could evolve. It is that different. And are we constructed to be able to create anew because that's what it will take.

The second thing is the digital interconnectedness, the world is changing in ways that I can't imagine. Boundaries are almost meaningless, not only geographic boundaries, but organizational boundaries, boundaries within the systems. Not only boundaries that are inadvertently constructed but boundaries we believe in, boundaries between the government and the private sector, boundaries between federal and state and local. But those boundaries mean something to us, but not to a digital domain and not to adversaries who would ply it. The digital interconnectedness is changing the aspiration of our adversaries. It isn't the ground next to you. You can have bigger aspirations. You have greater reach and the speed with which information moves means that capabilities combined with those aspirations are emerging in ways that are different from the way they emerged even a minute ago. And we're going to have to deal with that and data.

Somebody--I can't remember who said data is the new oil. What I'll tell you is data is both our bane and our boon. Data has the potential to have the answers to every question we have if we could command it and it is also drowning us. Nate Silver in his book, “The Signal and The Noise,” said, "The problem is, in this world, if we don't have the ability to understand the story, noise will look like data." So how are we going to see the story in this world that's changing? And that is our collective challenge. That is the foundation of our national security and I will opine that is the foundation of what Senator Sasse was saying we needed to take on is how we're going to do that.

Okay, quick romp around the world. What's so interesting is, even five years ago, I don't think we would be talking about the great power competition that we're talking now. We saw Russia as relatively weakened, not economically sound, and just not developing the capabilities that we have. China, we just didn't see the extent of their national aspiration. We saw the economic competitiveness, but we didn't see the national advantage that they were trying to pursue in the same way. And so it's interesting just how quickly that has changed.

Let's start with Russian and let's just look at not only its investment in military capabilities that are quite impressive, not only its geographic expansionism evidenced by what they're doing in Syria, which interestingly enough, it's not just about being in the Middle East; it is also about getting operational experience that will totally change their ability to understand how they are going to fight wars in the future. The brazenness of their activities, what they're doing in cyber. Five years ago, I would have said, "I'm confident that Russia is capable from a cyber perspective, but I can't see them." And China, I would say, "Oh my gosh, they're everywhere, but they're massively ham-handed."

Today what I would say is, "Russia's cyber activities are incredibly overt." We see them; we see their presence; we see their presence in our infrastructure; we see their presence in their influence campaigns; and China has actually receded some so they're much more difficult to see."

China, we've talked a lot about it in all the panels. I won't go into it, but I will say it's the whole of country approach. It is the investment they are making in the military but their movement across the world geographically and economically, insinuating themselves into society and fundamentally achieving the kind of power projection capability that once was exclusively ours. And that's on the terrestrial. If you look what they're doing in space in order to be able to support that, six years ago, **[TIME CODE 0:10:00]** they maybe had 10 satellites in orbit. Now they have the second most to the United States, hundreds going forward.

Iran is clearly one of the most malign nations and supporters of state sponsors of terrorism and what they do in terms of supporting others and being a proxy force in Yemen, in Syria is incredibly challenging. Syria, what Assad has done through his atrocities has created a venue and a vacuum that others are going to be able to move into whether it's Russia or Turkey or Iran and have the ability to create the kind of mischief that will **deterrent** demand response.

CT isn't going away. I think looking at the gentleman that I'm going to get to share the stage with, you would have to say one of the greatest accomplishments of the past 17 years for the United States is what has been done in terms of countering terrorist threats. I remember that day. I remember what we thought was going to follow and even though we've had to fight great fights, even though so many of our people and so many of our partners' people have been lost in this fight, if you look at what we've actually been able to protect strategically because of that fight, it has been remarkable. But for all those advances, for all the things we've done in terms of eliminating threats from geographic areas, this is a resilient threat. It's present in Africa and Asia. It's present in homegrown violent extremism. It is something that we're going to have to fight but fight differently than we did before.

Transactional organized crime, illicit drugs. 72,000 Americans last year lost their lives to overdoses of drugs. Let me put that in context. That's a 767 going down every day. Imagine if one went down today, think about what the news would be of that horrific loss of life. And illicit drugs, drug overdose, 72,000 Americans last year. And what's behind that and what it allows and what it inspires when you think about the instruments of our adversaries' power and the kinds of things they can do, you have to take that into account.

And then humanitarian crises, whether environmentally caused or a human-made event, they are the sorts of things that create the disenfranchisement and the disbelief in our systems that allow extremism and terrorism to prosper. We don't talk a lot--I don't talk a lot about cyber threats independently anymore. We used to talk about it when we were thinking about it from a technological perspective. Let me tell you the way I've used cyber. It is the vehicle by which every instrument of national interest is going to be affected. Whether that is what Russia does, which is fundamentally determined to undermine the very democratic bases of society, it uses cyber to do that. If it's China wanting economic advance, cyber is the vehicle to do that. If it's criminal outreach and so one of the things I would say is when we think about what we are going to do about cyber threats, it isn't just a technological issue. It is a vehicle by which national interest, so you have to understand intent. Yes, there will have to be responses and this is something that is going to have to be fought every day, but it isn't a technological fight. It's a fight of interests, the same interests that we've known but interests that are enabled as I said before by reach and distance.

This data thing, it's a big deal. Whether it's Putin or Xi or whether it's me. The person who is going to--the nation that is able to command data for its purpose are going to have tremendous advantage. But those same things that allow that advantage can be incredibly misused. And so how are we as a collective going to be able to both advance the capability use and protect from the misuse? To be able to put data in and technology into use **[TIME CODE 0:15:00]** so that we can respond at speed but protect ourselves from being duped.

So this is my last point. The greatest advantage we can have is in partnership. We learned this from counter-terrorism. That was a fight of partners. If the cyber community could learn partnership and community in the same way that counter-terrorism did, we'd be better off than we are today, but the partnership we need to have is with our international partners. It is with our private sector partners. It is with governmental partners that don't happen to be in the same branch. This is a time where we have to be able to share information appropriately, protect it appropriately, be able to see threats clearly, be able to demonstrate the impact and our confidence. This is going to be a data game, but it's a data game that is going to have to have confidence and truth behind it.

Here's my challenge to you all before I leave it to the panel. Understand that national security is a team quest. When you hear national security, don't think government. The great element of national security--our national strength is what? It's the innovation and the capability of the private sector and the American people. It is that advance, that is part of it; that is part of what we have to protect. How is the government going to help that and how is the private sector going to learn to understand that they are part of this great fabric? The intelligence community is more committed than I've ever seen us in sharing our best information with the people who need it to make their own decisions, not just be told what our decisions are. But that's a shared quest against the backdrop of threats we feel, with the confidence that I have like Senator Sasse's that we have tremendous advantage, great home field, but we have to work together in order to protect it against adversaries who see what we have and want it with the capabilities out there to do it if we don't \_\_\_\_ [0:17:20]. Thanks very much. I look forward to talking to you on the panel. [*applause*]

Pope: Thanks very much, Sue. First, let me extend my thanks again to Will and Bobby and Steve. You guys really have expanded this program in a way that is just remarkable, and I thank you for all your work.

Before I introduce Tony Thomas, let me also recognize Marilyn Olson and Barb Thomas who are with us today. I will tell you the three of us that became the commanders of U.S. Special Operations Command could not have gotten there without the strength of our ladies. Ladies, thank you so very, very much for standing behind us. [*applause*]

You can read Tony Thomas' bio, but I wanted to tell you what does it take to become the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command? I think in this day and age, one of the first and foremost things is you have to have combat experience. You'll look at Tony's bio. He graduated from West Point in 1980. By 1983, he was parachuting into Grenada. In 1989, he was part of the invasion of Panama to unseat Manuel Noriega. Between '89 and 2011, he was with the Rangers and the Delta Force. He is the only man ever to have commanded a Ranger battalion and a Delta Force Squadron. Since 9/11, every year since 9/11, 17 years, Tony Thomas has been down range in Iraq or Afghanistan fighting the war. I would offer that no man that ever sat in the seat of U.S. Special Operations Command ever had more combat experience or was more qualified than Tony Thomas.

The second thing is, you have to have earned the respect of the troops. People often think that it's the officers or the generals that make you a general. That's just not the case. It's the troops that make you a general because if the troops don't follow you, if the troops don't believe in you, if you haven't lived up to their moral expectations, their ethical expectations, their legal expectations, they won't be there for you. And if they're not there for you, you won't accomplish the mission and therefore you won't get promoted. Every soldier, sailor, airman, and Marine that ever worked for Tony Thomas has learned to respect him and, I would offer, to love him.

And finally, you have to be trustworthy. If the President of the United States doesn't trust you, if the Secretary of Defense doesn't trust you, if the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff don't trust you, if your leaders don't trust you, then you will never be able to lead. **[TIME CODE 0:20:00]** So for me, there's always a litmus test and you often say, "Well, do you trust them with your life?" That's easy. The question is would you trust your family. Would you trust Tony Thomas with your family's life? There are only a handful of people I think that I would trust with my family's life. Interestingly enough, there are a couple of them that are here today. I would trust Tony Thomas with my family's life. So when you think of that as a litmus test, frankly, there is no better person to be leading the U.S. Special Operations Command than Tony Thomas. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming General Tony Thomas. [*applause*]

Thomas: Well, good afternoon, everybody. I've relearned a lesson of the advantage of being here early so that you actually knew what preceded you, so I've tailored my comments significantly having been informed and enlightened by the preceding discussions. Interestingly, the three Senators who are up here initially, I usually see them from the other side of a pulpit when I'm getting grilled. That's always fun. I have to look forward to that again here this coming February, but I was very impressed with their insights. Certainly, Senator Sasse' commentary--thought-provoking is probably the understatement of the year, but a comprehensive tour de force of things that apply to this panel. And then at the risk of sounding like the mutual adulation society, thanks for the opportunity to follow Sue Gordon up here. She and I were actually teammates at the CIA, one of the many anomalies of my career. I was a card-carrying CIA member. I'm proud of that fact. I don't have the shakes anymore, [*laughter*] but I had a phenomenal and insightful year there at the Agency and Sue was a teammate who I was very close to and was just a--it was a great experience. But I'd also offer to you what you may or may not know about her and some attempt to describe this irresistible character, but in one small bundle, you have an incredible intellect and an extraordinary teammate, somebody who works to be a teammate, and someone who's a catalyst for change. So we're very lucky, Sue, to have you at the DNI and I sleep soundly at night knowing you're there. [*applause*]

I want to thank my friend and mentor, Bill McRaven, for inviting me here today. I would not be where I am professionally or otherwise, but this was a great opportunity to come think and come really reflect on our profession. So Bill, thanks for doing that. Although I have a confession right up front; I did not make my bed this morning, [*laughter*] but I have an excuse and I've thought all day. This has really bothered me that I'm--it's almost heretical, right? He's kind of made his stock-in-trade. The reason I didn't make my bed this morning, Barb was still in the bed. So it would have been what a little bit awkward but I've gotten over that and I hope it doesn't derail our discussions.

Hey, I was given the task to bridge from Sue's comments from the description of the strategic environment to maybe tee out some ways we can get at it to embrace it and then we will follow up with a panel where we'll have a chance to interact with you. So that's what I'm endeavoring to do. We'll see if I can actually get there.

First, if I can amplify on some of Sue's observations. The situation might even be more complex than she described. There is in fact a bad trend for some of the adversaries she cited to actually work together in league against us, their shared threat, the United States. Specifically, Russia and China have recently demonstrated historic levels of cooperation in a broad range of activities. This is hardly natural as we harken back to the days of the Sino-Soviet split but it is the current reality. The Russians and Iranians are strange bedfellows in that uber complex environment of Syria, which Sue cited. Syria I would offer may be the living laboratory serving as the bridge between the historic counter-terrorist effort against violent extremists and both the peer and rogue threats cited in the national defense strategy in the form of Russia and Iran. The only thing missing there is China.

Why do I say that? Where I was recently in Syria, within mortar or artillery range of our special operations forces, were Syrian regime, Russian regular forces, Russian paramilitary forces, Iranian revolutionary guard corps, aka IRGC, Lebanese Hezbollah, Shia militia groups, Turks and their surrogates, the Coalition and our surrogates, and of course the remnants of ISIS. In the same battle space, we also have active combat between Israel and Iran layered over the top. Indescribably complex and just for added flavor, we include some old-school ingredients of active electronic warfare, sophisticated air defense, and occasional chemical weapons use. Our folks are thriving on that frontier.

Besides acknowledging threat, I think it's worthwhile to consider how we got here. And this is shared across our security and diplomatic organization, so I'll make the same commentary as some of our precedents. I'm not laying blame here as much to advertise how I think we got here and where I think we can actually learn from that move forward. I think we can attribute our current situation to four primary reasons: **[TIME CODE 0:25:00]** lack of strategy, failure to terminate conflict, intelligence failures, and wishful diplomacy.

Lack of strategy, let me unpack a couple of these. In 2016 then-General Madison and George Shultz soberly assessed in their Blueprint for American Security that the United States had largely operated unguided by strategy for the past 20 years across a couple administrations. In an effort to address that, the newest national defense strategy provides our nation with clear strategic guidance. The NDS acknowledges and prioritize the re-emergence of peer threats of China and Russia. You've heard that today on several occasions.

Secondly it recognizes rogue states, North Korea and Iran. And lastly, it highlights the continuing threat of violent extremist organizations, or VEOs, and future threats including state and non-state threat actors. I had the opportunity to attend the McCain Security Forum a couple months passed. He was not there obviously for as he was in his terminal days. But I had the opportunity to see the then-perspective Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. In fact, at one point in his Q&A, he was teed up with the gotcha question of what drives our foreign policy? Is it national objectives or our national values? And I thought, boy, I was stumbling if I'd had answer the question. Of course, I was middling in my 900- person class at West Point. He was number one, so he had a ready answer and he said, "Both." And then very expertly explained that. That one, our national interests are grounded in pragmatic, practical aspects of realpolitik; and the other arguably more difficult art form, our national values based upon our unique ethos and the still strong demand for American leadership in challenging situations is unavoidable. It's a blend; it's an art form. I would offer too that there's been an ignorance or a misperception of other people's strategic approach to life specifically as cited earlier, the Chinese. China has a clearly stated strategy. It's out. It's open. It's available, that they are actively pursuing and it doesn't entail playing second fiddle to the United States of America in the future.

Failure to finish. My introduction to Korea of many years ago with our South Korean counterparts usually evolved around a discussion that a 75-year armistice is not a natural state of affairs between two countries. There is an odd state of reconciliation ongoing right now that is proceeding potential denuclearization. But that's 75 years in the making. After approaching an unprecedented level of brinksmanship this time last year, we're now in the throes of hopeful discussions, but with no real progress towards our stated objective of a denuclearized North Korea. History will reflect the fact that we won the Cold War back in 1989, but the recent resurgence of Russia begs the question did we finish it effectively?

Intelligence failures. Again, I'm a producer and a consumer of intelligence. So this is shared blame. We have never failed to get the next war or the threat wrong or too late and we certainly didn't anticipate the quick turn in North Korean nuclear capability. A year ago, I would joke because you try to make light of pretty dire things, that the North Koreans could only reach Topeka and they couldn't reach where I lived in Tampa. That changed with their high apogee test at the end of last year.

What I hope to do is provide some ideas on how we might adapt to this new threat situation and these are my opinions informed by and hopefully in line with the Department and my boss who continually advises us military leaders not to get ahead of policy. The reality is in my line of work in special operations, we often live at the leading edge of policy with the general guidance of "Buy space and time while developing the broadest possible options for policymakers and the Commander in Chief." It's an uneasy place to exist but one where we thrive.

To give you an example of that delicate existence, let me say cite again Syria. In 2014, I was in command of a different organization and we woke up the emergence of ISIS as a heinous extremist threat with a global reach and audience. Our four policy objectives that I inherited as a tactical Commander which are still consistent today over change of administration are one, defeat ISIS. Secretary. Mattis came on and changed that to annihilate ISIS. That's not a doctoral term, but it was pretty much giddy up, get after this thing. Second one was avoid war with Russia. The third was disrupt Iranian hegemonic activities. And the last was a void a Turk Kurd tete-a-tete. We are on the verge of concluding military operations against ISIS, although we have some work left to be done. But we continue to be challenged in the other three policy objective areas every day.

So what to do about these challenges? The default is discussed especially in my line of work in the military is to discuss the potential for conflict. We automatically go to phase three, brute force contact almost invariably, where the military must be prepared for a war, although none of us want that eventuality, neither our adversaries nor we. This is actually re‑invigorated in an old theme with a new title: "competition short of conflict," although the cursory analysis on competition short of conflict usually evolves to four elements of power: diplomatic, information, military and economic **[TIME CODE 0:30:00]** of big D, big I, big E, and little m. Think of the acronym that's left over there, by the way, big D, big I, big E before you consider little m, but a failure in that competition short of conflict goes to big M in a hurry and it's only a cursory look at the challenge and really reminds us of the essence of deterrence.

So how do we adapt and adjust for this new and challenging environment? I'd offer the first critical step is to acknowledge the one attribute that all these threats share, the fact that they are global and the need therefore to forge truly global solutions. I believe some of the tenets of a successful approach are global and that includes task organization changes across the interagency, delegated authorities, decisive information operations--you've heard that theme up here a few times today--and partnered activities specifically but not exclusively based on information sharing like we've never done before. In a global conflict, no one country, even us, has the capacity to do it alone. Allies and partners are key and essential, which means we must be willing to share information and empower them like never before. Already, that trend is already ongoing in our national intelligence authority, and Sue I want to thank you and the Director for that. Every day, we're unlocking new doors to empower our allies and it is the coin of the realm. It's as powerful as actually being out there in the field with them.

Reassurance of allies takes on a whole new substantive meaning with this kind of approach but plays to the one consistent theme I hear everywhere I go in the world and that's the criticality of U.S. leadership. Literally, I'll have allies begging us to stay. Don't care about whatever the overall architecture. You, U.S., please stay with us. Please continue to lead.

Task organization. We talked about this briefly but a cursory glance at our U.S. security organization will highlight a geographically restricted approach to the challenge, geographically. Emphasis on geography not threat, not function. Our IC, our intelligence community, our state department, and our DOD are all arranged with a geographically restricted focus as opposed to a truly globally integrated effort. The DOD specifically horse blankets the globe in a six-region approach. Our adversaries are not hobbled by similar arbitrary boundaries. In fact, they did they defy that approach every day. We may need to consider a corresponding threat oriented functional approach to be as agile as the corresponding threat.

There are in fact four global GCC's in the DOD inventory: strategic command, our nuclear deterrent; Cybercom, newly empowered as the Senator mentioned, and moving out with brand new authorities; transportation command, which arguably makes it all happen; and special operations command. We all operate in a global context and we're working together more effectively than ever in attempting to provide blended global solutions to our security challenges. I'll actually have a war fighter with both John Hyten from Stratcom and Paul Nakasone from Cybercom at Tampa here after the turn of the year, but we are working some pretty ingenious new global solutions together for the geographic commanders, for the inter-agency, which we haven't done before.

Authorities. If we've learned anything from the preceding counter-terrorist effort, it's that authorities to act must be delegated to the level which really enables operations at the speed of relevance. And again, Senator Sasse mentioned the new cyber authorities. Cybercom is very enthusiastically embracing those.

Information operations. and SoCom is on the verge of being designated the DOD lead for messaging and counter-messaging. It passed this last year through legislation.

Truth and legitimacy matters. Our adversaries don't conduct information warfare as much as war on information, undercutting legitimacy of all comers including governments. Russia and China are not peddling a platform of human rights and democratic values. We need to compete in this critical **somewhat offer** decisive environment. All of which is wrapped up in a world of maybe the most revolutionary technological development we've known and which may in fact drive a revolution in the military application of technology, the world of machine learning and artificial intelligence. Major corporations are already operating comfortably in this space while our national security apparatus is moving along less aggressively, pondering the policy implications and the need for regulation.

I read daily op-eds on the fearful trend towards Skynet. Meanwhile, our adversaries are pressing for any and all advantage. Culture change is often what's thrown back in my face, even in my organization which prides itself in being agile, as something that seems insurmountable or something you can push down the road. It's the major shift or something again that you can delay on. The need for change is now but in my opinion it's not as daunting as we're inclined to make it. The phenomenon is here and not futuristic. We need to embrace, especially us 60-year-olds, the need to educate and understand both the technology and the application. There is a gap. We need to acknowledge it affects and applies to everything we do. Don't constrain up front. It applies to everything unless proven otherwise and if we apply it, it will make us more effective.

And then lastly, if that's not compelling enough for you, our adversaries are already going there with dangerous, dangerous trends. **[TIME CODE 0:35:00]** Tactically--and I didn't go to tactical and operation where I'm most comfortable; initially, I tried to say strategically--but tactically for SoCom, that's applicable to everything from targeting, kinetic and non-kinetic targeting, information operations, personnel management, logistics communications, you get it. Everything we're doing. In the security arena, we have a tendency to be afraid of data big or otherwise. The tendency to be afraid because of our own vulnerabilities; we need to flip that paradigm in a hurry.

Those are just some of my thoughts as we embrace the challenges of current and future world. As the commander of United States Special Operations Command, I'm actually excited about what we might offer in terms of creative new ways to get after these challenges. While I admit to being exceedingly parochial, I state emphatically that we are not the panacea. SoCom can't solve it all. I never said that, for the record. But as part of the Joint Force, I think we can and should provide unique solutions and approaches to all these problems. I think our special operations force is incredibly relevant to all of these threats, but the current threats of **von** extremism, competition short of conflict, etc., and the future threats that you can consider, aligned in and in support with our national security objectives.

So thanks again for the opportunity to be here today. I believe we're now segueing into a panel discussion where I'll join two of my predecessors and Sue to entertain your questions. Thank you. [*applause*]

Pope: Ms. Gordon has a hard stop. So we're going to give--we started a little late but we're going to finish on time. So just want to mention that as we go through this. Both your presentations and the presentations before were actually teeing up some of the things that we were going to talk about here with regard to threats, but I wanted to pick on the very specific thing that you were talking about there at the end, General Thomas. But I want to start by asking the two previous commanders of SoCom how they see the regional organization and whether it's adequate and appropriate for the current challenges, the way we structure our commands and the way we structure our responses to these challenges. I'll start with Admiral Olson maybe.

Olson: I'm a little more historical in my viewpoint. I was the commander, four commanders ago. Two of the three since then are on the stage. What we're talking about is the geographic combatant command network and how we have, as a department, divided the globe neatly into regions to be addressed by senior military commanders for military operations in that region. And it generally works very okay. [*laughter*] The challenges looking back on it now that we don't have sufficient mechanisms in place to cross the borders of those regions with thought, with capability in an agile way. And so in a way, it's even considered an encroachment for one geographic combatant commander to be considering some sort of activity, some sort of policy that would affect another geographic combatant commander. So that's point one.

Point two is that as long as we, the Department of Defense, are carving the world into geographic regions, we probably ought to have the same regions, roughly at least as the Department of State, as the intelligence community, and as other elements of government. Bill?

McRaven: The only thing I'd add is I have always liked most of the geographic combatant commanders in terms of how we have apportioned them because it is about relationships. At the end of the day, the geographic combatant commander gets to know each of the ambassadors, U.S. ambassadors, each of the heads of state, and those relationships are important. I was there when we separated and established Africa Command so European Command had both Europe and Africa and candidly, it was just too broad for the EUCOM commander to be able to deal with, to be able to establish relationships with all the African countries. So when we established AFRICOM, those relationships I think strengthened as a result of that. However, as Admiral Olson pointed out and Joel Thomas did, there are some threats out there that are just not geographically contained. So I think having this blend of, yes, you need somebody that kind of owns terrain, that is there working the relationships on a day-to-day basis. But you also have to recognize that there are going to be threats that will move very quickly from one geographic combatant commander to another to another to another to our borders and we've got to be able to have somebody that oversees that threat in a way that can coordinate **[TIME CODE 0:40:00]** it quickly, rapidly, and effectively.

Pope: Thank you, sir. General Thomas, I wanted to ask you if you could drill down a little bit on your vision for what you were talking about with regard to the way we might organize for certain problems differently, especially things like information warfare and issues like that.

Thomas: I was actually inspired to think about the problem by some legislation that was pending two years back with the draft NDA where they were looking--our Congress, the one that funds us, the one that resources--sensed that we weren't as flexible as we needed to be and were looking at different ways of solving the problem. So they were looking at big headquarters as a problem, bureaucracy if you want to take it in that context. But they were also looking primarily at the agility of six geographic combatant commands relative to global threats that aren't staying neatly in those confines. So it was pending and in fact what I usually have advised my folks and folks who are inclined to listen is that we might want to devise our own structure or determine what the best way going forward is or ultimately we will have Congress telling us because they're on to it as well as a source of vulnerability for it. So the conversation should happen. I think the good news is and I'll give John Hyten at Stratcom the lion's share of the credit, because he's a brilliant officer, is that we're now more inclined to blend existing global combatant commands, our nuclear command, pretty darn potent on a global scale, our cybercom pervades everything. SoCom, in most of the countries he talked about us being in, in some way, shape, or form and then our transportation command. But how you blend those global combatant commands with that kind of perspective, that kind of effect across our geographic combatant command constructs. You don't throw the baby out with the bath water. But for the current piece, figure out how we are both globally agile and regionally kind of, to Bill's point, there with real presence, not virtual presence, developing those relationships.

Probably came home to me most poignantly recently when I was down in Panama and the country team asked me to meet with President Varela. And so I reached back to Kurt Tidd, the South Com commander to say this is your domain. I certainly don't want to interlope here. He said fine. Please have the conversation with him because he's actually tired of hearing from me, but it was about the nefarious influence of the Chinese buying out the Panama Canal Zone. They had also just flipped three countries relative to Taiwan down there. That is not on the radar of the IndoPacom Commander, what China is doing in Central and South America, although he is the coordinating authority for countering China. So that's the challenge we have currently. The good news is we \_\_\_\_\_ [00:42:34] are aggressively trying to rectify that but we have an existing six regional structure and some globals and we have to meld them much better in the future.

Pope: So it's more of an integration thing than a reorganization, is that what you're talking about?

Thomas: It may require--I'd hate to constrain ourselves if a radical \_\_\_\_ [0:42:52, *cross* *talk*]. I think we have to be as aggressive as our adversaries. China and Russia--the level of their aggressiveness and the blend of their elements of power. So they're buying out the Canal Zone with economic power which is paired directly with their military objectives. There's no bureaucracy in between. They don't have a whole bunch of policy wonks in between. They’re tight. I'm not saying the upside of a despot but there are advantages in terms of how they coordinate their activities.

Pope: I want to shift to the IC for just a second and talk about not the threat so much as the IC response to the threat. So how are we shifting resources? What are we doing there to think about these new challenges differently?

Gordon: So we have a little bit of a running start at this. So 9/11 highlighted the weaknesses of those 17 then, at that point 16, organizations much like in 1947, post Pearl Harbor, information tends to get stove-piped. So post 9/11, you formed basically the intelligence community, made the 17th agency the Office of the Director of National Intelligence with pretty much the singular function of integration. And due to my predecessors, we decided that we needed to be digitally integrated and digital integration is actually a really fascinating quick way to do reorganization because once you can share data, once you are constraining who can look at what data and can draw what conclusion, you actually are on your way to reorganizing. My friend Robert Cardillo, the head of the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, so imagery, is really articulate on this. He said, "Yeah,” what he and Paul Nakasone at NSA do are very different. Paul Nakasone deals with ones and zeros, and he deals with zeros and ones. [*laughter*]

So what's interesting about this is if you take integration and you imagine that once the data can move without the constraints of ownership or fear of **[TIME CODE 0:45:00]** who gets to act on it, you actually get to some of the things you need. Now, we need to extend beyond that because this line of demarcation between strategic intelligence and tactical intelligence, you just can't have a world anymore where you do tasking to collector to processing to processing to dissemination to artificial analysis to someone in the field. You have to make them as well and technology will do that.

But where the intelligence Community is starting because the cost of reorganization physically is time, is really in using data to affect that integration. And so you're just seeing that. I think things will come that will change but that's really what you're doing. And so you just see our ability to move data and that allows people to act on the data wherever they are.

Pope: I want to ask a question about it's very easy for us to say that we are going to maintain vigilance on counterterrorism but then shift resources to other things and I've been asked to do more with less before and sometimes we just have less with less but I'm wondering how we do that? Are there places where we actually can take what we've learned and do it more efficiently and then even when--if we do do that, what's left is still a big mission. So I'll start with you, the current Commander, but I want to hear from the previous commanders and the intel community because I think the counters--I personally am going to make sure that we don't forget that it's been a long fight and sometimes it's a pretty close call.

Thomas: The very blunt conversation we're having now which is the conversation we have to have is mostly resource-based but it's the extraordinary resources we've applied over 17 years. You heard the human capital today. I like the fact that that was emphasized because all too often, it's the trillions of dollars. The four people we lost this week are my people. They just got returned to Dover Air Force Base last night and returned to their families. That's been a 17-year struggle that most of America is not aware of or they see it in blips and they ask why are we still there? But they really can't put it in any more context than that.

But the hard discussion that is bound with that is we've spent a lot of capital both human and resource that we can't sustain as a country, trillions of dollars and this is what it's returned on investment. And so the harder inside conversation is what is sustainable security? Where can you actually put something in place where you can sustain over the long haul that doesn't require extensive number of troops down range, gads of money that isn't sustainable. You're just throwing money after into a money pit and not actually going to result in a sustainable security situation. So that's the hard conversation in many countries I would say specifically right now where we've been for years, but can you finish this? Can you actually park it in the garage or is there--and here's where the real challenge is--we're conflating nation building costs with CT costs. I could offer a CT model that's much less expensive. It's mowing the grass. It's keeping the threat at bay, at a distance, playing an aggressive away game, by, with, and through partners. That's not very satisfying. That doesn't necessarily get to the symptoms of the problem, but it isn't expensive nation building efforts that really ask that hard question, can this stick? Can it stay and God bless our diplomats who try and make it happen, but that's probably the harder thing to accomplish.

Pope: I'll just ask Admiral Olson and McRaven from the standpoint of special ops if they had a comment on that before we move to intel.

Olson: Yeah, it's a rules and missions discussion. Special operations is a unique beast. General Petraeus used to call it both fish and fowl. It has global responsibilities. It's both an operational command and a resourcing command in terms of providing people and equipment, mature capabilities to other operational commanders, and the definition of a special operation is actually a negative or a reverse one. A special operation is one that other forces do not have the training, organization, or equipment to perform. And so that leaves everything else to the special operations community if no one else is prepared to do it. And so kind of become utility infielders with guns sometimes and utility infielders with brains. But they're a problem-solving force. The people in it are older; they have volunteered more times and passed through more filters than across the broader military. They tend to be more expeditionary in terms of deploying faster with smaller footprint. And so they become, in a sense, the easy button to solve a lot problems that would not, in a thoughtful analysis, be a special operations mission were there more time or a strategy that was different in preparing the broader force. **[TIME CODE 0:50:00]**

And over time, the percentage of U.S. military forces in the Special Operations community and the percentage of the budget dedicated to Special Operations forces hasn't changed that much. Since 9/11, there's been a lot of focus on the Special Operations forces, but you do the math and as a percent of DOD, it's about--it's not much different than it was 15 years ago.

McRaven: When I was in the Pentagon as a young Lieutenant back in 1986, we were building the maritime strategy. Again, this was the Cold War and the maritime strategy was going to take the Navy to a 600 ship Navy and there was this great debate going on in the Pentagon with the planners at the time, the **in fives**, about are we going to build the maritime strategy based on the threat or based on capability, and eventually threat won out. So we were going to build a Navy to fight the Soviet Union. So the U.S. Navy invested heavily in fighting the Soviet Union and then of course the wall falls and all of that capability now has to be distributed more broadly.

So in the Special Operations community, I think this is always our challenge as well. How do we balance? Do we build the force, to your point. How expensive is it going to be? Do we build it to the threat or do we have a broader capability that then can flex to whatever the current threat of the day might be? As all three commanders here know, this is a quarterly discussion that we have in U.S. Special Operations Command as you're going through the resourcing. Where do we put our resources and are we resourcing for last year's fight or are we resourcing to what could potentially be tomorrow's fight? We'll never get it right. I think a couple folks have said it; we're always kind of betting on what's the next war going to look like and we're always wrong. So I've always felt after watching that as a young Lieutenant invest in capability and be prepared to reinvest when you have to focus on that particular threat.

Olson: There's an old adage that the Special Operations community can do anything, but it can't do everything. And what the commanders struggle with every day is what it is they're not going to do and by not doing it, does it leave a void in our national capability?

Pope: This theme that you're describing now, if I could just interject before Sue responds, it harkens back to a question Steve asked about focus. What should we focus on? What keeps you up at night? Nobody could really give a clear answer to that and I think three different speakers have said, “We don't actually know what our priorities are strategically.” So it's kind of hard for a derivative, for lower commands to figure that out. That's also true for the IC. The other thing I think about the IC, both SOF and the IC, are sort of--whenever we are resourcing looking at hard resource choices, we look at the IC as sort of an economy of force. Like, you're going to give us early warning about new problems so we can react in time. So that's another mission.

Gordon: General Thomas mentioned the new strategies, the national defense strategy and there are subordinate strategies to that, Iraq, CT, **a number of strategies.** All of them have an intelligence element to them. All of those intelligence elements of those strategies so far outstrip our ability to provide all that intelligence within the resources we have. We are just constantly demanded more of with less resources and it is really hard for me to decide to move resources from Russia to Iran or from China to transnational organized crime. There just isn't a mechanism that allows me to choose that. So that's kind of our challenge here.

So what we're doing now is we're really focusing on those 16 agencies in the intelligence community. Do all 16 need to be doing the same thing? So how can I look at what all are doing on Russia, or all are doing on North Korea, and does every agency need to have an intelligence assessment of Kim Jong Un's mental state or can we…? So our approach is really [laughter] no, no, no, because when the world got more connected when we were in a period of growth, every agency looking at the same world just went whoosh in terms of what to do and now we have to find a way to look at it together to make some choices about do all of us need to do it.

I've spent my life in technology, but what I mostly value is human thought but I will tell you that one of the things we're going to have to do is we're going to have to get people out of manual tasks. We have got to introduce artificial intelligence and machine learning to be able to deal with more data, with machines as partners so that my humans aren't hunting anymore. If we do not invest in that, we are not going to get there. **[TIME CODE 0:55:00]**

So my third piece of solution to this is we have got to modernize how we deal with, look at data, and get my humans on the critical thinking pieces and use machines for what machines are good at. So if I make this constant pitch about working with the private sector to get those technologies into our communities and into the department, it is simply because that is the only way we are going to be able within the resources we have, have the knowledge we need to be able to share it.

Thomas: In that pursuit, I might offer because I'm absolutely with you, we chased technology for the last bunch of years. So I'd go to Silicon Valley, I'd come to Austin, I'd go to Boston, I'd go to Carnegie Melon, you just can't put markers down everywhere we need to. The new trend is invite them in to--accept the risk. Get clearances through--your big challenge--get clearances through but get them in under the tent because they're brilliant people and they'll literally start with what problem are you trying to solve? You're doing it in a pretty ham-fisted manner; you're doing it in a manner that we couldn't get away from a corporate approach. Here's some interesting approaches, whether it's algorithms or what, but we're already turning the corner, but we should have done it three, four, five years ago, like a lot of other companies did, but we've got to embrace it. And unfortunately, who fights, pushes back mostly against us? Our age-old analysts who you're--I'm going to lose a job. No, I'm going to save you for that exquisite analysis that the machine will set up for you. It's why they win Jeopardy. It's why they win chess. They've got all that down. You make the exquisite move at the end of it and you don't give up trigger. It's not going to Skynet automatically unless you let it go there.

Pope: I want to get to the audience, but I have one more question that can't resist asking and you were actually just--both of the last two speakers were kind of teeing it up and that is that I did some reckoning here and if my calculations are right, not counting the academies and not counting service that happened after retirement, there's 156 years of service up here. That's a lot of time. [*applause*] Since, I'm in the young people business, I just wanted you to comment on how important it is that we attract great talent to these two missions and that we have a continued yearning for service by young people coming into the government on a regular basis. And I want to give the panel an opportunity to comment on that for our students here, many of them who are here, including some from Texas A&M who came over.

Olson: Clearly, although we may be returning to great power competition, the competition will be in an entirely different nature than it was before. It takes an entirely different set of minds, a different set of imaginations and innovations and audacity to approach it in a way that it's going to require. And we hunger for the kind of talent that is represented in the back of the room here. We are, as many speakers have said today, transitioning from to where keyboards become the weapons and bytes are the bullets and artificial intelligence--the military that rules artificial intelligence will have a significant advantage in all future conflict. The automation of the battlefield is a real thing. The autonomous warrior is not that far in the future as we have autonomous platforms now. And so this idea of, it's not just bringing the youth in to learn from us. It's bringing the youth in so we can learn from them and it's an entirely different mindset that they bring to the entirely new conflict environment.

McRaven: Yeah, I always find it amusing people ask me a lot having been in the military and then in higher education about the Millennials. And I think my response always surprises them when I tell them that I'm the biggest fan of the Millennials you'll ever meet. I said, one, I have seen them on the battlefield and I've seen them in the classroom and sometimes when you take a look at what's happening in Washington, you look at what's happening globally, it can cause you some anxiety but I will tell you I don't worry about it because I've spent time around the young men and women of this nation and they will be the Millennials in particular and probably GenZ, we will call these kids the greatest generation of this century. And when people say, “I think they're pampered,” well, then you've never seen them fighting in a firefight in Kandahar or you think they're entitled, well, then you've never seen them crossing the bridge to go to school in El Paso. **[TIME CODE 1:00:00]** I don't worry about this country because, again, I've been around these kids. We need to make sure they come in and want to be part of government service. And again, as I look around the classroom here today or the room today, it's great to see how many are going to be part of that. We need you; every one of our organizations need you, and I appreciate your sacrifice and your willingness to do it.

Gordon: I couldn't agree more. We are going to be okay as long as young people coming. Period. For all the things that have been said throughout today, we're going to be okay. And let me tell you why you want to come. I said this, Jose, I don't where you're sitting. It matters. What we do matters. The best thing about service to the nation is because you'll have a better chance to have more responsibility early, regardless of what you are going to do later. That will serve you on your way and the chance to pursue great purpose because it really is the combination of quest and capability. You will be well served as well as we will be well served. And we'll all be okay as long as you keep coming.

Olson: I've had an opportunity to go back to my alma mater the last couple of years they've asked me and consistently every time I go back and talk to the first classmen at West Point, their biggest complaint is this newest class is the weakest class ever. And so I've kind of made a shtick out of that and so I knew they were going to say that to me this last year up there and I said, "This is nothing new. In fact, a recent poll of America's youth indicated that they are callow, cowardly, self-serving, and leftist-leaning. Oh, I forgot to mention that poll was done in November of 1940 about the Greatest Generation as captured in “An Army at Dawn” by Rick Atkinson. So I play this **bags**.

In my class that came in, in the bicentennial year, when I graduated from high school, first year with women, we were the worst ever, the weakest class ever. Done okay for ourselves, but it's the age-old thing. I look down in our formation every day and it makes you feel a lot older, but the talent that resides there knocks your socks off every day. So we're still blessed to get extraordinary problem solvers in. They are empowered, to Sue's point. You want to come in and solve national security problems? What level do you want to start at? And I'd like to think we allow for failure; we allow for you to try new things and come up with new solutions. There are no cookie cutter solutions that we have handy, otherwise we wouldn't be asking. So it is. We’re lucky to have extraordinary talent still coming in. We need it to keep coming.

The other part that was addressed earlier today, we need to track corporate America. Stay close to us. Don't stray. You're comfortable making money in China; how about staying with our national security apparatus as well? And we've had some friction here lately where let me try and explain to you what we we're after. We're after the most precise form of warfare ever conceived. So it's absolute targeting, zero collateral damage; what's wrong with this approach unless and some of them do or naively leaning this way, there's never ever a good reason to go to war. I probably can't convince you of the value of this. But otherwise, the intelligence we're pursuing, the accuracy we're pursuing is to literally have the most accurate way of doing this which is consistent with our American values, right? Otherwise, carpet bomb, a familiar term that came up a couple years ago. Antithetical the way we do things.

Olson: And I'll just say, although great power competition and kinetic warfare will always be there, we are living in a world of all kinds of small crises, friction points, all around the world where the best solution is not a gun; it's a brain. And to bring people in who seek to move around the world, who seek to learn other languages, who seek to understand micro-regions so that the actions that we take are more likely to have a predictable effect. They are as important to the intelligence community and to the military community as those who want to be the first through the door with a gun.

Pope: Okay. We have time for just one or two questions and I'm going to try to start with a student back here.

AQ: My name is Ben McNally. I'm a senior here at UT. With the proliferation of third off-set technologies in the context of a strategic environment over new and great power conflict, how do you see the team of teams approach to C4ISR that **SOF** pioneered being applied to conventional forces and the broader national security apparatus?

McRaven: Well, Tony that's all yours.

Thomas: Wow, I'm going to have to take a couple of seconds to unpack that. **[TIME 1:05:00]** So you're asking how we need to adjust in terms of C4ISR relative to the emerging threats? Okay, yeah, thumbs up. As aggressively and \_\_\_\_ [1:05:14] as possible because right now we are a little bit stuck in the current war we're fighting. We acknowledge that most of that isn't fungible to appear competitor. So the ISR we're flying right now, in fact when it goes in the wrong places in Syria, it gets shot down where we have not coordinated our particular ISR. It won't survive in even a Korea scenario must less a China/Russia scenario. So just the dependency on traditional ISR over the last 17 years, it is completely whiteboard that one. Figure out where we're swarming stealthy etc. going forward. A confederation of sensors like we've never done before which is ironically how the Chinese are approaching it. Everything's a sensor. Everything's going into databases, **timed out**, with facial recognition and everything else they can throw on top of it. We're not there. We're behind. We need to pick it up.

Pope: Right here.

AQ: Hi, I'm Jillian **Schrader**. I'm a senior here at UT in the undergraduate program and also an undergraduate fellow with the Clements Center and I will be commissioning next year with the Air Force ROTC as well. So I'd like to say thank you to the panel for your service. My question is actually about autonomous warfare, **as is the** conversation on threats to the United States and on national security. I heard it mentioned a couple times with the panel. We talk a lot of about cyber security, cyber threats, but we haven't really been talking about as much autonomous warfare. And so my question is what are the consequences and risks of the United States developing this technology but also what are the risks if we don't?

Gordon: So I'll take the piece on the threat side. One of the things I think we haven't done as a nation as well as we might on the autonomous side is the security and the assurance of machine learning, artificial intelligence, all those things. If you think about the cyber threats and the ability to get into our systems, imagine being able to mess with the data or the algorithm and just do something slight and small that allows us to draw a different conclusion. And when you couple those things together, I think that leads to some pretty daunting scenarios. So if I would choose one thing that we probably, as a collective, under-invested in, is what I call AI assurance or AI security. And there are a whole bunch of things that go with that, privacy, civil liberties, attention to all those sorts of things. But if we don't get that piece right, the potential--and we proliferate the technologies that allows us to do things autonomously--the potential for either error or mischief would dominate. So if I were to choose one that I think is a really rich area for academic research as well as investment between the government and the private sector, I think it would be artificial intelligence assurance.

Thomas: I'll take a leap on the offensive side. I'm very self-critical that I'm stunted. I'm not the futurist. I'm not the visionary. I come to Austin to run around with a bunch of visionaries who make me think. But for this particular approach, I'm not spooked by Skynet. I'm not spooked by where people are going. I perversely think it might produce the greatest deterrent capability for state-on-state conflict ever envisioned where you can take down my satellites, you can knock out my infrastructure, I will still have the capability to come hunt and find you and do what I have to do to survive. Does that describe the futility of warfare sufficiently among state actors? You still have to do deal with non-state actors and others but it might be the new mutually assured destruction with layered-in nuclear aspects as well.

I'm comfortable going well and fortunately, again, the adversaries are already going there so you'd have to compete but I think if you get to a level of “boy, this is futile,” you actually have autonomous systems that even if I knock out your nerve centers, knock out your C4 and etc., you can still come at me? Why are we spending all our money on this stuff? And I am literally talking myself out of a job when I say that, but I am comfortable that that's where it could go as opposed to being spooked by the robots have taken over.

Pope: My colleague or friend from the New York Times, Eric Schmidt.

AQ: This is for General Thomas. Thank you to all the panelists today. General, I was wondering if you could help us give an assessment of the great power competition on the African continent, specifically the military challenges that China and Russia are posing there today?

Thomas: Again, it's a pretty complex question and I think as you know and as you've written extensively about it, our historical focus, the last decade or so, has been almost exclusively counter-terrorism because of the draw and because of the sanctuary that several groups enjoy there. There has been **[TIME CODE 01:10:00]** an absolute realization that it is a great power competition area. Interesting, when you talk about information operations opportunities, we just touched--cited this one as an ironic but not exploited opportunity. The Chinese are throwing money all over Africom, ostensibly as the supporter of the Islamic faith, building mosques, building, etc., you name it, in many countries where we're having to compete with the monetary aspect but also tied to a spiritual, a compelling linkage. We are giving China a complete pass for the penal colony they're running in Western China with the Uighers. It's one of the most impressive things on the planet and interestingly after we talked about this, three days later, the BBC trotted that out and others have glommed onto it. But you talk about competing simultaneously or the acknowledgement that China and Russia are there. China and Russia are in Djibouti in a big way right now. They have a huge naval base that is defying sovereign power there. They’re throwing money at a lot of other places. They are competing pretty aggressively on that continent and so it's complicated a CT approach with a broader outlet that requires some pretty deep strategic considerations.

AQ: \_\_\_\_\_\_ [1:11:13, *off mic*].

Thomas: In Libya extensively and certainly trying to seize the spoils of the coalition activities that unfortunately have not solved the civil war there but absolutely active. They're very active.

Pope: The question was about the Russians. This is going to be our last question and I'm going to use my prerogative as a moderator to say it's going to come from a student. So does a student have a question?

AQ: Thank you for being here. I wanted to place a question in particular for General Thomas in regards to China's influence in South America, particularly Venezuela and their great presence in their oil industry. What kind of interest would the American military have in having any influence, especially the current political situation over there in regards or in conflict with China's great influence and what repercussions could that have?

Thomas: If I understand the question, what are military interests in either a stable or a Chinese-affiliated Venezuela? I'd actually have to start by giving Chinese props. What was the latest most visible thing they did in Venezuela? They pushed their hospital ship in there, much like our U.S. Comfort that has done great things for us around the world. But very visibly, they're the benevolent organization that's come in to deal with Venezuela's challenges in terms of refugees and medical challenges. So they're playing a broad front there, both they and Russia, in our backyard, as much to be provocative as maybe with a longer term goal that we haven't even perceived yet. But premature for any military kind of policy concerns on our part other than you have a very challenged state that is barely propping itself up and now you have actors who we don't necessarily consider to be benevolent in there shoring it up. We've seen this movie before elsewhere.

Gordon: And I'll just jump in to say that their presence is real. What they offer to these nation states is real. Right? It's money for ports and things. The problem that it presents that we try and expose is the longer term ramifications of the debt load that you have or the fundamental loss of the sovereignty or the power of the nation because you've basically sold yourself to someone who offered you something very real. There's also the piece of power **projection,** but there is that more insinuation into a society and over time undermining the nation's ability to have its own resources because they will have sold the debt to other nation states. It's a fascinating--it's a very complex challenge because it is both real and beneficial and deleterious.

Pope: I'd just like to wrap this up by thanking the panel and this has been a real treat to have this distinguished panel put together and I know how busy everybody up here is and so we greatly appreciate the time you've taken to come see us and can you join me in thanking them for their time. [*applause*]

[*End of Recording*]