

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus Decodes Dynamics in the Middle East

Overwatch Podcast Transcript



Featuring David Petraeus and Maseh Zarif

OCTOBER 31, 2019

Evolving conflicts and unrest are reshaping the Middle East rapidly. The U.S. will continue to have key national interests at stake in this region even as challenges outside it demand greater American attention. ISW Board Member General (Ret.) David H. Petraeus joined Maseh Zarif to share his views on a range of issues, including the state of ISIS post-Baghdadi, Iran's regional campaigns, U.S. policy in the region, and the challenge of balancing among national security requirements globally.

Maseh Zarif

This is Overwatch, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. My name is Maseh Zarif, and I'm your host for this episode.

ISW recently held its annual National Security Leadership Award Dinner in New York City. On the sidelines of that event, I sat down with retired general David Petraeus, an ISW board member, to get his perspective on key issues in the Middle East. General Petraeus has nearly four decades of public service including his command of coalition forces in Iraq during the surge and his time as director of the CIA. Our conversation covers ISIS's future after Baghdadi, the broader conflict and instability in Syria and Iraq, Iran's regional aggression, and U.S. efforts to deter the regime, and how the U.S. is approaching both challenges and opportunities in the broader region.

Maseh Zarif

General Petraeus, it's a privilege to be able to have you on Overwatch. Thanks so much for joining us.

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus

My pleasure, thanks.

Maseh Zarif

So we're about 48 hours out from what was a successful American military operation that ended in the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and you're in a unique position to be able to reflect on this type of operation given your service to the nation, your career culminating in your command of forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, as the head of U.S. Central Command, and as the Central Intelligence Agency Director. So what were your impressions when you heard about the raid? As you're hearing about some of the details, how do you put it in perspective?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus

Well, it's a little bit similar to the night that we got bin Laden, frankly, and I monitored that operation as the commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan. And when it was all over, I turned to the colonel who was in the special command post for special mission unit operations and said, you know, "It was a privilege to be with you this evening. Now let's get back to the I2 operations that are ongoing tonight in Afghanistan." So, this is a very significant accomplishment. Baghdadi achieved things that even Osama bin Laden did not, established the first ever caliphate the size of the state of Indiana and also distinguished the Islamic State through the very aggressive, effective, and innovative use of social media and the internet, established essentially a cyber-caliphate in addition to the caliphate on the ground in Iraq and Syria, truly governed those areas. Again, these are achievements that Osama bin Laden never accomplished.

That said, the organization will designate another leader. We may already know who that is, and the organization will continue. Even as they mourn Baghdadi, they will resume operations. Certainly it will take a while for someone, if that's possible, to emerge as such a capable and effective leader, but ISIS will still be a force to be reckoned with in Iraq and Syria. There are some 15 to 25,000 Islamic State fighters still at large. A hundred have escaped detention during this period of U.S. withdrawal and the shifted focus of the Syrian Democratic Forces that we were enabling until the decision to withdraw. And as always, we have to keep our eye on these groups.

It's very hard to put a stake through the heart of an organization, or of ideas, or indeed of the cyber-caliphate in the way that we can, in essence, put a stake through the heart of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and other leaders and have over the years. The materials that were taken off the objective, at which Baghdadi blew himself, up can enable our intelligence agencies and special operators to just continue to pull in the string, if you will, to just keep reeling in additional leaders of the Islamic State and to take apart the organization from the top down. In the past, we've actually not just defeated these organizations, in some cases, we've destroyed them.

That, I think, is the accurate description of what we did to Al-Qaeda in Iraq, during the surge in Iraq, and sustained that damage on Al-Qaeda in Iraq in the subsequent three and a half years until we withdrew our combat forces. And very quickly after that, the Iraqi prime minister undertook very divisive sectarian activities that once again tore apart the fabric of society that we'd worked together to bring back together, the Sunni and Shia Arabs of that country and once again left the Sunni Arabs of Iraq with a sense of alienation, exclusion, and no hope in the land of the two rivers. And that allowed the Islamic State to play on these feelings as Al-Qaeda in Iraq had before it, as Sunni insurgent movements had before it. It also took the focus off the Islamic State because there were all these demonstrations and other activities that required the attention of the Iraqi Security Forces. ISIS obviously drifted into Syria, gained much additional manpower, combat capability, vehicles, weapons, money, and so on and swept back into Iraq, making short work of Iraqi Security Forces in the northern and western parts of the country. And the U.S. had to reintroduce forces, and at the end of the last administration, had some 5,500 troops on the ground once again.

So, again, we know that whenever we take our eye off, our focus off of groups even after they've been defeated or destroyed, extremist elements can have a resurgence, and they will indeed try to do just that. We do see activities of the Islamic State, of various terrorist cells and insurgent elements carrying out a variety of attack in Iraq and in Syria, as well. My concern with the withdrawal of U.S. forces is that we would indeed not just take our eyes off the Islamic State, but we would divert the focus of our Syrian Democratic Forces partners, largely Syrian Kurds whose families are being displaced from parts of that country by the Turkish establishment of the security zone some 20 miles into northern Syria and then by the incursion of the Syrian regime forces of the murderous Bashar al-Assad supported by Iran and Russia.

Maseh Zarif

Your description of some of the dynamics around the resurgence of AQI, particularly in Iraq, are really important because the way that you're describing governance conditions but then also what the United States was doing in that period after we really had AQI on its heels. It wasn't inevitable that they would resurge, but the combination of factors that you're describing, I think, is really important to keep in mind, especially as we're looking at what's happening now. The threat of ISIS in Syria is one aspect of a much broader conflict. I want to ask you about a phrase that I first heard you use back in 2015 in describing the conflict in Syria, and you called it a geopolitical Chernobyl. I wonder if you can unpack what you mean by that for our listeners.

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus

Yes. Essentially, that phrase refers to Syria as a meltdown of a country, and a meltdown that ultimately has resulted in well over 500,000 Syrian deaths, the displacement of over half the population and then half of that outside the country, so millions and millions of refugees, essentially a Sunni/Shia civil war but with many other complexities as a variety

of different groups were battling the regime and sometimes battling each other, so a country in which there are numerous sectarian and ethnic and tribal fault lines and a place that, curiously, is one where the enemy of my enemy is not always my friend.

It is, again, a real mosaic in certain parts with many different groups, sometimes supported by many different external countries all competing for power, control, resources, influence, and so forth. Again, the idea of a Chernobyl is that this country is not only melting down, it's also spewing violence, extremism, instability, and this tsunami of refugees not just into neighboring countries. Certainly every country on Syria's borders has hundreds of thousands, if not millions, Turkey with 3.5 million refugees on its soil alone, but all the way into Europe, causing, in the end, the biggest domestic populous challenges that many of our NATO allies have experienced since the end of the Cold War.

Maseh Zarif

One of the drivers of instability that's been spewing from this conflict has been Iran, which has used the war to continue to build out a forward base in Syria, in part to target our ally, Israel. So amidst the most recent U.S. policy shifts and the drawdown announcements, one of my concerns has been how Iran may further exploit a perception of reduced U.S. commitment. How do you think the regime interprets the decision-making and the process? What do you think their perception is in Tehran?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus

Well, I'm sure they're giving high-fives to each other behind closed doors and saying, "See? We outlasted the world's greatest superpower," and keeping in mind that Iran has a number of different objectives. One is, of course, to establish the so-called Shia Crescent in which Iran has the paramount influence, so an area of Shia Muslims that extends from Iraq through Syria and then down into southern Lebanon and Lebanese Hezbollah, to add to that a groundline of communications that would enable Syria to send tractor-trailer trucks full of military equipment, military industrial manufacturing plants and so forth all the way to, again, Hezbollah or into Syria proper.

Iran would also like to Lebanonize Iraq and Syria in the same way that it has Lebanonized Lebanon. And by this, I mean that it wants to establish real muscle in the streets in the form of a militia or militias and then to augment that with political power in the country's parliaments, again as it has done in Lebanon, where you have Lebanese Hezbollah, which is a very powerful militia, an extremist group, and you have a very significant coalition in the parliament that gives the Hezbollah grouping a virtual veto on bills that they don't like. And Iran would clearly love to achieve the same Iraq where it is indeed supporting a number of different Shia militia and where some of the politicians are aligned with Iran are representatives in the Council of Representatives, some of them indeed militia leaders against the law of Iraq, but nonetheless have seats in the Council of Representatives. And they'd, again, love to do the same in Syria.

So these are what Iran seeks to achieve, and a U.S. withdrawal from Syria, which is now is not the policy of the United States. It now appears that the U.S. force and hopefully coalition elements will still enable the Syrian Democratic Forces to control about half of the northeastern part of Syria that was controlled before, including the oil fields, which is quite important because they provide revenue for whomever it is that controls them as they did when the Islamic State controlled them, as they have while our partners, the Syrian Democratic Forces, have controlled them, and as they would if they were to go back into the hands of the murderous Bashar al-Assad and the regime forces. So this also will help restore some of the credibility that arguably would've been lost by a complete withdrawal and an abandonment of our Syrian Kurdish and Syrian Sunni Arab partners on the ground. And indeed, it will avoid, to some degree, what Senate Majority Leader McConnell, in my view accurately, described as a "grave strategic mistake." This will, in many respects, salvage what can be salvaged from what would have been quite a significant withdrawal and quite a significant victory handed to Iran, Russia, and Bashar al-Assad, none of whom are our friends, while abandoning, again, our Syrian Kurdish partners.

Maseh Zarif

You mentioned Iraq, and I wanted to shift briefly to be able to talk about what our analysts have been watching is a building political crisis inside of Iraq. It's led to massive street protests, and an inter-Shia struggle that we're witnessing right now. What's your view of what's happening inside of Iraq right now?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus

Well, it's very concerning. These demonstrations are not being promoted by Iran, and in fact, in many cases, they have targeted the Iranian-supported Shia militia headquarters because many of these individuals are very concerned about the level of Iranian influence in Iran. And keep in mind that much of this is in the Shia Arab part of Iraq, noting that that is the majority of the country, which also features a minority of Sunni Arabs and another minority of Iraqi Kurds. These demonstrations are essentially taking place because the people have just gotten to the point of boiling-over frustration at the corruption of those in power in government, the bureaucratic inefficiency which has resulted in very inadequate basic services: electricity, water, and a variety of other services that the government should be providing to their people and all of which should be absolutely expected by the people given that Iraq is one of the top three or so countries when it comes to proven oil reserves, and indeed has been increasing its export of crude oil and therefore the resources that it has, that it could be brought to bear and should be brought to bear on the challenges having to do with the provision of basic services for the people.

Now, again, this is a country where, in the heat of summer, it can be 150, sometimes even 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Air conditioning is an absolute must, and if the government isn't providing the electricity, as is often the case, then citizens have to buy electricity from the neighborhood generator man, as he's identified. That's totally unacceptable in a country with the extraordinary blessings that Iraq has, not just in crude oil and natural gas, but also in fresh water. It is the land of the two rivers, the only oil-producing country in the Arab world that has very substantial water resources. That should lead to a very successful agricultural sector. It also has the most sulfur reserves in the world. So there's no reason that Iraq shouldn't be vastly more economically developed. The people know this, and their frustration has finally evolved to the point that you see very, very substantial demonstrations. And tragically, these demonstrations have been met by fairly inept actions by the security forces that have resulted in dozens of the demonstrators being killed. And of course, that leads to more frustration and more demonstrations, and the violence that results can get out of hand if the people aren't sure that there will be significant changes made as a result of their expressions of this frustration.

My hope is that the Iraqi government, which has some very competent individuals, a very impressive president, prime minister, speaker of the Council of Representatives, at Parliament, and a number of other technocrats and various ministries, but that this government can finally get a grip on the corruption and the inefficiency and indeed improve the quality of life for Iraqi citizens, bringing it up to the level that I think should be reasonably expected in a country with the resource blessings that Iraq enjoys.

Maseh Zarif

Have you been concerned about the degree of penetration that Iran has had within political and security institutions inside of Iraq?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus

I have been very concerned about that. We've seen a campaign by Iran, indeed as I mentioned earlier, in a sense to Lebanonize Iraq if that is possible. Look, there's got to be some relationship with Iran. President Barham Salih will always note the size of the border they have with Iran. Iran is much bigger. It will always be their neighbor to the east. It is a fellow Shia Muslim country, albeit one that's not Arab and doesn't speak Arabic and has some very distinct differences and a history that includes a very bloody, nearly decade-long war between Iraq and Iran. But Iran has sought to capitalize on every opportunity. Indeed, when the Islamic State invaded Iraq and seemed to be threatening the outskirts of Baghdad, tragically this was used by the Iranian-supported Shia militia as a perfect excuse to come back on the streets in

uniform and weapons for the first time in any number since we defeated those militia during the battles of Basra and Sadr City and Khatami and so forth in March and April of 2008 during the second year of the surge. And those forces, to be fair, did help enormously in the counteroffensive against the Islamic State after defending, initially, Baghdad from any further penetration by the Islamic State fighters.

Then, again, these militias played a significant role in the ultimate defeat of the Islamic State. But now Iraq is wrestling with how to get the militias under control. As you know, a country should have a monopoly. A state, by definition, has a monopoly on legitimate use of force. But Iraq has challenges in that regard because of the continued semi-independent state of these militias, whatever the law may say and whatever policies have been articulated to bring them under the control of the legitimate security force units. Beyond that, Iran has certainly sought to increase its influence in the Iraqi parliament and in a variety of other ways. But in some cases, that has actually resulted in a considerable degree of pushback by the Iraqi citizens, even among the Shia Arabs who do not want to be essentially the State of Iran, who treasure their system in which the religion is not part and parcel of the government but is separate from it, this so-called quietist tradition associated with the Grand Ayatollah Sistani and the holy city of Najaf in Iraq, holiest city in Shia Islam, which is very different from the practice in Iran where, of course, the supreme leader is also an ayatollah and where the religious and governmental apparatus are often one and the same.

Maseh Zarif

In Iraq now, we also have a force presence that's tied to an ongoing U.S. policy that's focused on ISIS. But how would you define the set of interests the United States still has in Iraq that those forces and the Embassy in Baghdad are supporting right now?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus

Well, I think we very much feel a continued responsibility to help Iraq: to help its leaders further develop the political system, which, to be fair, has had successive fair and free democratic elections; to help the ministries to improve the quality of basic services; to help, again, Iraq writ large to resist the intrusion of Iran that is not warranted, again recognizing that there has to be a relationship between Iran and Iraq; in an ideal world, to help Iraq establish itself as a flourishing, vibrant, democratically governed country with a prosperous free-market economy with Iraqi traditions, needless to say, throughout all of that. That has proven challenging, but Iraq has made considerable progress in a host of different areas, albeit not to the level that the citizens understandably believe should've been achieved. Additionally, of course, there's also the interest of helping Iraq prevent Iran from establishing the groundline of communications that I referred to earlier running from Iran through Iraq, Syria, and down into southern Lebanon, where it can enable Hezbollah to threaten even more our Israeli allies; and indeed to help Iraq just avoid being Lebanonized in the way that Iran would like to do.

Maseh Zarif

So I'd like to pan out on the regional map, if I could. We've been intensely focused on the Iraq/Syria theater over the last few weeks and for good reason. It seems like a long time ago, but back in September, we witnessed a brazen attack by Iran on oil infrastructure in Saudi Arabia. I want to ask you: Have we seen the end of that escalation pattern?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus

I don't think we have for the simple reason that Iran's economy is hurting even more now than it was when it undertook a series of different attacks of an escalation nature, initially some difficult-to-attribute attacks against oil tankers, then the shootdown of a 130 million dollar U.S. drone, a variety of other activities and ultimately, of course, this very substantial attack on a Saudi oil processing facility that controls some 5 percent of the crude oil exports from Saudi Arabia, a very significant attack and one that reflected a degree of understanding of that facility and precision in the attack, using cruise missiles and drones perhaps coming from an unexpected direction to avoid the Saudi air and ballistic missile early warning systems and the defenses associated with them.

Iran is still very much in a box in the wake of some of these attacks. The United States has pushed them further into a corner through additional sanctions driving the oil exports of Iran way below where they were when the previous administration imposed sanctions on Iran during the course of the discussions on the Iran Nuclear Accord. And Iran is beginning to resume some of the activities that were forbidden under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Agreement, again the Iran Nuclear Accord, all trying to get Europe, the United States, others to recognize the need to come back to the table, to lift sanctions, and to negotiate on the issues that the U.S. feels are inadequate in that accord, and perhaps to allow the United States and others to also raise concerns about the Iranian missile program and its malign activities in supporting Shia militia in the region.

Iran has seen serious degradation in its economy because of the sanctions, and they keep getting tighter. Its economic growth is going down quite dramatically. Its currency is plummeting. Inflation is rising, and unemployment is skyrocketing. Iran clearly is in a very substantial box or corner. We have to be very careful because it can be in a position where its only option is to lash out. We need to try to deter that by reestablishing the Iranian sense of what might happen if its lashing out prompts U.S. and coalition responses but without doing so to the extent that Iran feels it has nothing to lose and just unleashes whatever it is that it has. The U.S. has shored up its forces. Some 14,000 additional forces over the course of a number of months have gone into the Gulf States. Among these are additional patriot system batteries for the anti-ballistic-missile defense, early warning radars, short-range systems and so forth to establish a degree of more comprehensive air and missile defense than was previously in place in some of our partner countries in the region and also of course to improve the defenses of our own forces while also adding to the capabilities of U.S. forces to respond to further Iranian provocation.

Maseh Zarif

So on this question of working to deter Iran from further aggression, you obviously, during your time in command of forces in Iraq, had to deal with a direct hostile campaign by Iran. Looking back to that period, what are the lessons that you draw for what it takes to have effective deterrents against this current regime in Iran?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus

Well, Iran has to be convinced that they're going to pay a substantial price for certain activities. Now, I'm not a fan of explicit red lines necessarily. We learned why in the previous administration, where the red line turned out not to be a true red line, and in fact, inaction after a red line has been crossed can obviously undermine deterrents. One can ask, I think, the past six months or so, whether we might not have responded to some of the earlier attacks. And had we done so, would deterrents have been shored up instead of the situation which we did essentially nothing kinetically? Certainly there were cyber and economic sanctions in the wake of those attacks but not of a sufficient nature, I don't think, to establish the kind of deterrents that one would want, and certainly subsequent activities seemed to validate that assessment. We communicated at various times with Iranian interlocutors.

I sent a message one time to the leader of the Revolutionary Guard's Corps Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, that if a similar attack was undertaken in Baghdad where they were basically lobbing massive bomb, for want of a better term, that was just made up of an enormous number of explosives, and then surrounded by nails, anything that would, when it exploded, cause enormous harm and damage. It was lofted over one of the walls of one of our outposts in Baghdad and thankfully did not cause that much damage. Another one actually exploded prematurely, killing the Shia militia elements that were going to employ it. And again, after that, we said, "If this happens again, there is going to be a very serious response." And there was none again for, I think it was a good two years or so.

So the question always is: How do you establish or, in the wake of an attack, reestablish deterrents? Noting that we did lose probably around 600 American soldiers to the explosively-formed projectiles that were used in improvised explosive devices by the Shia militia supported by Iran, those devices having been sent in from Iran, which had the manufacturing capability to prepare them for use in Iraq.

Maseh Zarif

So, as we're watching what plays out in both Syria and Iraq, I want to ask you if you could put yourself in the shoes of a leader of a country who's partnered or allied with the United States, whether there's a moment of recalculation for them in how they view long-term U.S. commitment to the region?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus

Well, I think the decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria, the very sudden decision and not one that was well-coordinated, planned, phased, and so forth but resulted in a very rapid movement of U.S. forces essentially, again, abandoning our Syrian partners on the ground, clearly that calls into question U.S. credibility of its pledges to our allies and partners. This is not unlike, perhaps even more serious than, the red line that was not a red line, less-than decisive actions in the wake of Russia's support for separatists in southeast Ukraine, the occupation of Crimea, some actions in the Asia-Pacific region. So, again, my hope is that the decision to actually keep maybe as much as 1,000 U.S. forces still in northeastern Syria controlling 50 to 60 percent of the territory that we used to control and encompassing the oil fields that are such important sources of revenue and could be a very important source of bargaining power for our Syrian Kurd partners, as well, that this will at least salvage some of what we had achieved in Syria, will see to the needs of those who have become refugees when just two weeks ago they were partners, provide a location that families can move to if they're in areas that the Turks are going to clear of Syrian Kurds, and again restore a bit of credibility to U.S. pledges not just in that region but around the world.

Maseh Zarif

So in these conversations that we have, we spent a lot of time on threats and challenges to American interest, but every now and then I try to get in a question about opportunities. And I know that you travel in the Middle East and are in touch with a lot of leaders both in government and in the private sector. So I wanted to ask you, What types of longer-term trends are you seeing in the region that give you hope in terms of progress for countries and communities that would also align with American interests?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus

Well, there are numerous countries in the region which have been doing quite well and have been very staunch partners of the U.S. and vice versa. If you look at the stability, security, prosperity of a number of the Gulf States, of the United Arab Emirates, which has, interestingly, two different economic development models. One, Dubai, which has no energy resources to speak of and has become the critical trans-shipment, maritime, and air hub for the entire region, has become a tourist destination, has become a financial center, has become again an import/export hub, all of this. That's one model. And then you have Abu Dhabi, which does have considerable energy resources and has benefited from those but has pursued a very thoughtful and very well-planned construction of infrastructure of a variety of different hotels, Formula One race course, an element of the Louvre in the Middle East, colleges, and so forth.

You see some of this also in Qatar, which admittedly, of course, is in a dispute with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, but nonetheless has been a very supportive partner of the United States, providing the resources to establish one of the biggest bases in that region at Al Udeid Air Base, which is in fact where the CENTCOM, Central Command forward headquarters is located, the headquarters that was built during my time with 100 million dollars provided by the government of Qatar. And then work your way on up. You can see Bahrain once doing well, Kuwait certainly doing very well despite potential transition that will occur perhaps in the years that lie ahead.

And then, of course, you have Saudi Arabia, which is paradoxical in some respects because, along with the impressive reforms, the Vision 2030, the efforts to reduce the reliance of the Saudi economy on export of hydrocarbons and increase a variety of other sectors and build modern cities and universities and allow women to drive and allow the establishment of movie theaters, even music concerts, and a variety of steps forward, there have also, unfortunately, been other incidents that have given investors and partners pause. And, again, all of that has to be reconciled. One hopes that

there's a recognition of the concerns that these other activities have created and a renewed commitment to ensuring that actions are taken to reassure those outside and to continue to march along the path of reform, which has also commendably included a degree of moderation in the practice of Islam in a country that has long been known for a fairly ultra-conservative form of the Islamic religion. Then you can broaden the aperture and look at the continued resilience of Jordan, a country that has virtually no resources other than a few tourist attractions and has had to achieve all that it has by just sheer dint of intelligence and, again, thoughtful development of medical tourism, regular tourism, and so forth, despite having, again, no water, no oil, limited access to a port, and so forth, and caught in a very, very tough neighborhood, as well.

And then out from there, noting that to be sure, on the Arabian Peninsula, you still have Yemen, which is still in the throes of, whether it's a Sunni/Shia civil war or an intra-Sunni difference of considerable magnitude; if you go into the North Africa Arab region, the continued problems of Libya. Tunisia certainly making a successful transition to democracy but one that is still very fragile and tenuous because the economic development has not yet been achieved that could reassure the people that this form of government can deliver for them what the authoritarian regime of the past did not. And of course, you have the biggest of the Arab countries, Egypt, which has overthrown the Muslim Brotherhood government which posed so many concerns because of the exclusive nature of the constitution developed during that period but which then has taken on certain elements of authoritarianism and pressure on the press and on government organizations and so on, and give pause, as well. We've seen some demonstrations there, also.

My hope, again, would be that this could move forward, that there could be the kind of economic development and reform, some of which has been undertaken. Some of the macroeconomic initiatives of the government of President el-Sisi have been courageous as well as impressive. But there are lingering issues that do have to be dealt with, such as the amount of military control over portions of the economy and a variety of other practices that, again, can give rise to the kinds of citizen frustration that ultimately result in a million people being back in Tahrir Square.

Maseh Zarif

I want to ask you to help put the Middle East region in a broader global context. Since the 2018 National Defense Strategy was released, we've had an ongoing debate about balancing our commitments in the Middle East, including counter-terrorism and great-power competition with China and Russia. How do you think we should approach this question of balancing?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus

Well, it is very clear that as the previous U.S. administration pursued an initiative called the Rebalance to Asia or the Pivot, that the extraordinary rise of China, a country with which I hope we can have a mutually beneficial relationship but certainly one that is realistically our biggest strategic competitor, as well as one of our biggest trading partners, that indeed this does require vastly more attention, resources, and so forth. So, where during my time, certainly leading up the surge in Iraq, we could focus almost exclusively on the development of leaders, units, equipment, organizations to carry out comprehensive civil and military counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and in Afghanistan, now our continued efforts in those countries dramatically reduced in size from, say, the 165,000 American men and women on the ground in Iraq during the surge or 100,000 Americans and 50,000 coalition troops in Afghanistan when I was privileged to command there.

Each of these now is vastly smaller, much more sustainable, still necessary, and that is important because we do need to devote much greater attention, resources, forces, new capabilities, and the rest of that to developments in the Asia-Pacific. The future will be written in Asia, and clearly we need a coherent and comprehensive American foreign policy together with our allies and partners around the world to address the challenges that are emerging, while noting again that I hope that we can work together with China and avoid certainly ever even approaching a war with China, which would be disastrous for either side. Let's keep in mind that while it's useful to look at past cases where there was a established

power and a rising power such as Thucydides wrote about when Sparta was the established power and Athens was rising, and then he wrote, “Inevitably, they went to war.” That cannot be inevitable in a nuclear age.

And those past histories that Graham Allison at Harvard examined so impressively do have some value. They are instructive in some respects. They are helpful historically. But, of course, the change with the advent of nuclear weapons is so substantial that I think it requires even greater attention to avoid inevitably going to war. That does mean, however, that we very much need to establish a very substantial deterrent capability and, if necessary, the forces to defend our interests should that be unavoidable. By the way, just having those forces, of course, contributes to deterrence. But above all, we also need strategic dialogue with China of the nature of a Henry Kissinger or some other deep strategic thinker so that it’s very clear that potential adversaries understand our absolute core, vital objectives, and so that in turn we understand theirs, and we can work out the differences that have accumulated over the past decade or two.

This is an era of renewed great-power rivalries, and of course it’s Russia as well as China, although clearly China is unquestionably the future military superpower along with the United States having already achieved status as an economic superpower and indeed presenting an alternative political and economic system that is competing very effectively with the democracies and free market economic countries of the world, many of which are experiencing a degree of populism domestically that is bringing about challenges in those countries at a time when this most significant competition has arisen. History is back. Francis Fukuyama’s title, *The End of History*, was a bit premature as it turns out, and as he now has acknowledged, as well, and the competition this time is not between usually successful democratic countries with capitalist economies against the Soviet Communist Party and a command economy that Francis Fukuyama predicted rightly would collapse of its own weight. This time the competition is between democratic countries, many of which are experiencing a variety of challenges internally and a hugely successful, meritocratic one-party Chinese government system with hyper-competitive free market economy in an ecosystem that also includes very substantial state-owned enterprises.

So this is the reality of today. This is the reality with which we’ll deal for decades to come, and it’s one for which we desperately need a comprehensive and coherent foreign policy and one that acknowledges the very substantial value of allies, of partners, of alliances, of multilateral organizations and institutions and of the imperative of trying to sustain the rules-based international order that has done a reasonably good job since the end of World War II and since a 50-year period that included two world wars and a Great Depression and has at least prevented anything similar to that since their advent. I am, obviously, a proponent of U.S. leadership in the world, of multilateral trade agreements, institutions, and indeed of the value of democracy and free market economics. But clearly the countries of the world, our own included, that cherish the freedoms associated with democracy and the vibrance that is produced by market competition do need to look at how our economies and our systems have not lived up to the hopes and aspirations of all of our citizens. And I think that is the reality with which we have to deal in the years that lie ahead.

Maseh Zarif

Thank you very much for joining us, General Petraeus. We appreciated the conversation and hope to have you back.

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus

It’s been a privilege. Thanks very much.

Maseh Zarif

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