



Widening Middle Eastern Security Partnerships: Q&A

The IISS Manama Dialogue 2016 Fourth Plenary Session
General (Retd) David Petraeus
Kentaro Sonoura, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Japan

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As Delivered

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General Petraeus, permit me to take off from where you left yesterday. Your comments made me a bit puzzled and eager to learn more about what you meant by Humpty Dumpty in Syria. Are we talking about more of an organised partition of Syria as a result of what you said, it is too late to have that political process that has been spoken of, or is it a situation where it is a de facto division of the country as is, and wherever it may be?

And the second part, General Petraeus, since you have been familiarising yourself with the potential administration of a president like Donald Trump, where do you see the administration going in its relationship with Iran? We understand clearly that it is not going to be about tearing the nuclear deal together, or not even tearing it at all, so might it begin by introducing the regional elements? Might it begin by objecting really seriously and tangibly to the export and the making of militias and exporting them to Arab lands? Would that take the shape of the beginning for the Trump administration? And if you were to be secretary of state, what advice would you give? Thank you.

Nadhim Zahawi, Member, Foreign Affairs Select Committee, House of Commons, UK

Clearly non-state actors' ambition is to become state actors, and it is right that General Petraeus talks about us focusing on taking territory away from them. The challenge, clearly, for all of us, is going to be Mosul. We have been discussing it in the previous session. And I would push back at the politicians in the room when they talk about a plan for post-Daesh Mosul. Yes, there is a stabilisation plan to spend tonnes of money on reconstruction. Yes, there is a military plan, because rightly so we have to defeat them militarily. But where is the political track on this? And when you talk to the politicians on the ground, whether it is the Kurds, the Sunnis, or the Shia administration in Baghdad, they are looking for guidance. Now, clearly we are nervous about governance. We sent Paddy Ashdown to Bosnia; I would suggest we send John Jenkins to Mosul.

But we do need a real plan, and as a member of the British Foreign Affairs Committee, I do not see any evidence of a real political plan, because many of the players on the ground, yes, they do not want to instruct them or mandate them, but they certainly want some hand-holding and some robust – really robust – challenge of their

positions. You have seen in Baghdad the passing of the Hashd al-Shaabi law in one week; how does that make the Peshmerga feel? These are all dangerous signals that are coming through. I guarantee you Qasem Soleimani in Iran will have a plan. We do not have a political plan.

Hee-seog Kwon, Director-General, African and Middle Eastern Affairs Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea

First, with State Minister Kentaro Sonoura of Japan, we are grateful to Japan for all the country has done for the security of the Middle East, and congratulate it on its great achievements in many fronts. Like Japan, Korea is a very close partner with the Gulf countries, and the broader Middle East. Japan and Korea have trodden a remarkably similar path of engaging the Middle East first economically – we have been importing even today a lot of energy, oil and gas, and also we are building infrastructure in various parts of the region – and secondly in terms of security. With Japan, Korea have dispatched a combined maritime-forces elements, and conducting counter-piracy activities in the Gulf of Aden and off the Somali coast. We have made a tremendous contribution to the First Gulf War in 1990, and also we have dispatched our military troops to the Afghanistan war that started in 2001, and the Iraq War in 2003. We have sent peacekeeping troops to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) since 2006, staying there until today. Also, Japan and Korea have both suffered from some sacrifices of their nationals in the middle of the 2000s in Iraq. So the Middle East's security is very important to Korea and Japan, and East Asia, and I thank State Minister Kentaro Sonoura again for the excellent presentation.

With regard to the presentation by General Petraeus, General, I have been fighting with you in Afghanistan during the period of 2010 and 2011.

General (Retd) David Petraeus, Chairman, Kohlberg Kravis Roberts and Co., US

Fighting alongside.

Hee-seog Kwon, Director-General, African and Middle Eastern Affairs Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea

Against the Taliban. And this morning, we heard from Secretary Carter about the US government's fair assessment of substantial achievements over the years in combating terrorism and Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL. Your tremendous efforts to combat ISIL has made some success in recent months, particularly now we are fighting very well against ISIL in Mosul.

Now, there have been a lot of assurances by the senior US officials – perhaps including you – that the US will remain committed to the Middle East's peace and security, despite numerous statements to the contrary by the Trump transition team. So my question is, now I am wondering how the new US Middle East policy would affect the Obama administration-initiated pivot to Asia. Thank you.

Dr Albadr Abu-Baker Al Shateri, Professor, National Defense College, GHQ Armed Forces, United Arab Emirates

I do not remember such title for some time, 'Widening Middle Eastern Security Partnerships'. So my question, is this because of a change in the structure of the world system? That is to say, the distribution of power among different states, which calls for Middle Eastern actors to partner with, or is it because Middle Eastern actors are dubious of the United States' role? Just to be provocative, as you asked us.

My second question is to His Excellency the State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan. Japan was always an important actor in Middle Eastern affairs. Now, from your talk, I am anticipating there will be a greater Japanese role in the affairs of the Middle East. Could you explain to me what you can add on the issues of highest concern, say, ISIS, Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran, Iraq and other security and other issues? So if you could explain to me what will be, at this moment, a bigger role for Japan in Middle Eastern affairs. Thank you.

Sir John Jenkins, Executive Director, IISS-Middle East

Thank you very much. Very good questions, if I may say so. Perhaps I could ask the Minister to respond first?

Kentaro Sonoura, State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Japan

First of all, thank you very much for your very kind comments. Last week we have concluded a military agreement between Korea and Japan, and we do value this close relationship and hope to enhance it in the future.

Regarding the question from the UAE, last week I had the pleasure of visiting your country, and thank you very much for the welcome I received there. Regarding Japan's contributions, this is limited to non-military areas. As you know, according to our constitution, we are not able to contribute in other areas. For example, capability building, investment in infrastructure, mostly in the industry side, creation of jobs and opportunities to stop the disenfranchisement of people who are tempted to rush towards extremism. If they are in good jobs with contented lives and an income, we can build a stable society from the foundations. But not just financial contributions. Regarding areas that Daesh has fled from, we would be able to contribute such capacity building, making people's lives easier and more comfortable.

Regarding Japan's policy, we believe that the best way is to go in the middle. I hope you understood my Arabic. Basically it amounts to the fact that we are not going to be imbalanced in any way. In September, in Jericho, Palestine, there was a ministerial meeting regarding an agricultural park. There were ministers from Palestine, Israel, Jordan. They shook hands in front of the cameras and declared their intention to continue this collaboration and spiritual cooperation into the future. And this is the typical way in which Japan can contribute. We are grateful for your continued assistance and support. Thank you very much.

General (Retd) David Petraeus, Chairman, Kohlberg Kravis Roberts and Co., US

Raghida, on the issue of Humpty Dumpty and Syria, what I am really just saying there is that it is a situation in which it is not clear at all that Humpty Dumpty can be put back together again. I do not think that there is no political solution possible. I do not think it is too late for that, but I think it is very late in the day, indeed. And what I have offered in looking at that situation is, at the very least, a question of whether or not what individuals are trying to negotiate is actually achievable. A country that is led by a democratically elected pluralist democracy from Damascus – again, I am just not certain that that particular desired end state is achievable or realistic at this point in time, and at the very least I think we need to be thinking realistically, again, about what other alternatives there might be.

I think there are two overriding objectives in Syria now, and these are different from several years ago when other objectives might have been achievable. The first, obviously, is the defeat of Daesh, but also Jabhat Fateh al-Sham – any of the al-Qaeda affiliates – which is increasingly difficult because of the mingling of all of the different elements in the opposition in the north, in particular. But that has to be done. And then second, you have to stop the bloodshed. This is no longer about all of the other loftier ideas, I do not think. The imperative is to stop the bloodshed. Already 400,000-500,000 Syrians have been killed; over half the country has been displaced either externally or internally. The magnitude of that humanitarian catastrophe, again, requires very cold, hard thinking about how do you indeed stop what is going on in that regard. Again, certainly worth having aspirational ideas and so on, but also, I think, ask whether they are achievable.

With respect to Iran, I cannot speak for the president-elect or for General Mattis, who I think will be a great secretary of defense. You all know him well. He followed me at US Central Command and we served together in the fight to Baghdad, has three stars in Iraq, as well. We did the counter-insurgency field manual together, and so forth. But I think as you look at Iran, my thinking on that is less about the nuclear deal immediately. That has been breached; it is a multilateral deal. You can say we might have gotten a better one, whatever, but it exists. There are actually some positive elements to this. All of the medium-enriched uranium is gone, 98% of the low-enriched uranium is gone, there is a limit on the heavy water, the plutonium path to a bomb is ended by cement being poured into the reactor, and there is a pretty intrusive set of verification measures and inspections.

There are some significant downsides, though, that should cause us great concern. One, it lasts ten to 15 years, depending on the elements of it; and number two, of course, Iran gets access to tens of billions of dollars that were frozen around the world, and tens of billions more as they reintegrate into the global economy. Not all of

that money is going to programmes for deserving Iranian citizens. Some of it is ending up in the hands of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Quds Force, Basij militia and others, and fuelling some of that malign activity that I highlighted in the region.

But if you come out and look at what it is that we really want to accomplish, it seems to me that we want to ensure that Iran really means what it says when it says it never intends to build a nuclear weapon. So why does Congress and the White House not get together? They are all from the same party now. They can have a statement of national purpose that Iran will never be allowed to enrich to weapons-grade, and then ensure that our military capabilities to accomplish that are present and capable of achieving what their intended end state is. And then, second, to counter this malign activity further, with the countries in the region all working together, again, to show some of this activity is just not going to continue, and that there will be consequences for that, should it do so.

From Nadhim, the member of Parliament, the question about Mosul: as you may recall, that is a city I know a good bit about, having spent the first year in Iraq there after the fight to Baghdad. I often say [inaudible]. In fact, [inaudible] Shammari, the biggest tribe in Nineveh province.

As I mentioned yesterday, the battle that matters most in Mosul is not the battle to defeat Daesh; that is going to happen. The reason it is proceeding very deliberately is because they are making a very careful attempt not to destroy infrastructure that they know they will have to rebuild, and not to kill innocent civilians. But that campaign is proceeding; it is cut off. And if you are a member of Daesh in Mosul at this moment in time, you are a dead man walking, and that will be won. That, I have said for two years, will be the case with Daesh in Iraq.

The real challenge is the battle after the battle. And it is correct, Nadhim, to highlight that it is about not just the post-fight reconstruction, humanitarian assistance and the rest, but what the political settlement will be. I mentioned yesterday the importance – Nineveh province is the most complex human terrain in all of Iraq. It is not just Sunni majority, Arabs and pockets of Shia Arabs; there are Kurds, but of course they are from several different parties now, there are Christians, there are Yazidis, there are Shabak, there are Turkman – Turkman Shia as well as Turkman Sunni, which is why the Turks are lurking on the edge of Nineveh province – and then there are tribes and there are other elements of society. All of these have to be represented in the ultimate provincial government, and they have to feel that the government is responsive to them within means; above all, that they have minority rights in an area where the minorities have suffered, particularly under Daesh. Minority rights have to be insured even as majority rule is practised. That is critical. By the way, it is not just critical for Nineveh province, where we did actually establish a government like that, as some of you may recall, when I was the commander of the 101st Airborne Division early on in Iraq, and we had that government in place before Ambassador Bremer even showed up. So John remembers some of this well. And unfortunately some decisions after that made the task vastly more difficult than it otherwise would have been going forward.

But this is important for Iraq writ large. Inclusive governance is a must for Iraq. The lack of inclusive governance is what established the fertile field for the planting of the seeds of extremism and led to the rise of ISIS 2.0. What we do not want to see – and Nadhim, you are correct in highlighting this – is the establishment once again of fertile fields for the planting of the seeds of ISIS 3.0.

But if I could, to be fair – because I do talk to Brett McGurk, the presidential special envoy for the fight against Daesh – there is a plan. Now, whether that political plan will survive contact with reality or not – perhaps not. Few plans survive contact with the enemy. The question, then, is can they adapt from this base plan that they have, noting that the problem is not just Sunni versus Shia, Arab versus Kurd, all of the other elements. It is Sunni Arab versus Sunni Arab. It is other groups with fissures and friction between them as well. And the reason that Brett McGurk has been spending so much time in the region lately, and a good bit of that in Erbil, was on the front lines of Mosul just in the past week and down in Baghdad and so forth, is to try to push this along, to nudge it forward, noting that, candidly, we do not have the same leverage that I enjoyed when I was the commander in northern Iraq with the powers of an occupying force under the Geneva Convention, 20,000 great American men and women in uniform and 254 helicopters of the great 101st Division. This is a good bit more difficult than that.

For the delegate from Korea, I just want to start by thanking your country for the contribution of troops to both Iraq and Afghanistan. I was privileged to command them in each location and indeed to the counter-piracy effort which CENTCOM oversaw. I also want to applaud what seems to be a degree of rapprochement between Japan and Korea in the recent agreement on intelligence sharing. I would also note, I think you are hinting that the situation in Afghanistan is a bit fraught, and I believe that is true. I am concerned about it. I do applaud what Secretary Carter mentioned today, that they stopped drawing down further, that they opened up the rules of engagement a bit. All of these were recommendations that many made. My concern is that there is going to have to be a regaining of momentum in that fight, as we last achieved during the surge in Afghanistan where we halted the momentum of the Taliban and reversed it in key areas. But again, that will be done with Afghans on the front lines by and large, hopefully with the enabling assets that we bring to bear fully exploited, as I think we are doing to a very considerable degree in Iraq.

Again, I cannot speak for the incoming administration, but when asked I have said that what we should do with respect to Afghanistan is make a sustained commitment, stop the year-on-year agony of these reviews to determine how much we draw down, which cause enormous uncertainty and anxiety, understandably, in Afghanistan, and then push this forward, some conditions to be sure and necessary, but to ensure that there is an awareness that we are there for a very important reason, and that is to ensure that Afghanistan is never a sanctuary for al-Qaeda or other transitional extremists the way it was when the 9/11 attacks were planned there.

I also want to note, in reference to a comment from the Korean delegate, I do think the rebalance is very commonsensical, and it will continue. I would think, again, there is a shift in economic, geopolitical, even military resources and importance to the rapidly growing and very large economies and countries of the Asia-Pacific and of South Asia, and again, I think that will continue.

Finally, to the delegate from the UAE who asked what was indeed a very thought-provoking question, let me just cut right to this – I am a soldier and I only know how to be direct – and this is therefore about Yemen. I think the explanation on why the Saudis, the Emiratis, the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have taken action in Yemen is because it was very, very important to them, and they realised that the other countries that were taking action there were not going to increase their contributions, and so they did that. I personally, by the way, applaud this action and I think it is paradoxical that people who used to complain a couple of years ago that some of the Gulf countries wanted, as they said, to fight to the last American, or have us ... hold our coat while we went into the ring for them, are now criticising them in some respects for what it is that they are doing. Really, in truth, there have been mistakes, without question – the Saudis have forthrightly acknowledged one most recently – and then we just should just do more to assist in that regard, because they are, indeed, getting after it. They are in a very important effort against a separatist element that is trying to get at the point of a gun what it could not get at the political bargaining table in [inaudible]. Thanks.

Baria Alamuddin, Foreign Editor, Al Hayat Newspaper

General Petraeus, being responsible for that headline you talked about when you started, I feel like I can ask you a couple of questions. My first question, sir, is I do not know, I find it not surprising when you see those Sunnis being humiliated in Iraq, in Syria, in Lebanon, everywhere, really, that you have some elements of those joining Daesh. I am completely against them and I think they are barbaric, etc., etc. So, sir, do you not think we should treat this cause from the very beginning?

And my second question is more directly about Hashd al-Shaabi. Do you think this is going to grow into, and will be the cause of, a full-blown sectarian war in Iraq? And where do you see the future of this Hashd al-Shaabi, now we see it is being integrated I feel it is a tool of Iran and probably it is more of Hizbullah also in Iraq. Thank you, sir.

Clarisse Pasztory, Head of EU Liaison Office, Kurdistan Region, European External Action Service

My question is to General Petraeus as well. Security partnerships are generally considered a positive thing most of the time, but right now, I think we see a number of emerging security partnerships that might not really necessarily enhance security in this region, or indeed for Europe. There are larger ones, when it comes to

Russia and Iran – I would be very interested in your comment on that one. But there is also Iranian cooperation with non-state actors, a number of which have already been mentioned: there is Hizbullah, which is not new; there is the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs), which are now half-state actors; but very recently, also cooperation with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – and I am talking about the Turkish PKK and not the Democratic Union Party (PYD), just to avoid any misunderstanding. So I was curious to hear your thoughts on this and also how you think the new US administration will be dealing with these sort of asymmetric security partnerships, not least also from a NATO perspective. Thank you.

Mark Fitzpatrick, Director, Non-Proliferation and Nuclear Policy Programme, IISS; Executive Director, IISS-Americas; Co-Founder, EU Non-Proliferation Consortium

I have a question to both speakers about pre-emption options. General Petraeus in his introductory remarks mentioned something, he said when he was CENTCOM commander seven years ago that made a headline. One of the other headlines you made, sir, you said quite rightly that Iran certainly could be bombed if necessary. This was before there were any discussions or negotiations under way, and Iran was moving towards a nuclear-weapons capability, and the possibility of a pre-emption was probably one of the forms of pressure that Iran listened to. I am wondering, if the Iran deal were to fall apart and Iran were to resume its move toward a nuclear-weapons capability, whether such pre-emption options would again have to be on the table.

To Minister Sonoura, you are representative of Japan and I do not expect you would say in a public forum that there should be a pre-emption option for North Korea, but maybe could you wink or use body language to indicate if you agree if this is necessary?

Dr Sultan Al Nuaimi, Head, Studies and Research Department, Ministry of Defence, United Arab Emirates

Again, I will address my question in Arabic. [Live Translation] Honestly, I have noticed everyone, when they speak about the Trump administration and what they are going to do in Iran as if it is a red carpet Trump is going to walk on without any obstacles by the Iranians and the Iranian regime. In fact, there are good relations with Russia and with all countries of the world, they cannot make relationships, and are walking on that path, and the agreement mentioned by Hassan Rouhani, it is with the P5+1, not with one country. So I think it is taking an international dimension in this outcome. The tools and the area that pushed towards the fear of the Iranian regime from being demolished from the 1990s, so they took the approach of expanding the security surrounding, and they said that when the war starts it will start outside Iran, and it is not going to end by those who began the war, but with a decision from us.

The other point, combatting terrorism, what Qasem Soleimani is doing now in Iraq, the Iranian regime started sending messages that they are the only country that can fight terrorism and this is what was mentioned by Javad Zarif, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The legitimacy of having the Iranian existence in those countries that they are supporting Shia, all these tools, some in Afghanistan and Iraq. This is according to the Iranian regime. They pushed the USA to sit at the negotiating table to find an exit from this dilemma in Afghanistan and Iraq. The question is: is there going to be a red carpet in light of all these tools?

Sir John Jenkins, Executive Director, IISS-Middle East

Thank you very much. Before we turn to that question, I will just ask the Minister if he has had time to think about a response to the question.

Kentaro Sonoura, State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Japan

Body language with a gesture is not quite possible, but this year North Korea did two nuclear tests and, surprisingly, three missiles were launched simultaneously, and these three reached exactly the same spot in the Japanese exclusive economic zone (EEZ). This capable country exists right next to our country, so some people say, 'Well, retaliate.' There is a reason for that. However, for the de-nuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, perhaps dialogue is not enough, therefore sanctions and, using the UN, we have to put on pressure; that is very important. So, everybody in here, please cooperate with the implementation of UN Resolution 2321.

Sir John Jenkins, Executive Director, IISS-Middle East

Thank you very much, Minister.

General (Retd) David Petraeus, Chairman, Kohlberg Kravis Roberts and Co., US

For Baria Alamuddin, I tend not to think that there is a full-blown sectarian war coming to Iraq, but I clearly recognise the challenges in Iraq. Again, I am the one who said two years ago that the big challenge in Iraq was not going to be Daesh, it was going to be the Shia militia, and that has, I think, proven to be true, and it will be more true as Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and his security forces determine how it is that they are going to get operational control fully and have the government with a monopoly on the use of force and this type of objective.

There is a Hashd al-Shaabi law, obviously. My understanding is it actually gives control to the prime minister of them, but also responsibility to them. And again, so, as with many laws in Iraq, what we are going to have to see is how it is implemented, and that is often the rub, as folks like Ali Khedery and Minister Hoshyar Zebari and others in the audience know very well.

Ambassador Crocker used to say that Iran was seeking to Lebanon-ise Iraq and, indeed, you can postulate that the Hashd al-Shaabi, at least three of them – Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kita'ib Hizballah and the Badr Corps – are funded, trained, equipped, armed, even guided by the Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force. The Sadr militia are a bit different, thankfully, and more nationalist, albeit a force that we had to fight at various times as well. If you think back to what Ambassador Crocker was expressing, you see, again, this is concerning, it is disturbing. It is something that Iraq is going to have to deal with and something that, I hope, those who have been opposing him in certain respects perhaps could go sit under a tree until the thought passes, because it is very dangerous for Iraq. This is lighting a match in a room that has potentially some gasoline vapours in it.

The question on the emerging security partnerships not being helpful, those are Russia with Iran, Russia with Bashar al-Assad, overtures to Egypt, in fact, and some other countries, and then Iran with various non-state actors. Again, look, these are all of concern, and they are going to have to be dealt with. Ideally, they are dealt with with cool heads. The fact is that if we could reconcile in Iraq, as we did during the surge, with 85,000 individuals, some of whom had our blood on their hands from the Sunni Arab side of the insurgency, and another 23,000 former Shia militia, this is doable. But again, it takes an enormous will, it takes huge effort, and that is what is going to be required in this case as well. I do also think, with respect to Russia, that there will inevitably have to be a strategic dialogue with Russia. This is something that Vladimir Putin has sought. He believes, and I think correctly, that he is a major player on the world stage. It had to have been very difficult for him to hear himself labelled a regional power and a power in decline. Well, that regional power and power in decline is reshaping the situation on the ground in Syria, where many diplomats have repeatedly said there is no military solution to be had in Syria. I think Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin did not exactly get that memo, because they are certainly changing the facts on the ground.

With respect to the discussion, I had not realised I was quite so quotable back when I was the Central Command commander. I am surprised I lasted as long as I did. I am not going to get into hypotheticals. Again, I cannot speak for the future administration about what might happen if the deal fails. I should acknowledge, though, that I am not one of those who thinks axiomatically that Iran is going to cheat on this deal in a very demonstrable and clear way. If you think through the incentives for them, that is just incorrect. Rather, I think they are going to flirt with the edges of it, and they did, of course, exceed the limit by a few kilograms or whatever on the heavy water that they are allowed to store, but they shipped that out in each case and it was, in fact, identified, showing that the verification regime is working with respect to that at the very least. Again, I tend to think that unless there is some other very significant disturbance, they will continue to honour the agreement for the reasons, obviously, that they ultimately signed it, most having to do with revival of their moribund economy, and that they will continue to do so. In the meantime, needless to say, we do have to be prepared for any contingency, and the job of now General Votel, the commander of US Central Command, is to maintain the capability to carry out contingency plans, some of which we developed when I was at the helm of that organisation. I am sure that we can still do that, if that is needed.

On the final question, I am not entirely sure, my apologies, what a 'red carpet' means. If it means that it is all going to be nice and easy for President Trump when he takes office, I think, like you, that it is more likely to be a rocky and bumpy path with respect to the relationship with Iran and a variety of the activities in the region. This is, frankly, why I sought to elevate the discussion earlier, get away from just the nuclear agreement and ask what is it, again, that we want to accomplish relative to Iran. Number one is, we want to make sure they never have a nuclear weapon; and number two is, we want to counter some of the malign activity that they are carrying out in the region. In that regard, obviously, I am concerned about the actions of the Quds Force, the Quds Force commander and of the Quds Force-supported Shia militia in Iraq.

Sir John Jenkins, Executive Director, IISS-Middle East

Thanks very much, General. We have five more questions and we have time for one more round of questions, if they are concise, and then answers.

I have one question myself, which builds on the issue of new and either desirable or undesirable alliances and partnerships in the region, and it is about China. China has not been mentioned so far really. If you look at what China is doing in this region, in the bigger sense, it is huge. This comes from One Belt, One Road into Central Asia, which of course then terminates in Iran and the Gulf. There is now a regular train service, for example, from Xinjiang to Tehran. The Chinese helped the Pakistanis build the port at Gwadar. They are trying to triangulate between Iran, India and Afghanistan at the same time. State-backed companies have been involved in the new port development in Doha. They are interested in Duqm in Oman. They have a basic facility in Djibouti. They have a 50% stake in the port at Piraeus. Economic penetration is huge and I do not see, if you have economic penetration on that scale, that you will not, in some sense, also need to have security or intelligence or whatever cooperation as well. I am just interested in how you view that. Perhaps I can ask the Minister to respond.

Kentaro Sonoura, State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Japan

As a precondition, if China were to develop in a peaceful manner, it is to be welcomed. Upon this precondition, I must say that the fact that their defence budget is growing and not transparent, that they are relying on the power of force to overturn the status quo in the South China Sea, remains an issue of concern. In regard to this area, if they are to contribute in a peaceful manner to the growth and development of this region, this is, in a global sense, to be welcomed. I am not in a position to comment in detail on China in this forum. However, if China were to develop into a peaceful nation, it is my private belief that it is to be welcomed. Thank you very much.

General (Retd) David Petraeus, Chairman, Kohlberg Kravis Roberts and Co., US

There is no question that China is developing economic and diplomatic relationships. It is the world's second-largest economy, still growing at a pretty substantial clip, although it is going through the great transition and certainly is slowing and is likely to slow further, which has enormous implications for the emerging-market countries of the world, in particular. However, they are very clearly spreading their economic and diplomatic - geopolitical, if you will - wings in this region, and they should. Again, it is to be expected; this is where a lot of their energy resources do emanate.

They are building maritime expeditionary capabilities that can help them over time. They had a ship in the counter-piracy operations. They would not put it underneath our task force but we had communications, and it worked and it was bridge to bridge and they were out there. The reason was so that they can get experience, needless to say. You mentioned the various port facilities, in particular the ones in Gwadar and in Djibouti being built, and perhaps in a Gulf state, and that is the string of pearls, as it is called, for the maritime version of the One Road strategy.

But this will take time. Developing maritime-aviation capabilities, for example, David Richards knows very well, this is the work of a generation. A chief of defence staff does not just snap his fingers and say, 'Yes, let us build an aircraft carrier. Let us start flying off it.' Frankly, it is incredibly dangerous. Anybody who has ever stood on the deck of a carrier at night watching these planes slam into the deck realises how absolutely dangerous this

is. It is notable, in fact, the Russians have lost two aircraft landing on their carrier in the Med just in the month or so that they have had it out there; they were flying them off the ground quite a bit. So, it is going to take them time.

Yes, their defence budget is growing, but the US defence budget, after you add the overseas-contingency-operation funds into that, is probably still four times what their budget is, and our budget is more than theirs and the next eight countries as well. In fact, if you took all of the aircraft carriers and other flat-deck ships of the world, the US has far more of those than is there as well. It does not mean they are not a rising power. It does not mean that they are not becoming more important, more influential, more capable and so forth. That really underscores the need for strategic dialogue with China, as well, as I discussed earlier, with Russia, because they are both our number one trading partner now in the United States, having eclipsed our two North American neighbours as the price of oil has come down. They are also, in many respects, a strategic competitor, and we want to make sure that we avoid what has happened in many other cases, captured by Professor Graham Allison at Harvard in a paper called 'Avoiding Thucydides's Trap', that what happens is, as a growing power continues to grow, ultimately there is a clash with the reigning power, and that is something that would be disastrous for the world. As would, by the way, something between the number two and the number three economies of the world, and there is reason for worry there as well, given what is going on in the East China Sea with the so-called 'fishing boats' that have extraordinary communications means on them.

Sir John Jenkins, Executive Director, IISS-Middle East

Thank you very much, General. Hoshyar.

Hoshyar Zebari, Former Minister of Finance, Iraq

I have not spoken today because I have lost my voice, I have a cold, but I have a brief comment and a question to General Petraeus. First, the five principles you designated are all correct, but the most important was leadership – I am a witness also to your leadership in Iraq. When talking about malign Iranian activities and so on, and I remember during the surge you interdicted a number of Iranian activities in Baghdad and Erbil. Also, I remember the raid on al-Qaeda operatives in Syria. These were small, little things.

General (Retd) David Petraeus, Chairman, Kohlberg Kravis Roberts and Co., US

I know nothing about that.

Hoshyar Zebari, Former Minister of Finance, Iraq

This is part of the history, but I think it is important.

General (Retd) David Petraeus, Chairman, Kohlberg Kravis Roberts and Co., US

It was a navigational error, I am sure.

Hoshyar Zebari, Former Minister of Finance, Iraq

I have some memories of that. I saw Bashar al-Assad after that, but I will keep it to myself. There is a famous saying by Winston Churchill, that is, 'Do not argue about the problems. The problems can speak for themselves.' All day, we have been talking about Iranian activities, expansion, what to do about Iran, what to do with the nuclear deal and so on, and it seems there is no ground or environment for any dialogue or contact, because there is no trust, and on both sides. But in such a forum like this, really, I mean, one should think about some solutions and what can be done. The Iranians went along with the P5+1 on their nuclear deal, which is a matter of their national psyche, national interest. Would it be possible also to think about a P5+1 dialogue between Iran and the GCC, with the Arab League, with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as such, to reduce this tension? General Petraeus, from your military, political, intelligence capabilities, I think you will be able to answer this question. Thank you.

Sir John Jenkins, Executive Director, IISS-Middle East

Thank you very much, Hoshiyar. I remember that raid myself very well, whatever caused it. Of course, when that house was hit off Al-Bukamal, the Syrian government then closed the American School in Damascus, which is what I call tit for tat. Thank you very much.

Suhail Al Gosaibi, Chairman, Board of Trustees, Bahrain Foundation for Dialogue

My first question is to Minister Sonoura. We hear people talking about so-called Chinese expansionism in Asia. We also see continued erratic behaviour by North Korea. It is interesting, from afar, to see how Japan handles this. In the future, will Japan's constitution change? Will there be a generation in the future that is more aggressive and more proactive and have a cultural, political change in the way Japan deals with its neighbours?

My second question is to General Petraeus. General, I will be very frank with you and very honest, and I think I am reflecting many Arab views here. I want to talk about drones and, I have to confess, I am not a fan of this policy and this weapon. Not only do I think it is inhumane, but I think it is illegal as well, as many others do. Hand on your heart, General, do you think, honestly, that this method is effective? Has it done any good? I can only see it causing a lot of pain and destruction around the world, and I think whatever benefits there are, surely they are not outweighed by the destructive causes it has done. I would like to hear your honest, hand-to-heart assessment on the use of drones. Thank you.

Sir John Jenkins, Executive Director, IISS-Middle East

Thank you very much, Suhail, good questions. The last question, Skandar Keynes.

Skandar Keynes, Parliamentary Researcher to Crispin Blunt, House of Commons, UK

General Petraeus, I would like to also follow up on something you said yesterday, when you mentioned the need to develop a dialogue with Russia, acknowledging our shared interests of defeating extremism and ending the bloodshed in Syria. To date, we have fundamentally disagreed with the Russian leadership on the causes, solutions and the desired end states to these two problems, and especially with the relationship between the two. So, after identifying the basic shared interest in the abstract, how do we practically move any dialogue forward in any constructive way, and what lessons do you think any incoming US secretary of state should draw from Secretary Kerry's experience of diplomatic engagement with Lavrov as we move into the next phase of the Syrian conflict? Thank you.

Sir John Jenkins, Executive Director, IISS-Middle East

Thanks very much. I now have two more questions, because the discussion has been so stimulating.
Dr Nabil Fahmy.

Nabil Fahmy, Dean, School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, The American University in Cairo; Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Egypt

Thank you, Sir John. Two quick questions. To the Minister of State – and I had the honour and the pleasure of being ambassador to your country – in listening to Donald Trump during the campaign, he repeatedly kept saying that if its allies wanted its support they should carry more of the burden in terms of security and so on and so forth. If one looks at your part of the world, is Japan ready to carry more of the security responsibility in your region if the US is not ready to do that?

To General Petraeus, I am not going to ask you to project what the President-elect will do, because you have been asked about it several times today and you did not answer, so I am not going to ask the question again. My real question is: one of the expressions of US power and leadership has been its readiness not only to promote values and principles, but also its readiness to use its assets and use its power internationally when it felt that that was required in support of its allies. In following the campaign, again the language seems to be, 'It is America first, and if others want our support you need to carry more of the burden.' So, my question to you, sir, is: do you expect America in the years to come – I am not talking about the President-elect per se – still to be ready to put boots on the ground and use its force in support of its friends internationally, or is it moving more and more towards a populist, isolationist foreign policy? Thank you, sir.

Sir John Jenkins, Executive Director, IISS–Middle East

Thanks very much, Dr Nabil. The last question – and this has to be the last question – is from one of our Chinese guests, Xie Xiaoyan.

Xie Xiaoyan, Special Envoy on the Syrian Issue, China

Thank you. Thank you for giving me the opportunity. My understanding is that the theme of this Manama Dialogue and the topic of this afternoon is concentrating on security issues in the Middle East, but since one of the speakers mentioned the issue of South and East China seas, I feel, as representative of the Chinese government, to respond.

It took me by surprise that the issue was brought up, especially by a country that still has not shaken off the burden of infamous history, and also a country where officials continue to pay homage to class A war criminals, against the strong opposition of its neighbours.

Secondly, China has always been seeking peace and stability in the region through political, economic cooperation, not like some country that is strengthening military alliance by rewriting the peace constitution and also by expanding its military expenditure.

Third, China has always been trying to make the East and South China seas seas of cooperation, through cooperation with countries in the region, through consultation. We want unity, we want understanding and we want cooperation. We do not want to have frictions and confrontation. Our military spending is no more or less transparent than the other country, where it has also been on the rise. I am just asking this: where is the uranium and the plutonium? Have you returned the plutonium requested by the US? I think, if you look at the history of China and its current policy, we have never been a colonial power, it has never been an expansionist country. We want peace. It was China that proposed the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence since the 1950s. Thank you.

Sir John Jenkins, Executive Director, IISS–Middle East

Thank you very much. We have about three minutes each from each of the speakers to respond to these questions, some of which clearly demand a rather longer response than would be allowed for in the time, but Minister, perhaps you could start.

Kentaro Sonoura, State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Japan

Regarding expansionist measures, Japan and China share extremely strong responsibility. President Xi and Prime Minister Abe have conducted many bilateral talks and they have a strategic cooperative relationship. We are neighbours, and of course there are occasionally frictions, but the merits and the benefits for both are great and we need to work together to remove the negative aspects. Regarding the environment and economy, there are many opportunities for the two countries to work together, so we must look at the positive aspects and hope to increase them and we will not be stinting our efforts in this direction.

Secondly, regarding what if Japan was asked to bear more burden from the US regarding security, this is only hypothetical. We are already involved in measures against piracy and, regarding ASEAN and surrounding countries, we are supporting the effort to enhance policing of the maritime region. So, if we may quote Prime Minister Abe, we are continuing to enhance the alliance between our two countries and hope to continue this into the future.

Regarding the comments from the gentleman from China regarding this region, the East and South China seas, what has been going on, we are all aware of what has been taking place last 14 August. Historical perception is just as the prime minister publicised last year, that we have apologised for our past actions and there is absolutely no intention on our part to change our peaceful constitution. Bearing that in mind, regarding the mention of plutonium, there was a Nuclear Security Summit last year. We have talked to the US on this issue and have confirmed that there was absolutely no worry or anxiety on the part of the US, so his concerns are groundless. All the plutonium held in Japan have legitimate purposes, which are completely transparent, but we will be increasing our efforts to make sure that understanding and transparency is guaranteed.

Sir John Jenkins, Executive Director, IISS–Middle East

Thank you very much. General.

General (Retd) David Petraeus, Chairman, Kohlberg Kravis Roberts and Co., US

First of all, to the question from the great Hoshyar Zebari, with whom I was privileged to work, first when he was in the Kurdish Regional Government position in the first year, then as the minister of foreign affairs and as the minister of finance. Thank you so much for all that you have done for your country.

I agree with you that of the five lessons that I put forward, the most important of them is leadership; that is absolutely crucial. I would never argue with a Churchill quote, certainly not the one about, ‘Do not argue about the problems. They speak for themselves.’ But Churchill also said, ‘Talk-talk is better than war-war’, and so I would never say never to the possibility of some kind of dialogue. We did try. Again, Ali and others remember here when Ambassador Crocker, who he was special assistant for at the time, had, I think, three rounds of talks with Iranian interlocutors in Baghdad. You remember it as well; you were a minister by then. To say that they were not productive would be to praise them too much. As you may recall, they had to keep going outside and making phone calls to find out how to respond to each, so they were on a very short string, and certainly you would want to have to get it more elevated than that if you are going to expect some progress. But, again, I would never say never about the possibility of something like that, and one always hopes that there can be an evolution in their outlook and in their actions and so forth, but noting the grip that the deep state has on the regular state, it is sometimes hard to be overly optimistic.

For Suhail, on drones, I can put my hand on my heart, first of all, and say that there is a legal review of every time that option is used. Beyond that, I would just note that I have always – and I have said this publicly on many occasions – had a sign in the operations centre of any headquarters that I was in charge of, which asked, ‘Will this operation take more bad guys off the street than it creates by its conduct?’ In other words, will this do more harm than it does good? If the answer to that is no, then you do go sit under a tree until the thought passes and you do not carry out the operation. Now, that does not mean that there are not mistakes in these operations, as there are in any military operation. It does not mean that we have not learned over the years. But what it does mean is that we take the legal foundation for this very seriously. We take the rules of engagement, which are crafted very carefully to ensure that injury to innocent civilians is at an absolute minimum and even that damage to infrastructure is also at a minimum. Indeed, we sought to ensure that was the case in each of the circumstances when I was in the military, where we were employing such operations.

What was to have been the final question, which was the question on Russia, again, I think you really just highlighted why this probably has to start out with very high-level dialogue. You have to begin at sort of the global level and ask, okay, what is it that really is bothering you, important to you? Anybody who has read Henry Kissinger’s most recent book on the world order, at the end he has a series of questions that people should ask: what is it that we are really willing to fight for? Again, these are quite profound, and I think it is those kinds of questions that would need to be addressed in that kind of dialogue and should be addressed before you then start to dive down into, okay, is there enough mutual objective in the fight against Daesh that there can be some arrangement in Syria that can, as I mentioned earlier, achieve what I think are the two main objectives, the defeat of Daesh and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, and also stopping the bloodshed.

For Nabil – it is great to see you again, and all that you have done throughout your career – clearly, one of the expressions of US power is to use its power, and that undoubtedly will continue to be the case. I think it is only fair to the current administration that, others have observed, did enter office, was elected in large measure to end wars, not to start them and yet found that it could not escape some of these, and the pendulum, as it always does in the US, does swing over in the wake of any of our experiences. There was a ‘no more Koreas’ club; there was definitely a ‘no more Vietnam’ movement; I studied that in my dissertation at Princeton, looking at the impact on military advice, on the use of force, which was incredibly conservative as a result of that. There certainly has been a ‘no more Iraqs, no more Afghanistans’.

Now, it has also been said many times that America could not, a democracy cannot, fight a long war and I think we are proving that theory to be wrong. We have been in Afghanistan for 15 years, so why is it that the American people are still supporting it? I think it is a number of factors. And one of them has to do with the final conclusion that I have in those lessons, that we are engaged in a generational struggle. Therefore, what we have to do has to be sustainable, and the metrics for sustainability are blood and treasure. If we can limit those whilst still achieving our objectives – and America knows we went to Afghanistan so that it will not be a sanctuary for al-Qaeda again the way it was before – I think they are willing to hang in there and to bear with it, but clearly cannot sustain the kinds of major efforts that we had to do. I am convinced that we had to do the surge in Iraq – it retrieved what was on the verge of being a full-blown sectarian war – and I also believe we had to do that in Afghanistan.

But the facts are different now. For all the damage the Iraqi forces sustained, there was enough foundation, there were enough infrastructure, enough institutions, enough leadership, enough weapons and so forth to reconstitute it. Yes, there had to be some additional equipping and training and the advising and assisting was very helpful, but they are the ones carrying out the fight on the front line. Could it have been faster? Certainly, I tend to think, because the sooner you can show that Daesh is a loser, the sooner that it is no longer effective in social media and cyberspace and, therefore, its recruiting and proselytising is not what it was before. But I think that we have shown that we can engage in a generation-long struggle, which is necessary, again, given lesson number five that I put forward before.

Finally, with respect to the intervention by the head Chinese delegate, I think you can see why strategic dialogue is needed. Thank you very much.

Sir John Jenkins, Executive Director, IISS–Middle East

Thank you very much. That was a fantastic and very rich discussion of a lot of very complex issues, and I will not attempt to sum it up, because it is too complicated, but thank you very much for dealing with these questions – and there were some very difficult questions there – honestly, fully and with considerable grace. Thank you very much.