

TRANSCRIPT

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Congressman Mac Thornberry **Chairman, House Armed Services Committee**

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DWG: Mr. Chairman, let me start by asking the first question. You and Secretary Mattis have stressed how much damage living under continuing resolutions is doing to the nation's defense, and of course defense spending has been suffering from sequestration and budget caps for some time now. My question goes to what compromises you may be willing to make in order to get out of this log jam.

For example, when it comes to an area like overseas contingency operation spending, which doesn't come under the spending caps as I understand it, would you be willing to match it in a vote with some of the democratic party and priorities on the domestic side? Things like emergency funding for the opioid crisis or hurricane and wildfire relief or stabilizing the individual insurance market as Senator Collins was apparently promised would happen.

I guess what I'm asking is that. And then also, would you be willing to vote for a grand bargain that would lift spending caps on both defense and non-defense spending and provide for rough parity in terms of increases?

Chairman Thornberry: I think there are an endless number of scenarios we could go down saying if this, then what would you do. If this, you know. And I can't predict all of the potential scenarios, much less what my response or other people's response might be.

I do think my job is to reinforce and not let members forget the damage that is done to the military every single day under a CR. And as you mentioned, Secretary Mattis has been doing that as well.

I think it's also my job to reinforce that doing the right thing for the military should not be tied to any other issue. And I am concerned, disappointed. There's probably stronger words that would apply, with members on both sides of the aisle who had acknowledged the need to spend more on defense, but only if we do this. We increase spending over here, we decrease spending over here, we tie it to DACA, all of this sort of stuff.

So just think about, if your sister or brother is a pilot who needs to be training for a major military engagement on the Korean Peninsula, you are telling that person you can't have the training you need, you can't have the planes fixed until we get a DACA deal. Now how could that possibly be right?

And the other thing just to keep in mind is, the Pentagon says after three months you have lost training that you will never recover because the next training demands come. And so you will never catch up. We're already there.

So I guess personally I would do just about anything to fix this problem including vote for things that I might not support otherwise. But I am increasingly disturbed that support for our military is being tied to some other issue, some other agenda, and I'm jumping ahead, I realize, I'm increasingly concerned, for example, on the DACA deal that some people may not want to resolve the issue. They may rather have the issue out there because they think it's to their political advantage, and yet DACA, they still say expressly they're not going to vote for military funding until DACA is resolved, but they may not want to resolve DACA because they're getting political benefit out of it in their eyes.

Now just think about, again, your brother, your sister out there who may be in serious military engagement. I think that's absolutely wrong and I hope we break out of that.

DWG: I may be the only person who doesn't want to talk budget.

There was a hearing [inaudible] [last week] on China and China's rise, and some of the witnesses said that they thought that the United States was not currently prepared for China's military and political allying with Asia and elsewhere in the world. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on that.

Chairman Thornberry: I did not read the testimony but in many ways I think we are not prepared for what China is doing. We always mouth these words "whole of

government approach”, and yet what we see in China is a combination of economic and other developments and military efforts all being combined in a long-term strategy that may be very successful for them.

So I don't think we're prepared adequately for the full range of tools from cyber to targeted military modernization in ways that particularly concern us to this broader national influence operations that they are pursuing.

DWG: Are you talking about just Asia, or are you talking about broader?

Chairman Thornberry: No, it's much broader than that. I mean you look at the One Belt, One Road map, and it obviously extends beyond Asia. But there are certainly military aspects where we can see they are systematically pushing us back further and further from the Asian mainland. So we're all focused on Korea. Meanwhile, the work on those South China Sea islands continues, including their militarization, of course not to mention once upon a time they said oh, we'll never put military stuff on there. Well, they are.

So we see the systematic approach that furthers their presence.

DWG: Good morning, Mr. Chairman. I wanted to shift gears a bit and also ask you something not related to budgetary questions.

Russian Ambassador Antonov has been unsuccessful so far in securing any meetings with members of Congress. If my memory is correct, at this point he only met Senator Ron Johnson. And the Ambassador was complaining about that, saying that he would love to meet members of Congress to try and maybe start building something back, to try to get the relationship out of the current nose dive.

Do you personally intend to meet the Russian Ambassador? And what do you think other colleagues of yours in the House think about prospects of meeting him?

Chairman Thornberry: I don't know. I have had no conversations with any of my colleagues on the topic. Just personally, I have many more requests to meet with Ambassadors than I am able to fulfill, and so I generally prioritize those nations with whom we have close military ties and so that's just, I guess, the fact of life. But I can't speak for what others may or may not do.

DWG: Also a non-budget question. The administration is wrapping up its Nuclear

Posture Review shortly. Aside from nuclear modernization which we know that you support, would you favor any sort of expansion of the nuclear arsenal to include low-yield nuclear weapons? And/or any broadening of the conditions under which the administration might use nuclear weapons?

Chairman Thornberry: Well, let me back up for just a second. Our nuclear deterrent is the foundation for our country's defense. Not only for our country, but for key allies. And there are two components. One is the delivery system, and one is the weapons themselves. The weapons themselves largely were built in the '70s and '80s, designed for the Cold War, and I think we absolutely should examine whether those are the weapons that provide a credible deterrence today and moving forward.

What we know and have said aloud is the Russians and the Chinese are continuing to build new weapons with different characteristics as well as modernize their delivery systems. We have not done that, and yet our weapons are, and we put a tremendous amount of effort and money into making sure they work as they were designed to work, but they are still machines that age.

So I do think it is a good idea to say okay, does this nuclear deterrent meet the needs of the nation now? And that may include different characteristics of various kinds. I don't know the answer, but I think we certainly ought to ask the question.

DWG: Is there something, in the work of the committee have you reached any conclusions about what, independent of this review, that you would like to see in it? Like on your own, on the committee.

Chairman Thornberry: I'm not sure I understand the question. I think we will be really interested to see what they, the administration concludes in the Nuclear Posture Review, but there's some pretty deep expertise in our committee on both the weapons and the delivery systems, and we will be deep into the weeds on both aspects of that deterrent.

DWG: Over the last years the NDAAs have been pushing the military systems to a large level of reforms, and the services seem to be pushing their idea of a component model for operating the hospitals. Basically each of the service surgeons general control [their] hospitals [inaudible] status quo. Do you support that? Or would you rather see more Defense Health Agency governance of those hospitals?

Chairman Thornberry: Well, the FY17 NDAA pushed more towards Defense Health

Agency as running the hospitals, but have the surgeon generals running more of the health care, if that makes sense. The medical standards for them. I think that is a model that makes sense.

DWG: Do you think that's feasible, having one agency do the administrative part and the services do the --

Chairman Thornberry: If there are insurmountable problems they'll have to come talk to us about it. Just like in the private sector, the changes in health care, the cost of health care, is a real challenge for the Pentagon, and it is one of the things we were most focused on in the '17 bill, was to keep in mind that the purpose of the military health system is to enable us to fight and win the country's wars. Now we also have to take care of dependents and all those other things, but the purpose of that health care system is to fight and win the nation's wars.

I think the new administration is taking a look at the health care in the military and, you know, we'll be interested in whatever suggestions they may want to come up with. But what we did year before last made sense to me. It hasn't all been implemented yet, but it certainly made sense to me, so somebody's going to have to show me how that was wrong to change it.

DWG: In the NDAA you guys laid out a request for [inaudible]. One of the last [inaudible] strategies that [inaudible] come up with [inaudible] involved [inaudible] talking about.

Can you talk more about what you're looking for on that strategy, that [inaudible]? And what level of intergovernmental [inaudible] you're looking for. Are you looking for something that is [inaudible]? Or much broader, a much [inaudible]?

Chairman Thornberry: To be effective in the information domain, it needs to be beyond DoD. It should be a government-wide effort. Part of the frustration that a lot of us have is that other parts of government have not really stepped up and done very much.

Now for the last, my years run together. Either last year or the year before, we put into law an office in the State Department that is supposed to be focused on these issues to try to elevate it and to show that this is important. The State Department among others, and there's some, Ted Royce has been trying to reinvigorate USIA and so forth to up our game.

What's really, my new term, it was I a book I read recently. Psycho cultural domain of warfare.

So we talk about information, we talk about cyber attacks, but what they're really trying to do is influence populations and undermine, for example, whether it's the United States or Western Europe or others, their willingness to defend themselves, or to sow seeds of discord.

So it's broader than just information. It is psycho cultural was one expression for it.

Now that's a challenge for our type of free and open society to deal with. But yet it is absolutely true, it's not just the Russians. We mentioned the Chinese. The Iranians have efforts in this regard. So we see increasingly competitors or adversaries that see this aspect as a domain of warfare, kind of like outer space or cyber as a domain of warfare, and we're not equipped to adequately deal with it.

So there's a role for DoD, of course, from the tactical, from an ISIS web site, for example, to the broader strategic, but it involves more than DoD, and I think it's one of the big challenges we face. I suspect we're going to have a hearing or two on this topic in the coming year.

DWG: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I wanted to ask you about the NDAA space [inaudible]. Have you seen the details of how DoD plans to transition the portfolio from the Air Force to someone else potentially? And is there anything you can say about the plan and are you happy with the plan?

Chairman Thornberry: As you know, what we came up with in last year's NDAA, which was just signed into law in December, was a compromise that did not set up a separate space corps, but did try to improve accountability for space and consolidate it to some extent so that you could hold somebody accountable.

I think it's too early to say how well that's worked because we're just in the early days, but we're going to be watching very carefully to see how it's done. And one of the big questions is can the Air Force culturally handle space as a separate but just as important domain of warfare as it does air operations? And so you can move boxes around, you can spend more money, and clearly we need to, but you still have to give it the priority

that is required. Not only for warfighting but for our national day-to-day lives. I think those of us who have received the classified briefings are increasingly concerned about our ability, the country's ability to continue to depend on space for our daily life as we have.

DWG: Your Senate colleagues have criticized your committee and others because you didn't have [enough] [inaudible] the space corps. Do you --

Chairman Thornberry: Well they may not have been paying attention, but there was a whole lot of discussion. Sometimes they tend to not look on our side of the capital very often. But the Strategic Forces Subcommittee had a lot of discussion, consulting with a lot of folks about it. And so I really think they did great work in raising the issue and in coming up with what seemed to me to be a very sensible answer.

So as with everything, when you get into negotiations with the Senate you don't always come away with exactly what you want, but I think a lot of people are going to be watching very carefully to see whether, under what we have passed, space received the priority that it should. If not, we can go back to some other options.

DWG: Good morning, Mr. Chairman. Tony [Bechuka], Inside the Pentagon.

AS to the CR, the Speaker said another CR is going to be necessary, probably into February. Even if some kind of deal is reached, we need more time to write the bill.

Lately he sounded like, he's using many of your talking points about military readiness. At CSIS this week he talked about military readiness the day before the expiration of the CR. And yet there will be another CR, according to the Speaker. What does that CR have to have in order to get your support? Are there things the Defense Department could get exemptions for under that CR? Is there anything that would be an emergency that you think, if we do the CR we've got to have X, Y, Z, OMB's got to approve what DoD is looking to get?

Chairman Thornberry: One of the points I've tried to make to all my colleagues is there is no number of "anomalies" that can fix the damage that a CR causes. You just can't do it. And so the idea that oh, if you could just give us a little of this and a little of that and then the CR wouldn't be so bad, is blatantly not true.

I don't know what the situation will be over the course of the week. I really think that a full agreement is very possible and it's very possible in a short amount of time. The

question is, do people want an agreement, or do they want to have an issue? And that's the question I don't know the answer to.

DWG: Amid all of this sort of fiscal uncertainty, we're going to have the National Defense Strategy released probably at the end of the week. That's happening without knowing how big the Army will be resourced at, how big the Navy will be resourced at. Do you think that's an issue for the National Defense Strategy when it comes out at the end of the week, that there's still some budget uncertainty about how we'll actually resource things that [inaudible] the National Defense Strategy?

Chairman Thornberry: Actually, I think it's exactly the other way around. We have been, many of us have been wanting a strategy that then would drive budgets. So if Congress does not step up and provide the budget required to implement a strategy, then the administration's going to have to say okay, you made this call. We can't do these things. I mean there's got to be consequences to failing to adequately resource our military. Otherwise what you're doing is you're just stretching these men and women further and further and they end up working 100 hours a week like the Navy sailors were.

So I think it's really important to start with a strategy, and the Secretary's got to be very explicit. This is what it takes to fund this strategy. If you don't provide this amount of money we can't do this, that, or, you know, we've got to do less. And the more explicit he is on what we're not going to do, the better, I think, because it makes it real. Otherwise, people think oh, they can get by. And the way we get by is on the backs of the men and women who are working 100 hours a week.

So I think having a strategy is a really good thing. Among other things, it helps put us on the spot to understand the consequences of our actions.

DWG: One on North Korea, if I may. [Inaudible], and do you have a sense that [inaudible]?

Chairman Thornberry: I'm sorry, do I have a sense?

DWG: Of whether they're [inaudible] A, how seriously the administration is [inaudible] option in North Korea?

Chairman Thornberry: By the way I told him, just last night I was listening to a podcast on the Daily Telegraph about Churchill's oratory. It was really good.

I think the administration is very seriously looking at what would be involved with military options when it comes to North Korea. And options is plural, but you have to be serious about these things. You can't just make a token effort. And being serious about it means working through logistics and ammunition and which forces would be required for which missions and when they needed to be there. It's lots of detail.

There was some reporting this weekend on some of the efforts that are underway, and training, by the way, which gets back to something we were talking about earlier. I think they're very serious, and that's only prudent to do so.

My favorite quote these days is from Washington's first State of the Union which said to be prepared for war is the, what was the word, the best, he didn't use that word, way to preserve the peace. We have to be prepared for a Korean contingency and we need to show that we're prepared. I think that the military has those preparations underway, and hopefully, they will not be needed.

DWG: Mr. Chairman, by [inaudible] CR, it sounds like you're still undecided on a temporary funding bill in February.

Chairman Thornberry: Here's what has become apparent. There are, because there are Democrats who know that many of us are concerned about the damage a CR does every day, they are trying to use our concerns about the military to promote their issues and trying to take advantage of that. And so the political gains seem to have no end.

Again, just to emphasize, these political gains are on the backs of the men and women who are out there risking their lives for us.

So we'll see what the situation is.

Look, I think today there could be an agreement reached on a [CAT] deal. Frankly, I think it's not that hard to get a DACA deal. But the question is, do they want to, and so we'll see how the week goes.

DWG: Everyone I've talked to on the Armed Services Committee so far as of late last week was undecided, including yourself, on how to vote on this. And some said hard and fast deal on the [inaudible], leadership needs to kind of show them that they're about [there]. There's talk about they're there except on the numbers. [Inaudible]. Where do you personally need to be on the status of what the defense top line is? Does

leadership have to show you something? Or does it have to be hard and fast?

Chairman Thornberry: I've learned not to draw red lines because they will be used as part of the negotiation to prolong the negotiations. That's what's frustrating, is the people's willingness to use legitimate concerns to not only try to pursue some other issue, but for some political advantage. So we'll see how things go. As I say, every day under a CR does damage to the military and it's very disturbing that people would be willing to see that damage continue for some other purpose. I don't know how else to put it.

DWG: I'm sure you've seen all the reports the Navy has put out on the Fitzgerald and McCain collisions and all the problems the 7th Fleet has had. What's your view on what has to be done to the Navy to fix their readiness and try to prepare to do what they're supposed to be doing? Is that something that will be a subject of some of your hearings this year?

Chairman Thornberry: Of course. Number one is, we need a bigger Navy. Again, you had people who were working 100 hours a week on their job.

Number two, we need to make sure that we have enough people to have them properly trained, because you had people on those ships who were not properly trained for the job that they were assigned.

Number three, we need more ships. So we have two now that are out of commission because of these accidents, but the threat from North Korea and the other missions that the 7th Fleet undertakes has not diminished. They only increase all the time.

So we have gotten ourselves in, as we cut the military budget by about 20 percent, as we have shrunk the military, the threats have multiplied and grown. And we can see the way out. Of course every day under a CR delays us getting on the path out of this mess, but we can see the path out. It's not going to happen overnight, but we need to get going. And no place is it more important, although lots of places it's important, but in no place is it more important than in the Asia Pacific region.

DWG: The Surface Navy Association, the head of Surface Warfare said we need more ships or fewer missions.

Chairman Thornberry: Yeah, and that goes back to the strategy argument. All right. If you're not going to provide the money for the ships and the sailors we need, then tell

us what you don't want us to do.

DWG: Is that a job for the administration? Or should Congress impose on that?

Chairman Thornberry: Well, I think we are trying to make it clear that you cannot continue to put more and more burdens on the backs of our people. As far as deciding which missions we're not going to do, that's a Commander in Chief type, an executive branch sort of decision. But to repeat my earlier point, we have muddled along for so long, I'm afraid that a lot of my colleagues think oh, they can keep on doing it with just a little bit less, until we have the sort of accidents, not only those ships, but of planes, of helicopters, of ground, on the ground. So you really see the effects of putting more and more burden on the backs of our people. In the last year you've really started to see some of those effects, and it's not going to get better until we turn things around.

DWG: I want to follow up on some of these questions. Has the Pentagon communicated to you desires for any anomalies in any upcoming CR?

Chairman Thornberry: They have not talked to me about it. We talked about some before. I am concerned, well, two things. One is, there's no number of anomalies that fix the problems created by a CR. Number two, I'm afraid that the Pentagon as an institution has become kind of used to CRs and they don't really ask for things. They don't think about what the added flexibility may be helpful, because we've conditioned them. This is the 8th or 9th consecutive year that we have started the fiscal year under a CR so they've gotten used to it.

One of the frustrations I've had is trying to get them to think a little broader at how to lessen the effects of the CR. They'll ask for a couple of little things, but unfortunately, we all get used to it. So that damage, that erosion of our military capability continues day by day by day.

DWG: Looking for [inaudible] committee can just say talk about one or two of your main priorities for the coming years in the NDAA?

Chairman Thornberry: Well, my two areas of focus have been rebuild and reform. So we will not rebuild in a single year even with a really good [CAT] deal. There will be more rebuilding to do. And the discussion we just had on our nuclear deterrent is one example of how we have more rebuilding to do. But as also alluded, the nature of warfare is changing. I think one of the roles for our committee is to shine a light on some of the ways that warfare is changing. We talk about cyber, we talk about space, we

talk about psycho cultural warfare, but we don't really think about all the implications and so forth. I think that's a job for us, to help through our hearings and member education and so forth, think through some of the implications of those changes.

DWG: Colin Clark, Breaking Defense.

The Nuclear Posture Review and lots of other folks are talking about the resurgence of great power competition. And we've been fighting mostly a very nasty and dirty little war on the ground against people who aren't terribly well armed but are smart. How has the Pentagon built a budget? Obviously, you're trying to improve readiness, but how do you balance between pushing to be prepared for those high intensity wars against major powers and still fighting on the ground against these evil little bastards, and boosting readiness at the same time? Where do you want to see the Pentagon strike this balance?

Chairman Thornberry: I think you put it really well. We do not have the luxury of picking one or the other. We have to do it all. And so the phrase you hear is full spectrum warfare. Most people hear that and say okay, we've got to be focused on near peer competitors. But when you're really talking full spectrum, you're talking about not only the terrorism fight that has not gone away, but remember who we sent to deal with Ebola in Africa. It was the United States Army.

So the spectrum goes from those sorts of operations and includes outer space and cyber space, and we have to be prepared for it all. That's the reason, the times we live in I think are more challenging than the Cold War was. Then we had one primary adversary, we knew who it was, we devoted all our focus on it. Now we have this wide diversity of adversaries, so we've got to do better about more training for a Korean contingency. Or some other contingency. But we can't leave off, or we can't forget about the fact that there are terrorists in Africa who are plotting and planning against us. And that's part of the reason these times are so challenging and we don't have the luxury of picking and choosing one or the other.

DWG: One of the things that came up again last week was optimization for use of military force. Senator [Inaudible] said during the hearing that [inaudible] trying to shore up what they have and what's going on with the House on that.

What is your stance on [sunsetting] the 2001 [inaudible] and coming up with a new one? And is there something more [inaudible]?

Chairman Thornberry: I think we need a new AUMF. I don't think the NDAA is the appropriate place for it. It's not our committee's jurisdiction. It's Foreign Affairs. And it is such a significant issue it needs to stand on its own. In my opinion. So putting it into a bigger vehicle like the NDAA would not be, in my opinion, appropriate.

We'll see what the Senate comes up with. My years run together. A number of years ago for two consecutive years the House passed amendments to the 2001 AUMF to try to update it somewhat to include associated forces, you know, as al Qaida at that point had spread. The Senate rejected it then.

I do think it is harder and harder to tie our current military activities back to the words that were passed three days after 9/11, or four days. And we, Congress, should fulfill our responsibilities under the constitution by updating it.

Now as a practical matter, there are a lot of people who are concerned that you'll never get Democrat votes with a President Trump to do anything on an AUMF so we just can't touch it. It would have been better, probably, to do it under President Obama because then at least you had a chance for a bipartisan way, but what President Obama put forward had so many restrictions and so forth it was a problem.

So my guess is it's going to be really hard politically to do. I think we should for a variety of reasons, but it's going to be hard.

DWG: [Inaudible] the main [inaudible] is not letting the issue come to the floor? I mean is there anything --

Chairman Thornberry: I don't know about that. Right after he became Speaker he asked me and Ed Royce and a couple of others to host some roundtable meetings like this to discuss within our conference about what an AUMF might look like and so forth. So I think he is very willing to update the AUMF. Here I am speaking for him and I shouldn't. But I think he is concerned about it. So you sunset this one and people play politics with another one, what are you left with? And what sort of message does that send our troops? Does that send the world? So he's worried about the consequences of it. As am I.

DWG: What are the scenarios where [you get] a vote?

Chairman Thornberry: I don't know. I think it should happen, and I can't predict

for you the alignment of the stars that bring it to fruition. I don't know.

DWG: Good morning, Mr. Chairman.

Last year the Trump administration promised that a military buildup would kick off in FY19. But now we've got Secretary Shanahan saying well, it's not really going to kick into gear until 2020. [Inaudible] National Defense Strategy and the FY20 budget will be the first budget that's really informed by that.

From your perspective, do you think that it's prudent to wait a year to really get going on this buildup? And if not, do you expect that Republicans on the Hill will try to authorize and appropriate more money for FY19 than the Trump administration might request?

Chairman Thornberry: Well, of course it's ridiculous to wait. While we're waiting, sailors are dying, you know, et cetera, et cetera.

Remember that the initial budget request that the Trump administration sent up was basically the Obama budget request that they had on the shelf plus about three percent because we wouldn't let them shrink the Army at the end of the Obama administration as much as they wanted. And that was it.

So later they came back and said, and to be fair, the day that the Trump budget came up to us in May of last year you had two Senate-confirmed people in the Department of Defense. Secretary Mattis and Heather Wilson, who had been on the job about a week. So they hadn't had a chance to even get their act together yet.

So Secretary Shanahan, what, he was put in office like July or something.

So I understand it may take a while for the full imprint of the new officials in the Department of Defense to make itself known on their budget request. Meanwhile, the world is getting more dangerous and so you saw what's happened with the NDAA this year which was more than the administration initially requested, but you also saw the President sign it into law.

My hope is that they can get, there can be a two-year, at least, budget cap deal that will basically have the, if it's good, it will have the number set for the next couple of years. If it's not, then obviously we'll look at it.

DWG: Good morning. Thank you.

Going back to military preparations underway. Can you quantify that a little bit? Is that across the board? Is that just certain units doing certain things? And additionally on a similar topic, do you have any [inaudible] you can share with us on the false alarm that happened in Hawaii recently?

Chairman Thornberry: Second question. No, not really. I just know what I've read of it.

I do think we, this goes back to the nuclear deterrent issue. I think we, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we were in a mindset that basically we don't have to worry about these things anymore. North Korea has reminded us we have to worry about these things, and even examining civil defense options and how we communicate with the public. I mean it's not far-fetched that one of those missiles may be headed towards not only Hawaii or the mainland somewhere. So we need to be serious about not panicking, but serious about that possibility.

As we were talking while ago, we have to be prepared for a wide spectrum of things. So it's not like you can take the whole United States military, train them for a North Korea contingency exclusively. You still have to worry about terrorists and all these other things that are going on. But I think you have seen signs of, I would call it a correction in ways, about being more serious about what it would take if indeed there is a conflict on the Korean Peninsula. That doesn't mean you want it. That doesn't mean you invite it. But it does mean that if you're going to, it gets back to what we were talking about. If you're going to ask men and women to go risk their lives on behalf of the nation, we owe them not only the best military equipment, but the best training and preparation that our country can provide them. And that's I think part of what's going on, and hopefully it's never used.

DWG: I'd like to ask a big picture question. You said that world is getting more dangerous, and certainly there's some potential for military conflicts with North Korea, with Iran, with Russia, et cetera, a miscalculation in any of those situations.

Can you talk a little bit about your assessment of the Trump administration's leadership on national security generally? I haven't heard anybody question the leadership of Secretary Mattis and Chairman Dunford, but at the same time there's been a lot of turmoil at the White House in terms of [personnel] management in the national security sphere and also outside of it. And you have a President who's really been a disruptor in terms of decisions on some of these issues, and his style. Can you talk about your

assessment of how they're doing generally, your confidence, any concerns?

Chairman Thornberry: I think you're right, I mean I would take it further even than the way you said it. I think there's tremendous confidence in Secretary Mattis on both sides of the aisle and on both sides of the capital. Maybe I've mentioned to some of y'all, when our committee had its annual retreat in February 2016 the guest speakers that I invited were Jim Mattis, John Kelly, H.R. McMaster, and the singer that wrote Ghostly. And my point is, these three people are extremely respected and well known, because we have dealt with them for years in various capacities. So there's tremendous confidence in the leadership of the military.

And I'd say the second thing is, the fundamental, talk about big picture, the fundamental priority I think of the Trump administration is to rebuild our military, put us in a stronger position.

I mentioned to you the basic precept. We seemed to have gotten away that to be prepared for war is the surest guarantee for peace, and I think that's where the administration as a whole is moving, and I think that is really important not only for adversaries to see, but for allies to see.

I understand the disruptions because there are other aspects of national security, economic and other things where I would probably disagree with some of the things the President's done, but the centerpiece has to be military strength, and on that central point I think we are clearly moving in a good direction. If we can get our act together and get rid of these CRs, then we will really I think have a good initial step in that direction.

DWG: Some of the military reports to the White House, to the Commander in Chief, are you concerned that there is potential for miscalculation, or volatility that may actually be [inaudible]?

Chairman Thornberry: Well, in the world we live in, good heavens. Whether you're talking politically or geostrategically, of course it's volatile. And increasingly volatile. And we've seen that.

But what I've also seen is, it looks to me like the President is willing to listen, because his background is not in national security, but he's willing to listen to the individuals I mentioned who have a long and deep background in national security. And I think there's, as I say, a lot of confidence in Secretary Mattis and that group. And particularly

in these times where it's not just North Korea, it's not just terrorists, you know, it's this full spectrum that we were talking about.

DWG: Nine days ago SpaceX launched the classified Zuma spacecraft for an unspecified U.S. government customer. We've not been told very much about it, not been told which agency, what the mission was, even whether it was successfully placed in orbit.

Are you able to provide any details about this mission? And if not, do you think that whoever the customer is or was, that they should be more open about this so that the public has some idea of how its dollars are being spent?

Chairman Thornberry: Not necessarily. When it comes to national security there must be some things that are classified or else you're telling your adversaries exactly what you're doing. I think we will want to pursue the issue because national security space launch has been a significant issue in each of the last two NDAs, and it is essential for the reasons we were talking about while ago, that we have assured access to space, so we'll be pursuing what happened and why, because it's important to the country.

DWG: What did happen? Was it a success or failure?

Chairman Thornberry: I have not been briefed on the details. I think they're still gathering that. I suspect I will be at some point.

DWG: Paul [Inaudible] with US News.

I [inaudible] ask you about some of the media reports last week about changes in the arms sales process. The White House [inaudible] more. I wonder, when you're looking at the balance between economic and tactical concerns and humanitarian concerns of arms sales abroad, do you think that process needs to be changed or streamlined?

Chairman Thornberry: Ever since I have been Chairman I have had a steady stream of officials from our closest allies who complain about our bureaucratic, slow, difficult system for arms sales or other sorts of security assistance. It has been something I've been talking about for at least a couple of years, looking for ways that we in Congress could streamline that process and at least get a decision.

I mean part of the challenge has been, there will be a proposed sale that just hangs out

there for months if not years. And that is no way to treat an ally.

So I think some of this is on us. Some of it's on them. Working together, I think you can have more accountability when it's clearer who's making the decision and why they're making the decisions. But not making a decision and having these things go on for so long has been extremely frustrating for some of our very best friends.

DWG: What steps have you seen the administration take, particularly in trying to modify that balance, humanitarian concerns with other factors?

Chairman Thornberry: I have not been briefed on what changes they envision. Again, part of the challenge is you get multiple agencies involved and I do think some of the streamlining and accountability is on them to fix. But there may be legal law changes that need to be made too, and I'm certainly willing to look at them because we ought to tell people yes or no and then go do it, not just leave things hanging forever.

DWG: Last year your committee in the Senate had some discussions about reforming the role of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As I understand it, they wanted to move a little quicker and the House side wanted to take a closer look at the issue. So could you give us a sense of why you think that might be a good idea or a bad idea or how you would like to empower him or what concerns there might be with giving him too much power given the civilian/military control balance.

Chairman Thornberry: Part of what happened last year is some proposals came forward kind of at the last minute, and we didn't really have a chance to carefully think through the consequences of them. And we thought it was important that we take that time, as you mentioned, civilian control of the military is a basic precept of our system. So we didn't want to be cavalier about that. Here I go speaking for somebody else again, but my impression is that General Dunford is, and y'all have heard him talk, and I can't quote him. Transnational, he's got this mantra that makes sense about how you can't just look at things in a siloed way in domains or in geography.

So part of I think what they're interested in is more authority to move forces around easier.

Personally, I'm willing to have that conversation with him, so I suspect we'll be having more of that conversation this year. But civilian control of the military is important, so we're going to have that in mind, too.

DWG: Just on the National Defense Strategy, I know that it's classified, but there's an unclassified version of it as well that will be presented. I'm not sure if you've seen it yet, but I understand it's going to focus on [inaudible] and that. The [inaudible] force structure may stem from that [inaudible] including [preparing] more for Russia and China, and then also having a high/low mix for, as we talked about earlier, the little dirty bastards that are still causing a lot of trouble.

So I'm just kind of curious if you can comment on if you'd like to see those kind of changes, and if you have seen it, to what extent it will focus on Russia and China and how the force structure will stem from that.

Chairman Thornberry: I haven't seen it. We're supposed to have a breakfast at the Pentagon this week where we'll get briefed on it. Just a couple of things. Remember there was, well, it shows you how old I am. I was around when we started the QDR and I thought it was a good thing. It became a worthless thing. So we changed it in the NDAA to try to have a more useful effort and a more useful product. With General McMaster, they started with a National Security Strategy under which is a National Defense Strategy and then there's a National Military Strategy underneath that.

One of the things I'm encouraged by is that there's a classified part of it. So it's not only a slick, glossy thing to pretend you've done something, that there's an aspect to it that will enable us to deal with some of these sensitive issues that we don't want to be talking about publicly.

The other thing, as I said, that I'm encouraged by is okay, you've got a strategy that will be tied to resources and so the burden's on our shoulders. If we don't provide the resources, you know, Secretary Mattis needs to say I can't do the strategy.

All of that is going in a good direction. I'm sure there will be a fair amount of criticism of it. It won't do everything that everybody wants it to do, but at least so far, not having seen it, I'm encouraged by the direction, and hopefully better than the QDR [inaudible].

DWG: The NDAA had like seven or eight different criteria that they wanted in the NDS. One was like a five-year budget stream, investment stream, and then there was also, if I read it right, to prioritize so that every challenge isn't, not challenge. The top tier. Can you play that out a little bit in terms of how the public should look at the [inaudible] unclassified document coming out to see whether this is more truisms that could apply over the last ten years, or something that follows your NDAA direction.

Chairman Thornberry: I do think a lot is tied to this resource issue. So you're right. If everything's a priority, nothing's a priority. Where does the money go?

Partly, the money's got to go in places where it hasn't gone before because we have a lot of catching up to do. But I think that will be significant, yeah, for the public, but especially for us as we work our way through the authorization and appropriation process.

As I said, I'm sure that I will not be happy that it answers all the, that it meets all the hopes and expectations we had and there will be a lot of fair criticism of it. But surely to goodness it's going to be better than what we have.

DWG: Do you expect it to say these are our top priorities number one, in a tier, the top one --

Chairman Thornberry: I don't know that it's fair to say okay, number one is this, number two is this, number three is this. But I do think there has to be some sense of prioritization that reflects changes in the world. The problem of terrorism has not gone away, but we are facing a different kind of terrorist threat now that the ISIS caliphate has been reduced to basically nothing, for example. So we can go around the world and show changes, and I think those changes need to be reflected in how this, what this strategy lays out.

DWG: I've got to ask on SpaceX. The Pentagon last week, when we asked what about it, they referred questions to SpaceX. Do you think that's appropriate?

Chairman Thornberry: I don't know. I'll be interested to see what we learn about what happened and why. And beyond, until I know that I can't tell you what's appropriate and what's not.

DWG: I'd like to ask about China and Taiwan. The issue of U.S. support for Taiwan came up in the context of your conference negotiations for the last NDAA, something of a compromise between two different [visions]. Are you happy with where that came out? Do you advocate for more robust U.S. support, especially diplomatic and military ties with Taiwan?

And a quick follow-up is, the Chinese government [tried to] insert itself into that process by contacting lawmakers on this issue. Do you believe that was appropriate? Have you seen an increased Chinese government [inaudible] congressional action?

Chairman Thornberry: I don't know. I have many governments who express opinions about things. It's okay for us to know that country X likes or dislikes that.

I think Taiwan is, in some ways, a unique sort of issue between the United States and China. It was carefully negotiated by Kissinger, and we have pretty much kept to that construct all these years. That does not diminish in any way the close ties the United States has with Taiwan, including military ties. As we develop those ties further, we do need to be sensitive to the unique place that that issue has in U.S.-China and Taiwan-China and who have I left out? China-U.S. [sic] relationships. So I thought it came out about right, but I'm sure that we will continue to have conversations about the appropriate level of military engagement with Taiwan. And with China, by the way.

DWG: Thank you for your time.

There recently have been a couple of memos from March that have resurfaced. One was from the Navy and one from the Defense Department. Basically, internal things telling units, [lots] about capability. And in addition to that, it talks [lots] about broken equipment and needs not being met and aircraft cannibalizing for parts. Some people have said this is actually, I think [Inaudible] wrote a piece about how this is undermining the military's effort to get bigger and increase strength, because they're not able to communicate freely with the public about it.

I was hoping to get your take on this issue. If you'd like to see better communication [inaudible].

Chairman Thornberry: Secretary Mattis and I have had several conversations on this topic. And there are two legitimate concerns. One concern that he is focused on is you don't want to tell your adversaries your problems. The concern that I tend to focus on is how do we fix our problems? And there's a natural tension about how much you can say publicly about what your problems are in order to get them fixed, but also not tell your adversaries too much. So we can all see, I think, that natural tension.

He has been very clear about instructing everybody at Department of Defense to be completely candid in classified sessions with us. So the issue is how much you talk about in public.

As I mentioned, I think we need to talk more. You can't hide the fact that we had 17 sailors die in the Pacific. Or however many Marines in the aircraft that exploded, et

cetera, et cetera. And I think that those families need to know that we are going to fix those problems and that requires talking about what some of the problems are with training, with repair, et cetera.

So we'll kind of have this back and forth that will continue, but I'm on the side of we need to talk more about these issues in order to get them on the right path.

DWG: A question on [inaudible] committee will be watching the reporting process [inaudible] following that [inaudible] for the Air Force. Where is that process now? Do you see progress [inaudible]?

Chairman Thornberry: We're going to need to follow up, and we will follow up, on the military reporting appropriate things to national databases. And if there is confusion about what level of military events equals what level of civilian events, you know, to facilitate that report. And then the responsibility may be on our soldiers to clarify that.

I think what's become clear is that none of the services are doing that as well as they should, and local governments are not doing it as well as they should. You know, it's a widespread sort of problem. But for our focus is, we are going to, and I give Secretary Wilson credit. She has taken this on in a serious way for the Air Force, but it's our job in Oversight to follow that and make sure that all the services are doing what they should the way they should. And if there is a need for us to clarify something, that we do so.

DWG: Mr. Chairman, thank you so much for taking on all comers, and there were a lot of comers because you draw a crowd. Once again, thank you on behalf of the Defense Writers Group, and we hope to see you again soon.

Chairman Thornberry: Thank you all for having me.

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