Defense Disruptors Series: A Conversation with General David Berger

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

- David Berger, Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps
- Bryan Clark, Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Defense Concepts and Technology
- Dan Patt, Senior Fellow, Center for Defense Concepts and Technology

Disclaimer: This transcript is based off of a recorded video conference and breaks in the stream may have resulted in mistranscriptions in the text.

A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/2129-defense-disruptors-series-a-conversation-with-general-david-berger2022

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Bryan Clark:

Welcome to the Hudson Institute. I'm Bryan Clark. I'm a senior fellow here at Hudson, and I'm director of the Center for Defense Concepts and Technology here at Hudson. I'm joined by Dr. Dan Patt. We are here at today, we're pleased to welcome the commandant of the Marine Corps, General David Berger, who's going to be here talking with us about the future of the Marine Corps and the future of defense as part of our Defense Disruptor series. So thank you all for being here today, and also thank you to the online audience. We appreciate your attendance.

We're going to be having a discussion with General Berger here for about a half hour, and then we're going to turn it over to questions from the audience, both here and virtually. So if you have questions virtually, please send those along via the YouTube link and we will work those into the mix for questions. So General Berger, thank you very much for being here.

General David Berger:

Thanks for having me.

Bryan Clark:

So to start off with Admiral Aquilino, the current commander of Indo-Pacific command, recently gave a series of speeches talking about events in the theater and the challenges he's facing and he really laid out a case for the need for us to take some new approaches to address the challenge posed by China and the need for new approaches to deterrence, new ways of structuring and posturing the force. You're also going through a major force design change in the Marine Corps that you've been advocating. What are the factors that you see occurring out there in Indo-Pacific command that are driving a lot of the changes that Admiral Aquilino is highlighting the need for, and also that you're pursuing within the Marine Corps?

General David Berger:

Factors. He highlights the pace that is changing. He also highlights the distances, the spread in other words, that was once was pretty close in tight and now more and more and more spread out, all of which is a bigger and bigger challenge for him. I think the maturation of what some would call the precision strike regime and what does it mean for us and I think on both sides an acknowledgement that this is not going to be over, or this competition is going to go on for a while and we're going to have to figure our way through it, long term.

What does that cause you to do? I think ... I know that it's causing us to approach risk in a different
way, managing near term versus long term risk because we could pull everything forward and be absolutely 100% focused on this week, mortgage the future completely, or the other, the inverse, right? Not really worried about this afternoon. I'm just looking down the road, but too much risk this afternoon, and part of the challenge in that is our processes, our processes that exist and some familiar in this room are familiar with terms like global force management. They were designed without all that in mind, frankly. They were not designed with that in mind.

**Bryan Clark:**

So one follow up to that. You talk about balancing risk. It seems like part of the risk balancing challenges, the kinds of situations you prepare the force to address so a lot of attention gets paid in the Pentagon to preparing for the China invasion of Taiwan, which obviously may or may not happen, and we try to burn down the risk on that scenario and while we probably accept risk in a lot of other scenarios that China could present to us, do you see that as something we need to kind of reevaluate? Is that maybe what Admiral Aquilino is getting that when he talks about the need for new approaches to deterrents? Do we need to think about China in this much more multidimensional way than just strictly as the invasion threat to Taiwan?

**General David Berger:**

Yes, and I don't think he would disagree. We also have to parse out deterrence on its different levels and consider them as related to each other but strategic deterrence, nuclear or not, is different than tactical and though they are related, we have to not just in different domains, but look at deterrence through different lenses and understand that actions at one level, yeah, they have effect at another level but if done in the worst case you could make advances here and actually set yourself back here if you're not cognizant of the whole, so deterrents in different levels, first step.

Second step, I think, is learning, frankly. Just understanding. I think we have a long history of understanding to some degree strategic deterrence, although some of this is relearning, but deterrence of activities, malign activities, in what some people write as a gray zone, okay, that we're not very ... We don't have a lot of ... We don't have 40 years of thinking about that. We have a few episodes, but not decades though, so I think we're learning our way through. How do you deter malign activity below the threshold of a hot war and how do you measure that, because it's not a win. It's measuring the negative and how do we do that?

**Bryan Clark:**

Right. Good point.

**Dan Patt:**

Sir, the title of this series is about defense disruptors, and that seems highly appropriate to have you on here. Thank you for joining us. And certainly a central disruption here is the new Marine Corps Force Design that at least in my memory and short history seems one of the more dramatic shifts the department has had. In making the case for the new Marine Corps First Design, you've cited evolving trends in lethality and the historian Stephen Biddle makes this point that as lethality gets so high, the challenge in conflict is staying alive long enough to have an effect and certainly one approach to deal with that is distribution and mobility and resilience, and it feels like the Marine Corps Force Design is
leaning in this direction with concepts like expeditionary advanced base operations, but it doesn’t come for free, right? There’s a price here. Two key challenges come to mind. One, how do you sustain this distributed force and two, how do you coordinate and harmonize their activities so they remain a cohesive force? How, how is the Marine Corps thinking about working through these challenges?

**General David Berger:**

The first part, I think a challenge for the Marine Corps, for the Naval force, for the joint force. Logistics hasn’t been ... I would say an afterthought is probably an exaggeration, but when your backside is protected, it’s not your first thought, let’s just say, but when you assume that your backside is threatened, now it’s in the first part. Most of us grew up early on in intelligence to drive operations and it should, but now like bring the logistics into the conversation in the first paragraph, because if we’re just focused on intelligence and then a scheme to come up with it, and then we’re going to turn to a logistician to say, "I need you to make that work, would you?" He’s going to say, "Well, you should have brought me in the early stages. I can’t make your scheme work."

I think logistics in a contested environment, huge challenge for us. Not insurmountable, but we need to acknowledge that we should assume, like we’re going to do to them, they’re going to challenge our sustainment. We have work to do. How do you get past that? A re-look, I think, at everything from pre-positioning ashore to pre-positioning afloat to the lift that conventionally has gone across the ocean through this solid protected pipeline delivered in some big port and off you go. That’s not how we’re going to need to think about it going forward because I think realistically, they’re going to challenge us back in our port or beyond. They’re going to try to slow our mobilization. They’re going to do everything that they can to slow us down as far back as possible.

Sustainment, huge challenge. Fortunately we have creative people thinking about it, trying different approaches. What do we have to work with? Some people think of allies and partners in terms of who’s going to fight alongside of you. I think in terms of yes, also this is your ... This is the pantry. This is the store you’re going to buy your goods from, and it’s all around you if you just open up your mind a little bit. It doesn’t all need to come from the East coast or the West coast of the U.S. The value of allies and partners, if we can get it there, is also sustainment. It’s logistics. It’s a distributed framework of keeping things operational forward and sustainment of supplies forward. How do we do that going forward? So logistics, we got a ... We have work to do there, but I’m optimistic because the right people are starting to think through and experiment with how we’ll do that. You had a second part, though.

**Dan Patt:**

Which is the coordination, the harmonization of activity, for this distributed force. The C2.

**General David Berger:**

Yeah. In a very simple sense, the way that I view it is the most forward parts of the U.S. Military in a contested environment before shots are fired are going to be special operations units, submarines and Marines, okay. So first step is if those three are forward persistently 24/7, how do we stitch them together into some sort of framework where they can move information, where they can move supplies, where they can with some overlap but not too much redundancy cover the playing field. This is a place we haven’t been in a while, to stitch together that tightly. We can, we should, and the last six months going a hundred miles an hour to sort through how to do that. It’s not as simple as create a joint task
force that all three of you all work for and you’re not suggesting that it is, but clearly command and control forward in a contested environment means not just distributed forces, but distributed ... Are we going to trust the small unit leaders to act and execute at speed, knowing that they may do it a little bit different way than the command post that's a thousand miles back there?

Second part, I think we're going to have to let go. We grew ... The senior leaders that we have today, many of them grew up in the last 20, 25 years where this place would've had nothing but plasma screens that gave us a picture of every square inch of territory we wanted to stare at 24/7. We got comfortable with that. We got comfortable with making decisions off of that. That's not how the future is going to be. In other words, the shared common operational picture I think looks different than it did in the Middle East. We have to get used to that. Commanders have to get used to learning about something that happened yesterday and being okay with that.

Dan Patt:

A follow up question on this. You talked earlier about the changing nature of thinking about deterrents. You've talked about some of this consistent forward presence and stand-in force and how that might be evolved in day to day activities. There’s going to be a stand-in force that has this enduring or ongoing role. How does that change Force Design or what a Marine needs to be prepared for? At least sort of my old mental model of force and readiness was there's a contingency, something bad happens and I'm there and I respond post facto, but here, if I'm there day to day, and I'm building the access and the relationships and the placements which are now a part of readiness with allies and partners, what does that ... How does that show up in Force Design? What is the Marine doing on a day to day basis to enable that and yeah. What does the Marine have to be ready for?

General David Berger:

To answer that question, I would probably go back four years, perhaps three and a half, four years, where a intentional shift to a focus on lethality, which was needed, I would now fast forward to today. I would say, "Don't let go of lethality," but you have to combine that with the ability now to collect, to understand what's in front of you and prevent them from doing the same. So the value perhaps of the stand-in force, in some ways it might be the most valuable thing they do is not killing something, but actually collecting or preventing an adversary from collecting against us. Or it may part of a kill web that this node placed forward is essential. The value of a stand-in force is lethality, for sure. Holding targets 24/7 at bay, or not at bay but at risk, where you know which targets you're holding and you can engage them either organically or with other assets, either way.

But part of deterrence, going back to your point, before that starts, before the fight starts, we need ... We want them to know we're there. We want them to see that we're there and we want make sure that they know there's nothing they can do there that we're not going to see. We’re not going to share with the rest of the world. There won't be activity that they can get away with, because we'll collect against it. That changes how they operate. They have to change then how they operate.

So where some, I guess long way of saying, a very simplistic approach might be everybody has long range weapons and there's satellites everywhere so we're just going to pull back to these great distances and hold each other at bay. Somebody who buys into that concept does not understand the approach of the adversaries we're talking about because us backing up, they will take four steps forward then we'll back four steps more, they'll take four steps forward and you know the rest of the story. So
staying in tight is exactly where the Marine Corps is very comfortable with being. It makes them uncomfortable.

**Bryan Clark:**

It seems like if we’re going to, and it seems like if you’re going to try to hold your adversary at risk and make him uncomfortable and create uncertainty, you got to be able to close that kill chain. So just watching him and making sure that he understands you’re watching him may not be enough. You’ve got to actually have the ability to potentially act on that information, and so you’re looking to equip the stand-in force with weapons and then I guess it’s going to work with other elements of the forward force—

**General David Berger:**

Absolutely.

**Bryan Clark:**

... To create this kill web possibility. So is that ... Is this part of the campaigning effort? Is this part of what we should be doing day to day to undermine the confidence that the PLA planners may have in their war plans or in their planned operations?

**General David Berger:**

Yeah. In any ... You pick a piece of real estate around the world. Through a military lens, the planners are going to look for what is the key terrain in that area that if ... You don’t have to necessarily be there, but you better be able to control it, okay. If you take approach in a littoral environment, then what can the Marine Corps contribute there? If we want to hold a key piece of littoral terrain open or deny the adversary the ability to sit there and control it, what does that take? And it’s not all about sinking their ships, to your point. It’s be ... Control. What does that mean? Or denial? What does that mean? And what is our role there as part of a combined joint force?

First step, back to first step. Can you collect ... Can you see ... Can you make sense of what’s in front of you? Can you do that? And frankly, I think we won’t have much problem getting there, but the paradigm of counter insurgency, target engagement, authority that’s held by an Admiral or a General somewhere back there is not ... That’s not going to be applicable right at all.

**Bryan Clark:**

And you’re going to need to equip those local commanders with the kinds of tools they might need. I mean, this gets to technology’s role and decision support tools to help them think through what are the different courses of action that are available to me because I don’t have a staff anymore. I’m just a 03, 04.

**General David Berger:**

Absolutely yes. From the hardware, software, of what computing do we need at the edge for a Sergeant, for a Lieutenant, for a Captain. What at the edge do they need the ability ... Do they need in their hands?
What do they need there, both processing wise and data wise and then what do they need access to, to your point. The tools that you mentioned ... In here, we have to separate artificial intelligence from machine learning, but the end result meaning they're not handling all of the volume of information manually nor sifting through possible options. That's being distilled down to a handful from which they can operate faster with better ... Not just faster, but actually better decisions.

Bryan Clark:

And it seems like that you we're arguing the stand-in force, the other elements of the forward force, are trying to get a decision making advantage over their Chinese counterparts. Even if no shots are being fired, there's this constant game of chess going on in terms of how you're positioning yourself or what then can be held at risk or what aren't being held at risk. And so in that decision making competition, it seems like you ideally you'd want more options available to you than what your opponent's going to have available to you, which I think gets to a question you wanted to raise about metrics.

Dan Patt:

Yeah, we can pivot to metrics. You know, one of the things you've engaged or drawn public attention to, is this conversation on readiness, right, jointly with General Brown, through Washington Post and War on the Rocks, you've talked about readiness and there's this theme that comes up which is often today conversational readiness focuses on availability, and it might miss this fact of even if I have available forces and available units, they might not be well prepared for the particular problem that I face now but at the same time, there's so much inertia around how we use these metrics that it seems very difficult to change. So the twin questions to you are what drew your attention to focus on metrics to drive institutional change, in particular readiness? What was your motivation for thinking about it? And two, you really think you can change the behavior of the institution?

General David Berger:

What drove me there I think primarily was a frustration that the metrics that we were using and the way that graphically and chart wise, whatever you want, the information we were giving the Secretary of Defense to make decisions with was incomplete, misleading to some degree. It was incomplete, in terms it didn’t give him the whole context. It gave him, "We have seven of them. How many of them can go today?" That was the extent of ... Okay, that's not good enough for him to make decisions with. So my frustration was not with him. It was with us. We have to get to a different framework that gives him the right information that is accurate and the context so he could say, "Let's do that." My frustration is living with this for the past decade, which probably served us well before, will not ... Is not going to serve us well going forward. So it's not the quality of his decision or, or anything like that. It's that the metrics were wrong, are not going to be what we need in the future readiness wise for him to make the right decisions, frankly. That was it.

Bryan Clark:

Because it seems like the way you're describing the operation of the future force, at least from the marine perspective, its utility is going to be based in part on its availability. I mean, is it even [inaudible 00:28:56] condition, but it's also based on, is it relevant to the operation at hand? Does it help me get more options, relative to what I had before? Does it give me options that are useful against these targets that I'm faced with in the situation I'm encountering today, which is a different way of measuring
readiness beyond just availability and did it certify its training or did it complete its tasks?

**General David Berger:**

That is certainly one aspect. Absolutely yes. Does that capability give you a relative advantage in the wherever you’re going to send it to. Clearly. The second part, which General Brown and I are trying to communicate, is at the cost of what, in terms of down the road modernization, whatever, if I do this, what’s the ... And readiness let’s say is not just about this afternoon, but readiness is deeper than that. What’s the risk that he’s assuming if we do that with that ship, with that squadron, whatever? What is the ... What risk is he buying in? We don't have a way to describe that for him.

If you do this, using some in this room's framework that they're familiar with, if I extend that ship for another 90 days on the deployment, can it do that? Yes, it can. That would be the end of the conversation with, "Let's do that." That makes all the sense in the world. What he doesn't see, what we can't show him, is two years from now, or a year from now, the scheduled maintenance period for that ship. We just erased that, and the maintenance, when we go do it, sort of like not changing oil in your car, it's not going to be the same, okay. There's a lot more inside when you crack that ship open, you're going to have more to work on than you planned. So we don't have a way of telling them any of that. We just say, "90 days. Can they stay there another 90 days?" Okay. They can.

**Bryan Clark:**

I mean, ideally it sounds like a readiness measure would help you make those kinds of trade off decisions to say, or even do I do something new to modernize the ship, to make it able to do more different things like support F-35, or do I take that money I put it towards extending the existing ship on a deployment or to go do another availability that doesn't change the capability of the ship.

**General David Berger:**

Yes. I mean, ultimately we're transferring risk from our level at this service level, in his lap, yet we have to find a way to communicate what that risk is, and then he owns it after that, just like at every level of command but my sense was we're not giving him the whole picture here.

**Bryan Clark:**

Right. There's an operational risk that is being born by him and the combatant commanders who are going to inherit whatever the services are able-

**General David Berger:**

To some degree, but it's also risk two or three years from now to another Secretary of Defense and another combatant command, not those two human beings, but two others. How do we capture that? How do we know what we're buying?

**Bryan Clark:**

Right.
Dan Patt:

Shifting topics a little bit. You've not just updated doctrine, you've released to new volumes, one on learning and one on information. In the topic of information where you described the background and the purpose and the mechanics of the information war, it's ambitious in scope, right? It covers information, everything from data flowing and C2 structures to the role of information in societies. One of the things reading through that struck me was the conversation on why, the motivation for this. And there's a discussion about rivals and how things like Russia has a doctor of hybrid warfare that has similar ideas and motivated by similar changes in the environment. Why is introducing this doctor now and focusing on this, not just a me too response? Why is there need for an American way of waging the information warfare?

General David Berger:

First off, nothing that I started ... I would credit General Neller five, six years ago maybe, maybe a little bit earlier, driving the Marine Corps to begin to understand what he saw coming and he changed the structure of the Marine Corps to create an organization in each of our three star headquarters focused on information, and then he got Congress, convinced them, that we needed another general on our staff working for the commandant focused on information, way in front of his time. People were scratching their heads going, "What craziness is this?" Six years later, prudent. Some ideas are before their time.

I think the last 120, 140 days in Europe is a fantastic case study in information. This isn't just about great power. Every power. Information is, to your point, is pretty much ubiquitous so it doesn't matter what your gross domestic product is. If you can manage information, you can actually gain an advantage. I think there's going to be a lot learned out of what's happened in Ukraine in the last three, four months by both sides and wider than that in NATO and globally information and if you can understand it, not harness it, but if you can understand it and work your way through it, it can actually gain you an advantage that I think some could argue could be decisive, even more than kinetically, perhaps. You can win before firing a shot, kind of thing, if you're organized for it, if you can think deeply enough about it.

But to your point, it bleeds over past the military intelligence kind of information into other aspects and then we start to get not nervous, but it's a different ... It's a broader definition, but this is ... I don't think there's going back. This is learning connected to the second piece of doctrine that released. We have to be actively learning because the world is moving at a velocity where if you think you're comfortable today or tomorrow, you'll be left behind. We have to be constantly challenging our assumptions and constantly learning. With information, who can use it most effectively? Who can understand the power of it? The allies and partners you mentioned earlier, I would say would be a great branch off into how do you ... As a collective group, how do you use information more powerfully?

Bryan Clark:

So it seems like also the competition for information or the information confrontation, to use the Russian word, is happening not just ... People, I think, tend to think of that as being like social media and political warfare and disinformation, but there's a huge military dimension of it, right? Every reaction you take, every posture move, every maneuver, every kinetic attack, that conveys information, which we've seen in Ukraine where a lot of the attacks that both sides are doing are intended to convey a message more than they are to actually accomplish an objective. Is that something that you're working
... I mean, it seems like the stand-in force and the work you're doing on Force Design is intended to help support the ability of the military force to convey messages through their operations.

**General David Berger:**

Yes. I'll draw probably a parallel you're not expecting, but in a kinetic framework, if you're going to bomb a target or shoot at something you would ... Before you ever did that, you would think through, "I need to allocate something that's going to go look at that target afterwards to see what effect we had," and that means you're actually carving out something that you would go do something else with just to go look at something you just attacked, but you need to because otherwise you're going to re-attack it because you don't ... Or you don't know what effect you had.

I think the same is in play with information. In other words, collectively in the Marine Corps and in a joint force, we're actually going to have to carve out some level of effort in front of whatever we do to measure the backside effect of it, just like dedicating a satellite or a second flight to go look at the bomb damages, we're going to have to do the same only it's continuously, so, okay. That's first part, we got to allocate something to measure the effect of what we're trying to do in the information space. That's going to be uncomfortable.

The second part of that, do we have the patience and the cultural understanding, using the right lens and not mirror imaging, to look at it, to stare at it for weeks through someone else's eyes? Otherwise we'll look at it for 24 hours through the U.S. lens and go, "That was a grand success." Maybe, maybe not. Do we have the patience and frankly, the humility to look at things through a different cultural lens, because we're talking information and how it's perceived or multiple lenses. Do we have that? We have the potential. We have certainly the quality of people.

**Bryan Clark:**

Which, and before we go to questions, so if you have questions in the audience, please formulate them and be ready and then we'll get the microphone passed around so we can ask those, which raises a question that I think some people have raised about the war in Ukraine is the information battle has been very prominent in who seems to be on top or not on top but now we've kind of seen this grinding war of attrition develop in the east and the south. So at how would the Force Design the Marine Corps is moving toward, how would it address a potential opponent, like a China or Russia, who may be willing to go to that just, "We're going to throw whatever it takes into this fight, no matter what the costs are and eventually try to gain our objective." How do we use the information competition or confrontation to prevent that or to win that?

**General David Berger:**

That's a great point. Great question. Let me try to come at it from two angles and then if I don't touch, if I don't scratch the itch, let me know. First, I think ... Hmm. Trying to put this in the right framework. When it comes to information and how we manage it or fail to, the depth, the time lag from incident to where we measure it is a different timeframe from going to look at a target that we just bombed. We can get immediately feedback doing that. We're going to have to make some major adjustments in that process, I think. There was a second lens. I'll probably ... I'll hold off on that for right now, but.

**Bryan Clark:**
I mean, it seems like part of what the argument would be would be we're going to try to prevent it from developing into that war of attrition. We're going to try to use the ... We're going to use maneuver reconnaissance and counter reconnaissance to create dilemmas for our opponents, such that the war of attrition option doesn't present itself as being viable.

**General David Berger:**

The worst mistake you can make, I think, not the worst perhaps, but a fundamental mistake you could make in great power competition is a symmetrical confrontation or symmetrical just mental approach. They do this. We're going to counter with the same thing and we're going to butt heads. Bad approach. So first of all, from the very beginning in the everyday kind of campaigning part, take an asymmetric approach. This is comfortable for the Marine Corps because we're not a land army. We're not going to count how many artillery tubes or in any way numerically try to match up with somebody. We're going to go asymmetric.

And the second part I think is taking advantage of what's, in our case, a maneuver offensive, aggressive, take initiative don't ask for permission, just constantly stay in front of an adversary's thinking process. Not speed for the sake of speed, but actually keeping an adversary off balance. This is the way we're trained from day one, so it's natural.

The last part I would say is, and you had ... One of the two of you had mentioned this before in terms of learning lessons. In my view, Ukraine ... We have to be cautious about what we're learning from Ukraine and how we characterize it, let's just say. I don't think it's a war of attrition. You didn't offer that it is, but Russia is not attacking the Ukraine military forces in a war of attrition. They didn't offer that it is, but Russia is not attacking the Ukraine military forces in a war of attrition. They're rubbling their cities. Okay, that's a different, some might say nuanced approach, but to me, it's not. They're going after not the Ukraine military, they're breaking the will of the people. Okay. That's that's an old style approach.

**Bryan Clark:**

And arguably that's an information competition.

**General David Berger:**

Absolutely. Yes. Yeah.

**Dan Patt:**

One final question from me.

**General David Berger:**

Please.

**Dan Patt:**

We're here. The name of the center is Center for Defense Concepts and Technology. We talked a bunch about concepts, new concepts, new ways of thinking about leveraging information in conflict and new
ways of thinking about deterrents as well as things like EABO operational concepts. What about technology? To what extent must the Marine Corps lean into new technology to prevail, to achieve its desired ... To support its concepts? And if it must lean into it, what are the promises and what are the perils of trying to lean into newer technology?

General David Berger:

I don't see a lot of perils, frankly. Part of the value of having the youngest force compared to the other services is younger people. They haven't spent 15 years learning a way of doing business so them tossing off, "This is how we've always done," they haven't always done it anyway so they're willing to ... If you give them a problem, them being Marines, young Marines give them a problem they won't hesitate to go try things and if it didn't work they'll this afternoon try it a different way because they don't ... They haven't had to lug around the same baggage for 15 years. They're not encumbered by that. The energy level is phenomenal. I don't see really a downside of it.

The downside might be the senior ones holding them back and saying, "No, you're only going to try it two ways," or, "Here's this new piece of gear." This is the way we'd normally do it, and I'm being self critical to probably over exaggerate a point. "This is the new piece of gear we think we might buy. We've been thinking about it for a year and a half. It's pretty good. And then we're going to send you a training team of experts. They're going to spend a week with you training you how to use this, to do a certain thing." That's our conventional approach.

"And then we're going to make you fill out this bubble chart survey thing that tells you how well it did what we wanted it to do," and you're ... You haven't even actually ... Marines are not going to stay awake for that whole first 90 seconds or whatever. And then they're going to take this from you quickly, go out this afternoon and do something completely different than they were authorized to do with it, not what we had envisioned and you know what? They'll figure out in like three hours, four things that we didn't intend for it to do that it can do pretty good. They'll break it apart, first of all. They won't ask permission, they just will, and then they'll put it together in a different way and they'll figure out how actually technology can help them, not me, in a way we hadn't imagined.

If we can embrace that, we're there. Just give them this, okay? Give them this tell them broadly what we had in mind and don't box them in too tight. Don't send a training team for a week and a half. No. They'll YouTube this in 90 seconds, man, and learn more than probably the training team will give them in four days, but then they'll ditch the YouTube and go four steps farther. That creativity's great.

Bryan Clark:

More broadly to the force, larger, the force as a whole-

General David Berger:

Yeah. Absolutely.

Bryan Clark:

That same idea applies.
General David Berger:

Yeah. The biggest anchor here is the top of this willing to listen. Willing to go at that speed and willing to listen.

Bryan Clark:

It may be the middle part. I mean, as a previous member of the middle part, I think it's the middle part of the force that tends to be the most stuck in their ways.

So questions from the audience. Do you ... Let's see. Sir, if you could just state your name and affiliation. One of these fine young Hudson scholars will hand you a microphone. There you go. Thank you very much.

Pat (audience member):

Hi, I'm Pat from Institute. I'm wondering if there will be an industry day or any release of info soon for a maritime tactical UAS services contract for the Marine expeditionary units?

General David Berger:

Let me get with you off offline on it. I know the answer to it, but let me get offline with you.

Pat (audience member):

Thanks.

General David Berger:

Sure.

Bryan Clark:

Thank you, Pat. Great question. Justin.

Justin Katz (audience member):


General David Berger:

Nice to see you.

Justin Katz (audience member):

You, too. I wanted to ask you about stand-in forces. You know, my understanding of it is that it's not meant to be the gospel. You want the fleet to go work with it, and then you want them to come back
and tell you what didn't work. So I guess two pronged question. The first one is, is there anything in the past several months going around the fleet or whatever it may be that you can point to as this is what I'm talking about, this is what I mean when I say a stand-in force, and then jumping off of that, I guess, can you elaborate a little bit on how you thinking about stand-in forces has changed as you've seen the fleet work with it and as you've seen current events?

**General David Berger:**

Fantastic point. As you, and accurately captured, stand-in forces isn't a thing. It isn't a unit. It's a concept. It's why we published it, a concept for stand-in forces. Okay. So that's a start point. It's how a unit might fight. Might operate. An example. I'm going to probably pick one you're not expecting if that's okay with you.

**Justin Katz (audience member):**

That makes it better.

**General David Berger:**

How about Europe? How about the last three and a half months? And I'll break it down for you as quick as I can. Sent couple thousand plus Marines to Norway from the East coast to go participate in a regularly scheduled exercise. Sent another element also from the East coast to go experiment in reconnaissance and counter reconnaissance, not related but from both from the east coast, both regularly scheduled, then war breaks out. Immediately, not immediately. Within a day or two, a lot of conversations between the European EUCOM commander and the elements that we had forward and us back here about, "What do you ... What's already forward that I can use quickly," right?

So from that point forward for the next 90 days, a shifting and movement of much of that force from an F-18 squadron to a radar section to a bunch of other information and intelligence related units that were experimenting already now collect, but from a very forward posture, in other words. Inside the collection and weapons engagement zone, operating persistently all the time, not trying to hide. Show them that we're there, but to the point where the creativity of them in terms of mobility and also understanding things like satellite vulnerability windows, things, just the basics of camouflage. In other words, knowing when they can see me and how do I operate that? How do I use that from an information perspective effectively? How do I either confuse them, how do I convince them that what they're seeing is what they want to see, but it's not really accurate? Just marvelous, magnificent creative work by a bunch of Marines, all as a stand-in force, all within the range of weapon systems.

Similar thing happened in the Indo-Pacific. Moving around between first, second island nation areas by ship and ashore. Constantly inside, constantly making sure that the adversary knew we were there. Constantly moving small elements, demonstrating that in ourselves, constantly repeating, closing kill chains and kill webs over and over, constructive ones, over and over and over again trying to cut the timeline down, down, down, down, down. Then once you get it down, you're really comfortable, then start interdicting different communications paths to make it harder on ourselves. That's what's going on right now.
The idea ... In other words, the idea just given to the operating forces, the fleet, let them run with it. They'll figure ... They will inform us back what works in their neighborhood, and I'm very comfortable with what's working in Middle East, maybe a different, little bit different flavor than this happening in Europe, maybe different than Indo-Pacific. I need to be ... We need to be flexible enough to allow for that, and we can.

**Bryan Clark:**

And arguably that's campaigning, right? That's-

**General David Berger:**

Absolutely.

**Bryan Clark:**

That's what we should be doing and creating that feedback loop.

**General David Berger:**

Yeah. This isn't a go there for an exercise and come home. It's not that. Stay in their face the whole time.

**Bryan Clark:**

So one thing I want to mention to you before we do the next question is, do you ... So we talked, you talked about the Indo-Pacific and the operations that are going on there. How does the work that you're doing now in the Indo-Pacific inform the LXX, the next amphibious ship? Because I think we've got a relatively large set of amphibious ships, not a large number, but a large ... There are large ships. Where do you think we're going to be going with that next amphibious ship design and how is it going to be informed by these experiments and demonstrations?

**General David Berger:**

I think the first step is to figure out the intermediate sort of platform. What does that look like, that gives the mobility at the 75, 100 Marine kind of size, and then concurrently as we sort ... As we start to get a clear picture of what might suit that requirement, then, to your point. If it's LPD 17 next or something else, what does that look like? How does it inform it in ... I'll just use a very condensed version. We're going to use the amphib ships we have right now in ways we have not used them in the past. Think unmanned. Okay, now think if you designed a ship that was designed with unmanned in mind, what would that look like? Probably a little bit different. In other words, I'm talking about both aerial platforms, surface and subsurface, all unmanned, and you had a clean sheet of white paper here. What would that vessel look like? Probably different than what we have right now.

So my point of departure is not the vessel we have right now, the next best version of it. It's how do we think we're going to need to operate in the future? What would that look like? My guess is more of them, smaller. You know where that conversation goes.

**Bryan Clark:**
Right, and being able to carry those unmanned vehicles that don't have the range and the reach to be able to get in there themselves, something to deploy them is going to be a big ... A contributor to counter-reconnaissance reconnaissance.

**General David Berger:**

To date, we've primarily thought of amphibious ships somewhat like carriers, where you leave mothership and you come back to mothership. We need to look at them as they're part of a whole network of portable air fields, plus the fixed ones, and harbors so if we're going to launch these unmanned platforms, they don't need to come back to the same ship. They could go ashore. They could go to somebody else's ship. They could go to an Australian ship. Could we land their UAS on our ship? Yeah. We can actually extend these ranges if we crack our minds open a bit. Yeah.

**Bryan Clark:**

Which is ... It's a broader view of reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance.

**General David Berger:**

Absolutely. Yeah.

**Bryan Clark:**

About undersea warfare being done by Marines. Think about like electronic warfare being done by Marines, using unmanned vehicles.

**General David Berger:**

And if you have a medium altitude, medium endurance, unmanned aerial platform, and you could refuel it unmanned, well, now you're in another world right now and we're not that far from there, are we? Technology wise, we're we're not far from there.

**Bryan Clark:**

Exactly. Patrick, you had a question.

**General David Berger:**

Sure.

**Patrick Cronin:**

General, Patrick Cronin. You were in Australia recently, and I wondered if you would share with us your assessment of the value of the rotational training in Darwin several years on now, as well as any other key takeaways you might share with us about the value of just the growing cooperation with Australia.

**General David Berger:**
You're going to get the most positive feedback you could ever imagine from me, because my history with the rotational force in Darwin goes back not quite a decade but pretty close, at least seven years. From where it started seven years ago til today, faster, farther than I would've imagined and I'm telling you that personally. I went early on to meetings in Australia about the next rotation and quickly learned, "Okay, we can't call it a base. We can't ..." All the things you can't do, because it was difficult for Australia to get past the first steps. Now we're like, "Can you guys stay year round? Can you move? Can you increase it?" And it is fantastic working alongside of them. We went there primarily because they were a great ally and they have great ranges and now it's grown seven steps beyond that.

Four years ago, you would go there and watch a mixed artillery crew of Marines and Australian soldiers on the same artillery tune and you're like, "That's crazy." Using each other's fire direction center. It's crazy. No, they're very comfortable doing that. Now we're to the point where I think later this year, early next year, we'll deploy on their amphib ships. They already go on ours. This is way beyond Admiral Aquilino, well way beyond interoperable. We're like, "No, we're interchangeable." Absolutely, yeah. I don't know where the limit is. I really don't. But everything from the very lowest tactical operator that I'm very comfortable with in Afghanistan on any mission all the way up, I don't know where the limit is. Both of us lean in very far into it now. It's a great place to be. Really optimistic.

Bryan Clark:

And maybe submarines, too. Dual crews on submarines.

General David Berger:

Right.

Bryan Clark:

Next question. Yes, Jack.

Jack (audience member)

Hey, General. My name is Jack, I'm an intern with CDCT. You talked a lot about getting materials, physical materials, and the whole challenge of logistics in the hostile theater. What is a reasonable expectation for communications and intelligence resilience in the face of a country like China that is capable of shooting down satellites?

General David Berger:

We should assume that on both sides, we're going to try to go after soft spots early on. I think that's what you're hinting at. Both logistics and command and control. If you were studying the U.S. for the past 20 years, where do you ... How can I start to weaken that animal over there? You would go after command and control because you would think they rely on it so much that if I can just interdict that, if I can hurt their command and control, we can start to have a more of a fair fight. So I think we should assume that they're going to go after our command and control and they're going to go after our logistics, if there were a confrontation or they're going to make it clear to us, they could, just say it another way, during the pre conflict and we're going to do the same. We're going to communicate, "We
A Conversation with General David Berger | July 7, 2022

can do A, B and C and that A, B and C isn't going to be all of it."

Where does that leave us? In certain places we got work to do in terms of resilience, joint all domain command and control. How do we patch that together? Is it redundant enough that there's multiple pathways? That's one category. The other category that probably not enough focus on, but in the Marine Corps, the primary focus, it's not gear. It's the people. How do we train? How do we become comfortable with small unit leaders making decisions at speed with very limited connectivity. We had a discussion earlier, I think younger leaders will be happy with that. The senior leaders will be uncomfortable with that. I'm overplaying it to a degree, but they'll be very happy to be unencumbered by the every 12 hour sit rep that was just like the last 12 hours and takes them an hour and a half to type out. They'll make decisions at speed and this is a natural place for the Marine Corps to be. We're very comfortable giving ... Empowering junior leaders and training them to get to there.

The last part of that we have to up our game, training wise. When I talk about maturity of the force, I'm not talking about an age. I'm talking about how do we get ... Today, what a Staff Sergeant has in terms of experience, how do we get that two years earlier? Part of it is technology. It's reps, it's sets, it's over and over, building into their mind what it normally would take seven years to get, how do I get there in five? So maturity to me is the ability to make decisions based on a volume of experience so how do we get to the experience faster in a shorter period of time? How do we get a Sergeant with the same level of experience that today a Staff Sergeant has? How do we do that? That's what's going to get us that in a broken connectivity, fractured environment. That's how you operate at speed without any loss in tempo.

Bryan Clark:

We'll do one more question.

Todd Lindberg (audience member):

Todd Lindberg from Hudson. My question is actually is the political leadership sufficiently educated in this devolved concept of how to go about these things? Is there more work to do? I mean, the specter of LBJ selecting targets in Vietnam continues to lurk in the imagination. Do you have more work to do there? Are you comfortable?

General David Berger:

Yeah, no, we should never be comfortable. I think there's clearly at the strategic level ... I mean, there are things that you don't decentralize, you don't delegate, and they need the reps. They need the repetitions that, they meaning the nationals. Leaderships have to be involved in war games, have to practice their role, if it's conflict on a very large scale.

I'm not in a position to judge are they ready for that or not? I see them in war games. I understand their involvement. That's critical, so that they can see the options, they can get used to that weight on their shoulders, if you know what I mean. When there's real pressure and real consequences of the decisions they make, that has to come. At our level I joke a little bit about us letting go of the reins a bit. We'll be fine. The senior military leaders will be fine letting go of that control. We know what tempo means. The rest, I think, is just a function of a lot of exercises, war games, just repetitions for them to understand because if you don't do it the first time is not ... You don't want the first time to be the first time, ever.
Bryan Clark:

Great point. So, well, thank you very much, General Berger. I think that was a great point to end the discussion on is it's all about empowering the junior leaders to take charge and be the tip of the spear in that future force. So thank you very much for your time today and for answering many questions and helping educate us on kind of where the future of the Marine Corps is going.

General David Berger:

I'm not sure I educated, but thanks.

Bryan Clark:

Thank you very much.