

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 386 | Michael R. Gordon: The U.S. Isn't Ready for Great Power Conflict - And the Iraq War(s) That Led It There

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Re-alignment.  
Hey, everyone. Welcome back to the show.  
I've got a great episode today.  
I'm speaking with Michael Gordon,  
a national security correspondent at the Wall Street Journal,  
about his book to grade and destroy  
the inside story of the war against the Islamic State  
from Barack Obama to Donald Trump.  
Michael has written three other books on the wars in Iraq  
from Desert Storm, which was the General's War,  
to Cobra 2, and the Endgame.  
This period covers the 1990s,  
all the way up to the end of the Islamic State in 2019.  
Lately, though, Michael's work has increasingly focused on the pivot  
to great power conflict and competition with China and Russia.  
So what we successfully do in this conversation  
is tie these two stories together.  
What happened over the past 30 years  
were also focusing on how that period and attention  
that was or was not paid to other styles of conflict  
is going to impact the future over the next decade or so.  
Hope you all enjoy this conversation  
and a huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation  
for supporting the work of this podcast.  
Michael Gordon, welcome to The Re-alignment.  
I'm glad to be here.  
Yeah, I'm glad to speak with you.  
As I said before, the recording.  
I'm a huge fan of your work around the Iraq Wars,  
Middle Eastern policy and broader Pentagon reporting  
for the New York Times and Wall Street Journal.  
I want to start by asking you about a piece you wrote back in March  
which is about how the United States is not ready  
for an emerging era of great power conflict.  
We're going to get into the Iraq Wars issue,  
but I think that it's really important for us  
to sort of place ourselves in the current moment.  
Can you summarize your perspective on that topic?  
Yes, at the Pentagon, the declaratory strategy  
in the United States is to be able to deter Chinese aggression  
in the Western Pacific and also Russian aggression  
wherever it might manifest itself.  
And this strategy was articulated

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when Jim Mattis was the Defense Secretary really in 2018 and it was embraced by the Biden administration.

And in fact, Secretary Austin calls China the pacing threat. What does pacing threat mean?

Well, it means it's the dominant long-term concern that the US military has as it seeks to overhaul its forces for the decades ahead.

But the challenge is, because at the Pentagon there are no problems, only challenges, is that first of all, this is an inherently difficult undertaking.

China is building up its military in a whole host of ways and its own ability to protect power regionally.

And the US is trying to develop the capability to defend Taiwan if a future president decides to do so.

We don't have a formal obligation to do so, but it's certainly a possibility you have to be prepared for and are Asian allies.

And these are thousands of miles away from the American homeland. We don't have an alliance in Asia the way we do with NATO in Europe, not a formal one.

We have Japan and South Korea and perhaps the Philippines now and supporters in Taiwan and an outpost in Guam, but that's not a formal NATO alliance.

And the Chinese have really learned from the US involvement in the Middle East.

And they've developed a strategy that essentially relies on their ability to take out American bases in the region, the kind of footholds that we would use to protect power.

If you think back to like the Desert Storm campaign that I was a part of as a journalist,

where the US and allies evicted Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait, the US had a massive buildup under General Colin Powell, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

It took months to carry this out.

There was no interference.

It was purely an administrative undertaking.

You built up a mountain of supplies and bases in the region, and then we'd pick a time when we wanted to start it.

Early 91 sounded like a good time.

And then we initiate the conflict with, none of the bases really came under attack.

Saddam's scud threat was really very primitive.

And we didn't have any difficulties getting our men material over to the Middle East.

Well, none of that would be the case in a conflict with China.

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Our air bases in Japan and Guam, you have to assume would come under attack from the very start. And this is a strategy China has promulgated called an anti-access strategy. It's got an acronym at the Pentagon, A2AD, because everything at the Pentagon has an acronym, anti-access area denial. But the point is they try to keep us from getting anywhere near their part of the world. And so what the US military now is taking on is not merely the development of new weapons systems and long range missiles and new capabilities, but a whole new strategy in doctrine for being able to project power within, well, you know, let's say in the case of Taiwan within 100 miles of China against an adversary that would try to stop us from even getting to the fight. And all the different US military services have moved out on this for a whole host of reasons. One, it's a good way to get budget share and resources from the Congress, but I think they're committed to it. And yet the Marines are doing something, the Air Force is doing something, the Navy and the Army. And this strategy, however, is yet to be knit together in any sort of intricate way by the Defense Department leadership and many of the systems and capabilities that the Pentagon are projecting or five, ten years away. So it's a bit of a race. China is trying to build up the capability to take Taiwan if they so choose. The CIA has said that the Chinese leadership wants to have that capability by 2027. That doesn't mean they would act against China militarily then, but it means that Xi Jinping has instructed his military to build up the capability to do so if he decides. And we're racing to build up the capability to deter and counter that. And so this is a problem that's going to unfold over the next five to ten years. And it's nothing the US is remotely ready to do today. Of course, if war broke out, it would be fought by both sides who are ill prepared to fight it. But it's a deterrence mission that the US is trying to carry out really for the next decade or two. And something to be helpful to illustrate for the audience then is you've pointed out that this strategy or this threat environment you're describing requires the US military to change itself. In the piece you wrote, you gave an example of the Marine Corps no longer has tanks. And if you're understanding the Iraq war in 2003, tanks were obviously a huge part of that. But as you discuss the ways the US military and the specific military branches themselves are shifting given this great power-conflict focus. And probably the poster child for change is the US Marine Corps. This really was an initiative of the Marines, not of the Trump or Biden administration. General Berger, the commandant who's leaving now and to his successor Eric Smith, who is also going to carry on this vision. What he did, and it's quite controversial actually, especially within the larger Marine community, was he decided to reinvent the Marines as a kind of naval infantry force.

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And his vision is a small teams of Marines would be deployed to islands, let's say in the South China Sea, Indonesia, basically in the Western Pacific equipped with anti-ship missiles.

Their mission would be to bottle up the Chinese fleet.

It's a way to make the Marines relevant to the big war scenario that's preoccupying the Pentagon now.

And what the Marines have been, and I've been with the Marines in Iraq, and what they were there was kind of a second land army.

They had tanks, they had aircraft, they had infantry.

But to come up with the resources to underwrite this new capability,

General Berger got rid of the Marine Corps' tanks and cut back on some of their artillery, come back on law enforcement battalions, things of that sort, made a lot of reductions.

And the reason it's controversial is on the people who say,

well, the military needs to change, applaud this and say,

well, wow, these guys are stepping up to the plate.

They're getting rid of things and trying to buy new things and reinventing themselves for a new mission.

But some of the old guard, former Marine officers say,

well, wait a second, what if we're wrong about the next war?

We usually are.

You know, what if it's not with China?

What if it's a different type of contingency?

What if it's on the Korean Peninsula?

Was that really a wise thing to do to get rid of some of these legacy capabilities?

But that's how the Marines are changing.

The Air Force, you know, is pretty much on course developing its longer range missiles,

but they have some catching up to do and the Air Force has put a premium on bombing targets on land,

and now they have to do some catching up to do in terms of developing capabilities to attack targets at sea.

That's how you would thought an amphibious, a Chinese amphibious thing.

And the Navy and the Army is also undertaking their own changes.

As I said earlier, all of this hasn't really been pulled together at the leadership level.

You sort of have all the services doing their separate things,

and there's a recognition that this has to be harmonized and reconciled at some point.

But this is the mission ahead.

The mission the Pentagon has set for itself, and it's explicit in its doctrine and website, is deterring China, deterring Russia.

The trade-off it's willing to make is drawing down U.S. military capability in the Middle East.

That's a matter of risk because ISIS is still active there, diminished, but not out entirely.

In fact, just yesterday on Sunday, July 9th, Senkham announced they'd carried out a drone strike a couple days earlier against an ISIS leader.

And Iran is still problematic, but it's the elevation of China and Russia as the principal threats,

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the downgrading of the Middle East, accepting more risk there.

That's the new strategic direction that the Pentagon is going in.

So a couple questions emerge from that.

So number one would be, how do you think a military bureaucracy can balance the challenge of being prepared for the current threatened mission and the future one?

Because something that is interesting to me as an observer of the discourse around the war in Iraq has been, if it's 2006, 2007,

all of the memoirs from the time, especially those that were more focused on the counterinsurgency community,

saying, look, there's EFPs that are going off, the IED threat.

You have hundreds and even thousands of American soldiers, Marines, airmen, sailors, et cetera, dying in the streets.

And then there's all this talk about China and Russia.

We need to focus on the now and the present.

Now, if you read a lot of these articles that are backwards looking, that are looking at this forward-facing Great Power Conflict Area,

they will say things like, we were too focused on insurgencies in the 2000s and 2010s and not focused enough on this future-facing threat.

So these seem to be not contradictory, but just you have to balance different factors at the same time.

How do you assess the military's ability and civilian leaderships to do both of those at the same time?

Well, it's a very perceptive and pertinent question, but it's a complicated one.

First off is when I was at the New York Times, I essentially broke the story of the Iranian supply of EFPs to kill American servicemen in Iraq.

And the perspective of people like Secretary Gates and others at the time was, look, you got to succeed in the war that you're involved in and not cut back on the resources that are needed for that to be ready for something in the future.

In fact, Gates called it next war, it is. You know, we had to build them wraps and really, the surge really became essential not only to reverse the military momentum in Iraq, which it did and succeeded at doing,

but it also, and President Obama later acknowledged this, it actually facilitated President Obama's strategy to withdraw forces from Iraq.

And he took it too far by going taking all the forces out, but it would never have been able to do what he did if it hadn't been for the success of prior efforts in Iraq and beating back Al Qaeda in Iraq.

So, you know, that was the immediate challenge. Now, it did come at a cost.

And one of the costs, for example, was during this timeframe, the same Secretary Gates, who was instrumental in getting MRAPs to protect troops in Iraq, also cut back on the F-22 program.

The Air Force to this day, if you gave him truth serum, would say that that was a mistake.

We only have 100 and I think 187 F-22s.

And they're not all mission capable on any given day. And we just deployed something at least because guess who's acting up in Syria right now, the Russian Air Force, and we need air to air fighters.

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And we didn't build nearly enough of them in that timeframe for a great power mission.

So that was one of the tradeoffs, but it's a little more complicated. A lot of people like to say, and here's where the caveats come in, oh, if only we hadn't been involved in Middle East, we'd be better prepared for China.

Well, I'm not sure that's really the case. Yes, there were tradeoffs in pursuing these conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, or trying at least not to lose in them.

But there were other factors at work. First off, both the Bush administration, George W. Bush, and then President Obama did not necessarily see China as an adversary.

The hope was that China could be integrated into the world economic system, that if you treat them as an enemy that'll act as an enemy.

Yes, there was concern about where their military buildup was going, but they had not embarked on a very determined nuclear weapons buildup as they have now.

And there was still the hope, we helped get them in the World Trade Organization. There was still hope that we could have a relationship of competition more than confrontation with China.

So that was a factor. This is not just something President Obama believed. It was something President Bush also held on to. That's what Gates told me.

He worked for both of these presidents. And another factor is absent the shock of 9-11, which is what led the U.S. into the Middle East.

Remember, we didn't just go there willy-nilly. It was initially to Afghanistan and then residual concern over Iraq.

But it's not clear there would have been a high level defense spending. And if you go back and look at how much we actually spent on defense during the time, a lot of these wars were funded by something called Overseas Contingency Operation Budget. It was a separate budget above and on top of the Standard Defense Department budget.

And so Gates will say, look, the regular Pentagon budget was still went up during this period.

And we still bought conventional weapons systems during this period, aircraft carriers, missile defense. We did a lot of that.

It's just a lot of the things that they pursued in the conventional realm then was not the best used to resources.

Sometimes the Pentagon uses the 9-11 wars as an excuse to cover up some of the bad decisions it itself made on the development of weapons systems and new doctrine and strategy for China and Russia.

It probably could have done a much more effective job of preparing to deter China and Russia with the resources it had.

It squandered money on things like the Army's feature combat system that was later canceled.

But when you say, well, why aren't you more prepared? They say, oh, well, because of Iraq and Afghanistan, it's partially an excuse.

Something that would be helpful to build out on that point is how should we understand how the American governmental system even handles these broad military questions in the sense that the headlines folks are probably thinking of right now are the

We can't produce enough munitions given the constraints and requirements of the war in Ukraine. Is that a failure of the DOD?

In terms of military officers, is that a failure of civilian leadership of the DOD? Is that a failure of

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executives within the White House?

Is that a failure of the private sector in this case? We're not the Soviet Union. We don't have a defense, a literal defense industrial complex that's run by the government top down.

So how should we understand how all these different actors are coming together? Because I guess to your point, too, even in your earlier conversation, you were pointing out that even within the DOD, the Marine Corps, the Navy, the Air Force, the Army are actually taking different approaches that aren't coherent together.

So how should we understand how this comes together from an accountability perspective?

Well, I mean,

Big question. So there has to be a perfect answer to that.

I mean, you know, look, the US wasn't was caught by surprise by 911 and the age of terrorism and it was, it reacts to these shocks and then it pivoted to that challenge. And now Russia's aggression in Ukraine and China's nuclear buildup is sort of another shock to the system.

And the system is adjusting. And as you point out, the system has many components, but there was a premature harvesting of a peace dividend.

And this is a societal issue. It's not anyone individual's fault. But for example, we stopped submarine construction for four or five years because well, who needs strategic submarines if the Cold War is over and China's not yet a threat.

And now the submarine industrial base is really hard put to produce the two Virginia class attack submarines a year that the Navy wants and also the Columbia class strategic nuclear submarine that we need to replace the Trident on the deferred nuclear modernization.

And it's not just a matter of, I mean, that you have to recruit recruit and train new shipyard workers and subcontractors and build up the supply base, August, which is a worthy initiative.

I, in my view, to build up defense deterrent capacity in the region and solidify our defense ties with Australia is going to put a further strain on it. So who's responsible for spiking the ball.

I look prematurely after the Cold War, there was just huge pressure, you know, Cold War is over, we don't need submarines. Well, submarines are really a vital weapon system in any conflict with China. They're probably all the naval assets you can imagine, they're probably the most important, whether the Navy fully accepts that or not, because of the dominance of their carrier admirals in their system.

But part of it is it's, you know, we, the society as a whole, understandably was trying to divert resources to domestic needs and cut back on defense and, and the world's a highly unpredictable environment.

And so now, yes, you know, defense industrial base, a lot of lessons have been learned about the enormous consumption of munitions and a kind of high intensity conflict would appear competitor, which is what's going on in, in Ukraine.

And the system is, is adjusting.

You know, for all of our pitfalls and limitations, I think the close examination of the Russian military performance and I was with the Russian army and Chechnya for the New York Times in 2000.

You know, take a look at the way the Russians are handling themselves. I mean, they've got a lot of problems too. And no doubt, the Chinese, although they're undertaking pretty substantial buildup, they've never done an amphibious operation across 100 miles of water.

Right.

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If that's what they're planning. So all of these powers have challenges adjusting to future war. So the last question for we pivot to going over your work on Iraq from Desert Storm to ISIS would just be what bearing does military performance during a previous era have on your confidence in our ability to perform for future threats.

So just to give context, a debate point, the folks who don't support our position in Ukraine and Asia often raises, look at the past 15 to 20 years, look at the forever wars.

These failures shouldn't give one confidence in status quo and future policy. I guess the way I tend to think of it is the loss in Vietnam, 1973 to 1975 didn't have any bearing on the specific challenges we faced in Desert Storm.

That metaphor would be applicable from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to great power conflict. But how would you think about this dynamic in this question? Because once again, in between Vietnam and Desert Storm, you had the all volunteer military.

You had the defense buildup in the 1980s. The thing that seems to be difficult from my perspective is we're having to make this shift on a much shorter time frame without the 15, 20 year leeway.

Well, first off, as you point out that the failures in Vietnam, and I was not personally in Vietnam, but led to the kind of changes that made Desert Storm successful, the all volunteer force being an example.

There were some hard lessons learned out of Vietnam. The military adapted and changed and became a more effective fighting force for future conflicts. But I'm about to say something that might be controversial to some of your readers.

In my most recent book, which you haven't mentioned yet, which I'm trying to promote on your broadcast, Degrade and Destroy, but we didn't lose all these wars.

So you're asking an interesting question. What did the effect of our involvement in this part of the world and what way did it perhaps handicap us or help us prepare for future wars?

So first of all, it's a really a misconception that the US lost all the wars in Middle East and it's repeated by a lot of the news media so much that people think it's true. Not true.

The US defeated ISIS. It collapsed the caliphate at modest cost, maybe 20 US combat deaths, minuscule, about on the level of what the invasion of Panama took.

Because it was primarily a campaign that was waged through local forces, Iraqi and Syrian forces on the ground with some participation of US special operations. And it succeeded in rolling back that caliphate.

Pretty considerable achievement. Yes, we still have to go after them and carry out strikes too. It was just one on Sunday announced that it occurred a few days earlier against an ISIS leader.

But the US succeeded in defeating ISIS with its coalition at the minimal cost under President Obama and then President Trump carried forward the Obama strategy and that worked.

Quick pause though. I guess this is where we're valuable to differentiate between political victory, military victory, because from my perspective, if we're sitting in the world of 2003, we would say to ourselves if we're even fighting a conflict with ISIS in 2017,

that would seem to be a political failure given the articulation of American objectives in Iraq in 2003. So how would we understand these different definitions of victory?

Well, I'm looking at the military and, you know, first of all, we defeated ISIS. As a pure military campaign, it was successful by any reasonable standard of what you're trying to accomplish. The caliphate was destroyed, the caliph was killed.

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They're not a factor in Iraq today, and they're a minor factor in Syria and they're basically being contained.

Because military force is not the answer to all of the world's problems, ISIS people elements are still active in Iraq and Syria. That reflects the problems of those societies and the chaos of Syria.

The military isn't the solution for everything, but as a pure military proposition that was successful. Second, let's take the Iraq war.

The goal was to overthrow Saddam. It did. The goal then, the insurgency rose up. The goal was to defeat al-Qaeda in Iraq. It did, through the surge.

Now, you can look at Iraq today and you can look at the president and the prime minister, I mean their prime minister and the whole system of governance there and you can draw some conclusions about whether they're too beholden to Iran

or not appreciative of America or maybe you don't like the level of people that can be critical of the level of governance there.

Those are probably failures of foreign policy and failures of not necessarily military failures, but from a pure military proposition, in terms of what the military was asked to do, it defeated Saddam and then it defeated the insurgency that rose up afterwards.

A considerable cost. Now, a fair question you can ask is, was that cost worth it to the United States in terms of life and treasure? That's a question, a legitimate question to ask.

But from a military proposition, it succeeded. Afghanistan has to be counted as a strategic failure. Why is that? We left.

I mean, we had 2,500 troops there and with 2,500 troops and air power and contractors and NATO contributions, we were holding the line.

And then we left and the House of Cards collapsed. Now, you can make the case it wasn't worth being there and what's happening in Afghanistan is not a great consequence to American interests, but from a purely military perspective,

the US military was able to kind of hold the line in a stalemate, essentially, with a modest number of troops.

So I think people really need to be careful about saying we lost all these wars and that our military is a failure.

No, Afghanistan was a strategic failure. It was a foreign policy failure and it was also perhaps a military failure in the sense that we couldn't build up the Afghans enough to take the ball and do it on their own.

Iraq is a bit of a muddled political outcome, but it wasn't. It was a military success like it or not. Maybe the cost wasn't worth it to the US. That's a fair question.

Now, what did we learn from that? That's useful for the future. Well, I have a lot of context in the US military and I was with these people in these wars.

And if you ask them truthfully, they learned some good things and they are at a disadvantage in other respects. They learned how to fight.

And I have a general I know. I said, would you really learn? We learned how to fight. I mean, the US fought hard in these conflicts against an irregular foe.

ISIS was a bit of a hybrid of a conventional irregular foe, but they learned how to fight, how to use air power, how to do any number of kind of military operations.

So they have that experience behind them. But what things did we not learn by being there? Where

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were we at a disadvantage?

Well, there are a whole host of capabilities that weren't properly developed because we didn't need them in these wars. Take air defense.

I mean, the army didn't need air defense in Iraq because al-Qaeda in Iraq didn't have an air force. And so, you know, air defense officers would be repurposed as advisors to the Iraqi army or so that was an area that kind of went by the wayside.

Okay, electronic warfare. We didn't need sophisticated electronic warfare in Iraq to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq because these guys put on cell phones to communicate with each other.

In fact, we could listen to them, but we didn't need very sophisticated EW to counter or we weren't afraid of the air capabilities to use electronic warfare against us.

So those capabilities during the Iraq conflict, atrophied, they had to be recovered because electronic warfare is an area that both China and Russia emphasizes extensively.

Aircraft airplanes, they're developing very sophisticated aircraft. So air defense against manned aircraft, against cruise missiles, against all manner of missiles, hypersonic missiles.

That became important. So there were some air, some muscles, so to speak, that weren't exercised in the U.S. military and were given short shrift.

And it showed up, you know, if you look at the defense of Washington D.C., which there is, by the way, we had to buy a system. What system did the U.S. procure after 9-11 to protect the national capital against cruise missiles?

Naysams. Norwegian system now sent to Ukraine. We didn't have our own. So there were some blind spots in our own kind of range of capabilities because of our focus on these conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan that has to be acknowledged.

But the wars were not all failures from a military perspective. That's simply not accurate. And people who fought there gained a lot of experience. Now, these other conflicts are different entirely.

And so they required, you know, different training, different exercises, different capabilities, you know, cyber, electronic warfare, space, long-range systems to stay outside the weapons engagement zone, new ways to deploy troops.

Troops have to disperse so they make themselves less of a target for a peer competitor. It requires a whole new repertoire. And that's what's underway now.

You know, hearing what you're articulating, I think a very useful thing for listeners to understand then is the conflicts that the United States probably feels best about in terms of military victory, political objectives achieved would be conflicts where military victory equaled achievements of those political goals in the sense that if it's Desert Storm in 1991, the political objective is for Saddam Hussein to no longer be able to project power into his neighbors and threaten the broader Middle Eastern oil supply.

We then use our military to both accomplish that, which also then achieves the political goal. It seems the difficulty with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is sometimes the political and military goals are the same.

So if the political goal in 2008 is how do we stabilize Iraq enough so that we can comfortably withdraw the surge and its success is correlated with that political objective at a military level, but there are more complicated ones, which is there's

a discussion of what was the objective of, you know, the Iraq war 2003 to make the Middle East completely stabilized was it that we never have to be there ever again. That's where it gets more

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complicated.

So how do you see this political victory and military victory dynamic playing itself out in this great power conflict sake because if we're talking about deterring the if we're talking about deterring a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, the military victory would be deterrence and the political goal will be maintaining the status quo. So that would be well correlated. But how do you think about this in the context of the future?

First off, before we get to China and Russia, and not the world doesn't always fit itself into these categories. For example, what happened in the counter ISIS campaign, right, inherent resolve this thing I chronic home to great and destroy.

So we used small teams of advisors, and they were able to tie into enormous US air power, other forms of firepower work with proxy forces to accomplish an end, not a large footprint on the ground. Substantial US air and other capabilities brought in high Mars to include them famous high Mars system to work with local forces. Now, look at the Middle East today. I mean, look what's happening over in Africa.

I mean, some of these terrorist threats aren't just going to go away in the future, because we're losing interest in the Middle East, they're still there.

And we're still going to need to be prepared to fight them. So one point I believe in is not all these wars fit this category of World War Two, where you have a surrender on a battleship and war is over on a peace document.

And then your enemy becomes your ally. Some of these things are messy situations that require constant attention, especially kind of militant terrorist threats in the region.

One thing I want to say is that this war we fought against ISIS provides a template for how to in the future, how to use a strategy involving a small deployment of American ground forces, harnished to US air capabilities,

working with local proxies to deal with future militant threats. Who can tell me we're never going to have to do that again. We're doing it now in Somalia.

Every week they just they just had another airstrike there. No one pays attention to it. It's happening. And against the militants there. So there are two spots in the world.

Where's the Americans? Where's the United States in combat today? Syria. Iraq through Iraqi proxies, not directly. Syria, we even do missions there.

Aaron and soft Somalia. Today, this is happening. Why aren't we reading about it? Because it more or less works. And it's done with a small footprint, special operations.

It doesn't even make the front page. Newspapers don't even write about it. But it's happening anyway. We're in combat in these parts of the world dealing with militant threats, more or less successfully keeping them in check at minimal cost in terms of live and treasure.

So that that's first to keep in mind. And I argue that this this template that was used this in the counter ISIS campaign is applicable to these future conflicts in these ungoverned spaces, which aren't going to go away just because our politicians may lose interest in them.

Look at what's happening in Ukraine. You know, we're not fighting in that directly, but we're enabling the Ukrainian forces through intelligence, through munitions, through advice and mentoring, all sorts of things.

It's, you know, they call the strategy against ISIS by with and through, you know, is fought by the local proxies or allies, partners with our help through a policy framework.

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It's kind of what's happening in Ukraine. It's being fought by the Ukrainians with our help. And why is that? We're not directly involved with our fighting forces. Why is that?

Because the other guy is a nuclear power. And we don't want to have a situation where our forces are directly engaged with the nuclear power, unless our vital interests are directly engaged.

But we do want to help the Ukrainians. So this concept of by with and through fighting, playing in an advisory role while lying on local forces to carry out the hard fighting on the ground with American intelligence and munition support.

It can be applied not only in the Middle East and ungoverned spaces, it's being applied a variant of it. I would argue in Ukraine today, you know, on a much grander scale.

Obviously, there are some differences. Now, your question was, I'm sorry.

I'll ask a more concise version. I guess my question is America is at its most comfortable from a public opinion level when military victory, when political victory is correlated with military victory.

When the politics, you're right. I mean, it's good to start wars that have or be involved in wars that have realistic political objectives and remaking the Middle East and turning it into a democracy is an unrealistic political objective.

So your military means and your political objectives need to be aligned to have a successful intervention, but not all wars are wars of conquest.

I mean, you know, sometimes you take, you know, in many of the operations I've covered like, okay, there was a Libya got out of hand as a terrorist threat in the US carried out in airstrikes there under President Reagan.

So it was a punitive measure was more or less successful and what it was trying to do, but it was a limited intervention.

Take a look at what happened in the Balkans, which was reasonably successful and stopping Serbian aggression in Kosovo.

We didn't even use a land force to in the military operation we did for peacekeeping purposes.

So, you know, some of these wars which are important to succeed at have more limited objectives.

In the face of China and Russia.

Our objective, our overwhelming objective is not to fight China and Russia.

It's not.

That's the goal.

The goal is to build up sufficient deterrent capacity in the Western Pacific that there won't be a confrontation.

And, and just like there wasn't during the Cold War and all those decades except in kind of side theaters through proxies in Africa or let's say Vietnam.

There wasn't a big war in Europe.

That's the test.

If the US builds up this deterrent capability.

And there is no hostilities with China.

And they don't like our policy.

We don't like their policy.

We continue to trade with each other.

We cooperate where we can.

Taiwan continues on its muddled, you know, on this kind of muddled, ambivalent, ambiguous status

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of not being an independent nation, but not being subjugated to Beijing and being a democracy. That's success.

And if Russia kind of impales itself in Ukraine and it hangs on to, let's say, you know.

Crimea and some territory in the East, but the fighting, it doesn't go much further.

And it's dissuaded from thinking about destabilizing actions elsewhere in Europe or further aggression against NATO.

That's success.

Success is, is, is not.

Victory over nuclear power and adversary.

Which is maybe not possible for any, any of these nations.

Success is maintaining the status quo and maintaining peace in the Pacific in Europe.

You know, I'm really curious when you speak with generals, members of the military and general civilian leadership.

When you speak with them, how do they reckon with the fact that to your point, now that we are the status quo.

We are responding to decisions and strategies that others make, as opposed to the past 1520 years where Iraq war.

1991, we're going to launch when we want to launch.

2003, that's whatever we want to do.

If it's 2002 in Afghanistan, it's our choice to stay a nation built or not on and on and on, even if you're talking about, you know, Syria.

During the ISIS period, it's our decision to have an operational tempo of special forces, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

What is it like for them to think to themselves, wow, like in 2027, that she's choice.

That just seems to be an entirely different mental shift from a leadership and strategy perspective that would be difficult to reckon with.

Well, perhaps not.

First of all, the military has a saying and, you know, they have a lot of these lines and the enemy gets a vote, meaning, you know, the best laid plans that we can have as long as their decision.

So, I mean, in the case of Ukraine, Putin had a vote.

He made a, in my view, I used to live in Russia for the New York Times for four years, a reckless decision that's against his own nation's interest.

He still may succeed to a certain degree, but the cost to the Ukraine and to Russia itself.

But so the military understands that.

Second of all, this is back to the future.

I mean, what do you think the US military did in Europe for decades during the Cold War in a much higher level of expenditure in terms of GDP with with a much more substantial force presence.

We had a NATO was our major commitment to keep the, you know, the out the Soviet Union from carrying out aggression there, whether planned to or not.

And that was NATO's purpose to as an insurance policy was a massive undertaking with large numbers of American troops, major exercises in which we would rehearse bringing forces over from the conus continental United States as I like to call it to Europe.

I mean, we did this.

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We did it successfully.

We did it until the Soviet Union collapsed of its own internal contradictions.

We didn't cause its collapse.

It caused its own collapse.

And but we kept that we kept them contained the strategy was containment.

We're going back to an old strategy here.

Strategy was containment for decades.

What made it successful that containment was supported by Republican and Democratic administrations alike. Yeah, there were differences over this or that detail or arms control treaty or how to do it.

But the basic philosophy was supported from George Kennan on we were going to contain Soviet power.

You can argue where we overdid it or we can argue where, you know, we might have done it differently.

And now we have to contain so Russian power and Chinese power.

The goal is containment.

The goal is to avert conflict.

The goal is to preclude these nations from exerting their political dominance.

Through military blackmail over nations on their periphery.

Right.

Like Finland used to be used to be say it's Finland eyes.

I was afraid to be against Russia.

Well, now Finland has a different connotation since it's in NATO.

But, you know, by building up its power in nuclear and conventional, these, these China and Russia are trying to exert some degree of influence control dominion over nations in their, their neck of the woods.

And we're, we have to have a countervailing deterrent capability to avert it.

We did it before and we did it successfully.

So I think it's just going back to, to some of the same principles, recognizing that the challenges in Asia because of the distances and the alliance structure and the nature of technology with space and cyber and make it a very different sort of undertaking.

So the, the last big question and take this wherever you want to go.

You know, degrade and destroy is, you know, knock on wood the last of these big Middle Eastern Iraq centric books that you've written.

Obviously the previous ones are written with your recently passed away co-author general trainer.

I would just love for you, because we were discussing for the episode, just a lot of folks have started to just move on from this Iraq war era at a narrative level.

Could you just in these last few minutes, sum up your broad takeaway from, from each book.

So Desert Storm, Invasion of Iraq, which is Cobra 2, Occupation Iraq, Occupation of Iraq 03 to 2011, then finally Degrade and Destroy.

Will it just be your top line takeaways for folks who want to dive into this category more?

Well, I mean, I never set out to cover the military, but I ended up doing that when I was at the New York Times starting with the Panama Invasion.

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And so I would be in these massive events.

And there is the drama and the tragedy and the suffering and the effort that goes into them is just extraordinary.

And the smart decisions made and the mistakes, the inevitable mistakes, and it's just, these are just really dramatic world events.

And so what I set out to do, and I didn't know I was going to write four books, but what I set out to do in the first book was, you're part of this all.

But you know, you're not seeing really everything that's happening.

And you can't rely on the Pentagon to lay it all out.

Pentagon has even done a history of the fight against ISIS.

They haven't even done their own history.

Is that typical?

They usually do a history of conflicts.

Military does a poor job of documenting its own history, particularly if it's not an unqualified success.

There are some isolated examples where General Odierno commissioned a study of the Army's performance in Iraq that took 18 months for General Millie to release.

When he was Army Chief of Staff, but he finally did after I started to write a Wall Street Journal article about what was happening with that report.

But yes, in these events, these are enormous events.

And so what I always want to do is say, so what happened?

What really happened?

How were these decisions made?

And all of these books became like multi-year undertakings because you had to talk to a whole host of people inside the U.S. government.

You had to talk to people living in the country like the Iraqis and about leadership and ordinary people.

It took coalition part.

And I just try to reconstruct what really happened to create along with General Trainer a history of our involvement.

You know, Desert Storm was seen as a vindication of American military power after Vietnam because we succeeded in evicting Saddam's forces from Kuwait.

But we didn't succeed in destroying the Republican Guard because of flaws in the strategy.

That's what General Trainer and I wrote about.

Well, the invasion of Iraq, we wrote about how it went well, but how unprepared the U.S. was for the insurgency that followed politically and initially militarily.

That was a failure of leadership on the U.S. part.

And the end game, well, we did the-

Quick pause, leadership failure, civilian or military leadership failure?

Or is that all mixed with these things?

Both.

Okay.

Both.

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It took a long time for the White House under President Bush did not envision insurgency. It was not really-  
He didn't have a good handle on what they called phase four post-conflict resolution. And neither did General Tommy Franks.  
He thought the State Department would just take it from there and he would be able to go down to a low level of forces.  
I was in Baghdad at various meetings when all this happened as an embedded correspondent. The U.S. learned from that.  
The end game is the story of how the U.S. recovered from that, led a successful surge militarily, and then left Iraq behind.  
It was reasonably stable, but politically fraught.  
And the last book to grade in the story is how we had a return when ISIS emerged because of the failure of U.S. and Iraqi leadership.  
Let's not exonerate Noriel Maliki to keep a small number of American forces in Iraq. But we did it differently.  
The fight against ISIS, everything does, the storm was not. We didn't have a large number of ground troops.  
We had advisors and mentors.  
Yes, some went in combat, contrary to what the White House said.  
They did and used tow missiles and carried out operations, but it was a small number of forces. The Iraqis and the Syrians did the dying on the ground.  
And it was a different type of war to respond to that challenge.  
It sort of chronicles the whole era of American involvement in the region.  
The principal challenge now is Iran.  
Iraq is more or less stable.  
Syria is a mess.  
It's going to remain a mess for the foreseeable future.  
With multiple countries involved, Russians, Turks, Americans, Israelis, Iranians, Russians and Iranians working together now.  
Not only in Syria, but in Ukraine conflict because Iran's providing drones for the Russian army. But now the principal challenge is Iran, which is almost approaching becoming a threshold nuclear state and what it poses to the region.  
And the challenge there is to avert a war just as it is everywhere while exerting enough leverage that Iraq stops short of becoming a nuclear power.  
Iran stops short.  
You said Iran stops short.  
Sorry, I apologize.  
Iraq stops short of becoming a nuclear power, which it has so far.  
And to do so with a very modest American military footprint, we have 2,500 troops in Iraq, 900 in Syria.  
We don't have big ground forces in the Middle East anymore.  
We don't have a big Navy in the East.  
We don't have a carrier in the Middle East.

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We might have a handful of ships in the Middle East.

We don't have a lot of airplanes in the Middle East, maybe a couple of squadrons.

And so we're trying to do this with technology, with allies.

And it's a new Middle East, you know, with the rapprochement between some of the Arab states and Israel, the possibility of eventual normalization down the road of Saudi Arabia and Israel.

It's a different region.

But what I set out to do in those four books was, and not at the beginning, it just sort of happened.

We kept having wars.

And then I kept having that, oh my God, I'm in this war and I know a lot of people in the war and I spent time on the ground here.

And I know the people in Washington made the policy.

I guess I should try to figure this all out.

I did it partly to understand it myself and partly because I know the government wouldn't do it.

And it's not like they're best sellers necessarily.

Only one was.

So I did it to create a kind of a record, a historical record of what happened.

And I feel that through these four books, the general trainers efforts of my own, I created that record.

But now I'm also pivoting, just like the U.S. government.

And I'm pivoting to great power competition, to China and Russia and the new dangers that the U.S. is transitioning to to try to maintain the American position in the world and deter future conflicts.

That now is the sort of compelling story at the Pentagon, how to do that with new technology.

And it's very difficult because unlike the Cold War, we've got two geographically dispersed potential adversaries who are in cahoots to a certain degree, China and Russia.

We have to be able to project power in the Western Pacific and in Europe and with the military that's smaller than before, right?

Hoping the Allies will help us out and trying to keep this short of a nuclear conflict in any way, because that's not what we want.

And if you look at our defense strategy now, you'll discover it's a one war strategy against two adversaries.

That's a vacuum that the U.S. is still hasn't doesn't really have a good answer of how to fill. Partial answer is allies.

But, you know, how do you deter two adversaries with a one war capability without nuclear weapons?

That's the strategic challenge facing the Pentagon.

And if it's successful, there won't be any future conflicts with these with these countries.

I think that's an excellent place to end just because you've summed up what the challenge at the era transition was.

You know, if you're thinking back to the 1990s, like the challenges, what do you do with this post Cold War moment?

What do you do with this peace dividend discourse?

What do you do when it comes to ideas of military transformation?

So that is excellent.

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But the book, which is recently out in paperback to grade and destroy the inside story of the war against the Islamic State from Barack Obama to Donald Trump.

Michael, thank you for joining me on the realignment.

Thank you for a very stimulating and provocative conversation and for really asking a lot of hard and important questions that I may not have had all the answers to, but you certainly put them out on the table.

Thank you.

For more exclusive Q&A, bonus episodes and more, go to [realignment.supercast.com](http://realignment.supercast.com) and subscribe to our \$5 a month, \$50 a year, or \$500 for a lifetime membership.

Great. See you all next time.

Thank you.