

From the Chairman

Risky Business

There is risk in daring. As asserted by Niccolò Machiavelli, “Never was anything great achieved without danger.”

Every day, the men and women of our Armed Forces dare to be great. Every day, they take risks to achieve something bigger and more important than themselves. It is the risk they willingly take that makes our nation great.

We owe our good fortune to more than blind luck. Like no other profession, we pay attention to risk. We study it, forecast it, manage it, and seek to reduce it. We spend endless hours—even years—wargaming risk to our missions and to our forces. We simulate attacks and disasters. We rehearse responses to complex contingencies. We develop strategies and plans for a wide range of threats to our national security interests.

As much art as science, judging risk is an essential skill for military professionals at every echelon. Right now, a pilot is judging risk as she climbs into a cockpit. An infantry platoon is doing it while on patrol. A ship’s captain is doing it while navigating in the Arabian Gulf. In my role as Chairman, I have a statutory responsibility to explain risk to our senior civilian leaders, the President, and Congress. I want to share some thoughts about risk with you as well.

How to Think about Risk

Ancient societies viewed life as subject to arbitrary forces. The discovery of probability in the 16th century gave mankind a sense of greater influence over events. Today, we “make our own luck” by better understanding risk.

Risk is a relatively straightforward concept. Simply, it is the probability and consequence of danger. It is not very likely that we will be invaded soon, or that we will face a mass nuclear attack, but the consequences of either would be catastrophic—even existential. On the other hand, the probability that terrorists will attack our interests somewhere



Chairman and Admiral Samuel Locklear, commander of U.S. Pacific Command, meet at USPACOM Headquarters, Camp H.M. Smith, Hawaii, May 2012

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around the world is higher. The consequences—albeit horrific for those at the point of attack—are relatively insignificant in terms of national survival.

Probability and consequence are not easily measured, and they do not paint the whole picture. It is just as important to think about how risk changes over time and what opportunities might be available if we accept risk. Cyber attacks, for example, are becoming more frequent and more disruptive every day. Destructive cyber is a reality. In today’s world, bits and bytes can be as dangerous as bullets and bombs. At the same time, advanced cyber tools are creating new options for achieving military objectives.

Risk only exists in relation to something we value. At a basic level, we think of the risk to our force—people and equipment—and to our mission. At a more strategic level, we think about risk as it relates to our national security interests. Beyond the survival of our nation, the health of the global economic system is essential to our way of life. Protecting Americans abroad is

a national expectation, while upholding our values is part of our national identity. Reliable allies also help to distribute risk.

What Risks Are Out There?

The risks to our national security interests are real. They are broad and run deep. From a security standpoint, I see risk in the context of a security paradox. To paraphrase Charles Dickens, it is the best of times, it is the worst of times.

We serve at a time that seems less dangerous, but may be more so. By some accounts, we are experiencing an evolutionary low point in human violence. Dickens might call this a “season of Light” with low risk. But less violence does not necessarily mean less danger, particularly if both the probability and consequences of aggression are on the rise. We can hope for the light, but those of us in the profession of arms have a moral obligation to be ready in case we confront a “season of Darkness.”

Two trends are casting long shadows. First, power in the international system is



Chairman observes Afghan commandos during demonstration at Camp Moorehead, Afghanistan, April 2012

shifting below and beyond the nation-state, spawning more actors who are more connected and more capable of doing harm. While hostile regimes such as those in Iran and North Korea get the most attention—and deservedly so—the security stage has become much more crowded with violent nonstate actors.

At the same time, advanced technologies are proliferating horizontally and vertically. Highly accurate ballistic missiles wielded by middleweight militaries lurk in every theater. Bombs made of homemade explosives can mangle our toughest mine-resistant vehicles. A cyber attack from a lone malevolent marauder could disrupt broad sectors of our economy. In many ways, the homeland is no longer the sanctuary it once was.

These mutually reinforcing trends ensure an uncertain future that will not mirror the past. They argue for a more competitive security environment that does not follow yesterday's rules. They call for us to think differently and prepare differently for the dangers we may face.

How to Deal with Risk

Our responsibilities do not end with anticipating risk. We are expected to take actions to reduce and mitigate risk. Among the many ways to mitigate risk, some of the

most effective include having a sound strategy and a ready force with reliable partners.

A solvent strategy keeps our ends, ways, and means in balance. It guards against ambitions that exceed abilities. With our means reduced, we have no choice but to carefully and deliberately prioritize our ends and seek new ways to achieve them. I have been hosting a series of strategic seminars with our senior defense leaders to do just this. The result has been a better sense of where to invest our resources and how to integrate capabilities to meet an uncertain future.

We also buy down risk through readiness. A hollow force invites danger. A ready joint force deters threats, assures allies, and can respond quickly to defeat aggression. This is why the Joint Chiefs and I are committed to making sure we sustain the best led, trained, and equipped military on the planet. At the same time, we must make some tough tradeoffs to build the joint force we will need by 2020.

We can also share risk. We must continue to look to others to help us deal with threats before they mature. I have made strategy the centerpiece of my dialogues with our pivotal partners. Our allies and partners can bring to bear the kind of additional capability and credibility required to make our strategies work. Of course, we also need our partners to stand up to their responsibilities

and be ready with relevant capabilities and adequate capacity.

Leading All the Way

Leadership is our best insurance against risk. By developing leaders today, we prepare for a turbulent tomorrow. The kinds of leaders we need are those able to adapt to a shifting security landscape. They do not just react to change; they lead it. They do not just manage risk; they embrace it to generate opportunity. By taking calculated risks, we illuminate the path to greatness. Whether we take that path depends on leadership.

We are and will remain the greatest fighting force on the planet. Be alert to risk, but dare to be great! **JFQ**

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