

An Interview with

# General Joseph Votel, USA (Ret)

President and CEO of Business Executives for National Security (BENS), and former Commander of U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) and U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)

**We have now been fighting in Central Asia for almost 20 years with significant cost in blood and treasure. What have we accomplished there?**

First and foremost, we have largely blunted the platform that was used to attack our country on 9/11, and our military operations there have ensured that the area cannot be used as a location from which to attack our citizens or our homeland. We certainly have accomplished that. I think we have also provided the opportunity for the Afghan people to move forward in their own way; to exercise self-rule, for example. It has certainly been a very difficult path and it will continue to be as we move forward. It is not an easy situation, but I think we have provided the opportunity for them to become a more stable part of the Central Asian scene, and hopefully not be a platform from which terrorist organizations or other elements of instability can continue to impact the people of Afghanistan or others in the region.

**Can you envision a Saigon-like collapse of the Afghan government after we depart?**

I don't think that I would predict something like that. I think what we are seeing is about what we expected. It is very complex; what might be called Afghan-hard, and it is always going to be. It will be very important for us to continue to provide support—moral and otherwise—throughout this entire process. There were some good reasons behind President Trump's decision to withdraw troops and begin to decrease our presence on the ground, and get the burden back on the Afghans where it needs to be. But there are things that we continue to do at the allowable troop levels to continue to assist the Afghans as they move forward. Military support is going to be an important aspect of that. But as important as the military aspect is, at least of equal importance is the political support. I understand Ambassador Khalilzad is back in Afghanistan again this week. The diplomatic effort is going to have to continue if we are going to see this through to a conclusion that supports our national interests.

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**By reducing troop levels—down to the allowable levels—are we ceding influence in the region to Russia and China?**

Our troops are principally in Afghanistan; they are not broadly dispersed throughout the region. Russia and China will continue to pursue their own interests. China will focus principally on the economic aspect and we see that playing out in Pakistan with the China-Pakistan economic corridor. Russia has concerns in the northern parts of central Asia including terrorist threats, so that may be a factor, but I don't know that we are going to be replaced in the region. It is important to recognize that Central and South Asia are important areas to us: We have to maintain a level of presence, a level of relationships, a level of reliability as partners there that does continue to provide influence for the United States. That will be important in the long term.

**Having commanded both the Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and Central Command (CENTCOM) what can you say about the current state of the global war on terrorism?**

It continues. SOCOM Commander General Richard Clarke recently discussing his priorities emphasized up front that the continuing effort combatting extremism is his priority. It will continue to be. We have to continue to focus on this. We are in a different strategic situation now than we were in 2001. Now we are confronted with great power competition, and we certainly have to pay attention to that, as that competition is going to be existential to us. But terrorism has impacted us over the decades as well. The best way of addressing terrorism is to continue putting pressure on terrorist leadership and their networks and helping our partners develop their own capabilities to address terrorism. Whether it is our own direct pressure or whether it is through working with partners or enabling partners to keep pressure on these networks and drive them—and drive them down—we will have to continue to do

that. So, while we necessarily have to focus on great power competition, we are also going to have to continue to deal with the terrorism.

**In the 20 years that we were focused on the global counter-terrorism mission, did we take our eye off the ball with respect to traditional great power competition?**

I think an argument can be made for that. The large numbers of troops rotating into Iraq and Afghanistan for long periods of time significantly consumed resources and readiness. We put all of our investments and efforts into trying to make sure—appropriately—that the people on the ground had what they needed. And during that time, we saw Russia and China continue to move forward in their own national pursuits, watching what we were doing and learning from it, and using the time while we were engaged in these counter-terrorism wars to improve their own capabilities and influence. There is no doubt that they took advantage of that. Did we lose sight of the ball on that? I do not think that is the case, yet. We have to be serious about it, we have to get focused back on it, and I think that is the object of the National Defense Strategy; trying to maintain a competitive advantage against great power competitors.

**The National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy indeed both identify great power rivals as the most significant threat to U.S. security. Do you agree that the current pivot from the Near East and counterterrorism to great power competition is timely?**

I do, and as the CENTCOM commander, I testified before Congress to that fact on several occasions. We have to look at our interests and decide what are existential threats to us. I do think a rising China and a nuclear capable Russia that is revanchist in its actions right now pose very serious threats to America. We have to pay attention to that. And the military element of power has to make certain that

we can contribute to meet the challenge, alongside our diplomatic, informational, and economic elements of national power. But at the same time, we also need to make sure we deal with a full range of threats, such as the rogue regime in Iran that continues to perpetrate friction in the Middle East, and North Korea. But bearing everything in mind, the pivot to great power competition is the right one.

**Can you describe a plausible scenario in which U.S. forces and either Chinese or Russian forces actually engage in direct combat?**

I do not really see that on the horizon right now. That would not be in our interest nor in their interest either. What I do see is conflicts playing out in what we refer to as the “gray zone.” In the physical spaces and places where we compete for influence and for partnerships, different actors try to pursue their own interests and objectives. This is where the competition could play out much more indirectly—militarily, economically, and ideologically. I think that is much more likely than a direct confrontation at this point. Certainly, direct confrontation is always a possibility. But the risks are very great and we should do everything we can to avoid that. I think that we will definitely see this playing out more in the gray zone than we will in direct engagement.

**How can the United States best counter Russian and Chinese gray zone aggression—what some refer to as hybrid warfare or conflict short of war. What is the best response?**

Our best response is making sure that we bring all the elements of our power together to create the most positive and long-lasting influence and partnerships that we can. I firmly believe that it is important that when we look at the list of countries that line up with the United States and our Western Allies, and we look at the countries that line up with China or Russia, we always want to make sure that our list is longer. And we do that by being good

military partners. We do that by having strong and robust security cooperation programs. We do that by having strong diplomatic and economic ties. We do that by sharing our values.

At CENTCOM, one of the most important programs was a program that brought foreign military officers to our schools in the United States. It doesn't cost very much; we were only spending about \$19 million per year on it in my last year in command. What that program does is bring people into our schools, gives them an opportunity to get to know our country: Their families live in our communities and they almost always leave with an overwhelmingly positive view of the United States. That's the type of thing that we need to do to ensure that we have strong, long, enduring relationships. Traveling around the Middle East as the CENTCOM commander and even as the SOCOM commander, it was always very evident to me that people wanted to be aligned with the United States, and that they want to be on our side. We have to reinforce that by our actions.

**One of our comparative advantages vis-à-vis either Russia or China is our robust global alliance and partner network. What should we be doing now to strengthen and reinforce that network?**

It is vitally important that we continue to be as reliable as we can be. Former Secretary Mattis used to remind us of this: It is good to be operationally unpredictable—create an element of surprise operationally—but strategically, we have to be predictable. Our partners have to be able to rely on us in the long term. We don't want them questioning our commitment. What we have to do is look at the relationships that we have and find ways to strengthen them. They are not all perfect. A very strong case has been made by President Trump and others that the NATO allies definitely need to pay their way for their own defense. We cannot care more about their defense than they do, frankly. We must put the right kind of pressure on them to step up. But what

is most important is to recognize that where we have had our greatest successes is when we have brought our allies and partners along. My most recent experience with the coalition to defeat ISIS put together by my predecessors—that I had the opportunity to work with in a 79-nation coalition—is a great example. Those are the times when we will be most successful. We must do this. We must make sure we share technology with them, and should look at how we might better share information with them. There are practical things we can do to improve our relationships with allies and partners as well. What I think is first and foremost is to recognize that our way of competing, our way of protecting ourselves, is really through strong partnerships. We have to put actions behind our words militarily, economically, diplomatically, and informationally: We must make sure that we are prioritizing our relationships.

**In your experience commanding CENTCOM, do you think we were successful in bringing all of those elements of national power together? If you remember, back in the early 2000s, there was a lot of enthusiasm and talk about integrated whole-of-government responses and inter-agency collaboration. Has the United States been very good at interagency collaboration and the whole-of-government responses that you describe?**

We have had moments when we have done a good job, but in general, we struggle with this. We started off our discussion today talking about Afghanistan and I think Afghanistan is a good example of where we have leaned very heavily on the military to carry a large part of the mission. I am not trying to denigrate our diplomats; they do fantastic work, but the civilian component needs to be robust and sustained. And being able to sustain the civilian effort is always a challenge. As I was leaving CENTCOM fourteen months ago, out of twenty countries in the region—eighteen with which we had diplomatic relationships at the time—in only seven did we have

a confirmed ambassador. The chargés are excellent, they are great professionals, but there is a difference. We should be sending a strong message of commitment by sending people that have the confidence of the President and the full backing of our Congress to be our principal representatives in these countries. This I think is really important.

**Another thing that Secretary Mattis said was “If you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition.” What should we be doing in addition to appointing ambassadors? What else might we do to fortify the State Department and USAID?**

My experience working with people in that department and that agency has generally been very positive. They are great Americans who care about what they are doing, who are very focused on their missions. But we must allow our diplomats to get out of the embassies and be out more often. We have placed a lot of limitations on them. Certainly, situations like Benghazi have had a chilling effect on our diplomats getting out and being with people that they need to be with in order to make the very biggest impact that they can. And these things must be taken into consideration. There is an effort, sponsored by the American Academy of Diplomacy, to encourage review of the Congressional requirements in situations or incidents with our embassies or diplomats or our overseas USAID staff that really inhibit their ability to get out and do the things that we need done. They are overly onerous and work against our interests. We have to take a look at this; it’s not enough just for the military to be outside the wire. In many cases, the military is not the best choice to be the only face our host nation partners see. The best choice might, in fact, be USAID, or our diplomats. I think back to some of the provincial reconstruction teams in Afghanistan in the 2007-2008 timeframe; these were extraordinary efforts where we had diplomats living out in the local

communities, directly interfacing every day with local Afghan leadership, and it was a good approach. We have to inculcate that culture again of letting our people out into the communities.

**That would align with Ambassador Ryan Crocker's idea of an expeditionary diplomatic corps.**

I have heard him speak about that and I think it is definitely a worthwhile idea. If you look back into American history, you will see examples when diplomats stepped forward and created great opportunities for us to advance our interests. It is important especially in what has become a highly complex world, and one that is dominated by competition; competition for influence, competition for ideas, and competition for control. And so, for us to try to preserve the way of life that we have had we have to look at this very seriously.

**I agree completely. You cannot sit in the capital and hope to have a major influence on a country.**

Ambassador Ronald Newman (President of the American Academy of Diplomacy) and I have been discussing this. The process that is initiated by Congress when an incident happens overseas is a very thorough review process but is very much top-driven. Ambassador Newman's idea was if the Department of State or USAID had a process similar to what the Department of Defense has for significant incidents it would have a less suppressive effect in terms of trying to get back out into the field. I really support that.

**We spent years and hundreds of millions of dollars supporting the Afghan and Iraqi militaries, which have not performed particularly well when they've been in direct combat. What does that say for our current efforts to work by, with, and through, and to develop partner capacity with our security force assistance brigades and security cooperation?**

That is an excellent discussion point. I would say though that even in those cases not all our efforts

to institutionalize professionalism were failures. If you look at an organization like the counter-terrorism service in Iraq; as the Iraqi army evaporated around it in the midst of the Islamic State onslaught, the counter-terrorism service held together, and it became the nucleus of the rebuilt Iraqi army that ultimately defeated ISIS. Along with the broad international coalition that was supporting them they really took the fight to ISIL. So, there have been some examples of success, but I take your point on that.

The observation that comes out of this is that when we step into these situations, we have to step into them with our eyes wide open. One of the very smart things we did when we went back into Iraq in 2014 and Syria shortly thereafter in trying to defeat ISIS was that as we identified our partners on the ground, we did not try to reorganize them, try to over-professionalize them or institutionalize them any more than was absolutely essential for the task at hand. We helped the Iraqi army retrain itself, recoup its capabilities, and then helped them as they orchestrated a fairly complex campaign plan; but we did not try to overtly change their structure.

Across the border in Syria, we took the YPG (Kurdish People's Protection Units) with the Syrian Democratic Forces and the other Arab militias as they were. We did not try to reorganize them. We used them for the capabilities they had and tried to enable and reinforce their natural strengths. The Kurds were extraordinarily good leaders and they had a great understanding of the situation. Of course, the Arab militias had great local understanding as well. We focused on that instead of trying to reorganize them into something that looked similar to us. This is a good lesson for us long-term.

As the SOCOM commander, I looked at a number of the programs we have had with special operations partners around the world and I think you will see that that approach has paid off. While militaries will be in various states of readiness, often the special operations forces are of pretty high

quality, adhere to the rule of law, and are very reliable forces for their country. We have taken a very deliberate approach to this, not trying to over-organize them and trying to build on the inherent strengths of our partners.

**Over the course of your career, how would you characterize the evolution or any changes in the concepts or the character of war and the concepts of victory and defeat?**

The concept of war and the nature of battle have been significantly impacted by speed and information, and certainly by technology that has changed our ideas about what we do, the way that we have pursued things, and our understanding of our challenges and opportunities.

We sit on the cusp of artificial intelligence-enabled activities and operations. This is a watershed point for us that we have been building to over a number of years and is going to have a dramatic impact on how we move forward. In many cases, those who dominate these technologies will be the ones writing the rules that will prevail over the long term. This is very critical. I mean to include in this the whole suite of emerging cyber technologies. These represent something uniquely different than anything we have experienced in the past. While we have exquisite intelligence collection capabilities, often the information out there in the open sphere is as important to us as classified information; but the volume of it is so great and our ability to mine through it and understand it is still greatly challenged. That said, as we saw in Raqqah and in West Mosul, war can still be very brutal. These were brutal, brutal fights against a very savvy and technically-enabled terrorist army (information-wise). When it came down to the end of fighting in many urban areas, it was very gruesome building-to-building combat. So, the basic nature of war remains brutal but it is now dramatically influenced by these emerging technologies.

As to the concept of victory, that has become more complex to understand. One of the things that we often spoke about at SOCOM, as well as at CENTCOM, was the need to rethink what winning means in this environment. Winning will not necessarily look the same as it did in the past; a parade, a very clear and distinct signing of surrender or some clear indication that hostilities are over, and that one side has prevailed over the other. In many ways, it will be more about preserving our interests, preserving decision space moving forward, maintaining relationships going forward, and being able to sustain a level of pressure on adversaries that prevents them from rising or from prevailing in a competition with us. The definition of what winning in this very complex environment means has changed; winning matters, but winning looks quite different than what we might have thought about it in the past.

**What specific emerging technology does he see as the most critical for the U.S. to prioritize, and why?**

I think artificial intelligence coupled with 5G communications capability should be our priority. This has the potential to make extraordinary advances for our nation and for our partners. It is essential for the United States and her partners to master this technology first so that we can ensure the rules that guide the global use of these technologies are fashioned in a lawful and ethical manner. In the wrong hands, like the Chinese, this could have an extraordinarily bad effect on us.

**Can you briefly describe the main elements of a strategy that will best manage our evolving relationship with China and avoid war?**

First and foremost are deep and trusting relationships with our partners in the region and around the globe—militarily, diplomatically and economically. Second would be an approach that holds China accountable for its actions—whether that is their failure to properly warn the world of the COVID-19

virus or the predatory lending arrangements they are pursuing globally. Third would be making sure our strategy is not just about military strength. We have to compete across the spectrum. We need to leverage our strength in innovation, entrepreneurship,

and American business. Finally, we have to lead. We cannot do this by ourselves, and we have always been at our best when we have been leading others because that is not only in our interest but in fact the interests of peace-loving people around the world.