

Joint Chiefs Chairman Defends Lincoln Battle Group Deployment to Deter Iran



Sailors observe an E/A-18G Growler landing on the flight deck of the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN-72) on May 28. The Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group is deployed to the Persian Gulf region. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Matt Herbst

The nation's top military officer validated the intelligence that raised concerns of possible Iranian attacks on U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf region and said the deployment of troops to the U.S.-Mexico border was legal and an appropriate mission to "fill gaps" in the Department of Homeland Security's capabilities.

In a detailed survey of global and domestic national security issues May 29, Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also said U.S. and South Korean forces are still "ready to go to war tonight," despite reductions in large-scale military exercises, and he defined the rising tensions with China in the South China Sea as a "rule of law" issue that must be addressed by other than military means.

Dunford said U.S. intelligence had detected Iranian actions and statements that created the appearance of a possible "campaign" against U.S. forces and allies, rather than the persistent hints of "a single action."

With his four-year term as Joint Chiefs chairman nearing an end, Dunford advised his successors to ensure that whatever future funding the military receives emphasizes “capability” rather than just “capacity” or numbers.

Taking questions at the Brookings Institute, Dunford repeated the view he expressed at his Senate confirmation hearings in 2015 that Russia is the “existential” threat to the United States, but said he has worked hard to maintain a dialogue with his Russian counterpart to reduce the chances that President Vladimir Putin’s belligerent actions would lead to conflict.

Asked about the controversy over the alleged threats from Iran that led to dispatching the Abraham Lincoln carrier battle group and B-52 bombers to the Central Command region, Dunford said U.S. intelligence had detected Iranian actions and statements that created the appearance of a possible “campaign” against U.S. forces and allies, rather than the persistent hints of “a single action.” The intelligence also indicated that Tehran questioned U.S. willingness to hold Iran responsible for any third-party attacks on Americans in the region.

He said the initial reinforcements were part of an effort to “address that gap in perception” and to let Iran

know that if anything happened "it would be attributed to them." The later decision to send about 1,000 additional troops and extend the deployment of a Patriot air and missile defense battery was to enhance force protection of U.S. personnel in the region.

On the politically controversial border issue, Dunford did not address the use of defense funds to build a border wall and said his focus was to ensure that the troops sent to the U.S.-Mexico border were properly equipped and trained and were performing legitimate military functions. He acknowledged that the work at the border might reduce combat readiness but said that was no different than when troops are sent on humanitarian relief missions and is addressed by rotating units to minimize any erosion of capability.

Dunford disputed the claims that the reduction in large military exercises in South Korea because of President Donald Trump's courtship of North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un had reduced the coalition's combat readiness.

He said the field exercises had been reoriented to focus on ensuring the infantry battalions and Air Force squadrons were combat ready, while table-top drills kept commanders sharp. He said U.S. Army Gen. Robert Abrams, the joint forces commander in Korea, knows that if he

became “uncomfortable” about his readiness all he had to do was tell him.

On the disputes over China’s creation of militarized artificial island in the South China Sea, Dunford said he does not view that as an issue of “a pile of rocks,” but as violations of “the rule of law” and the need to hold the violators accountable. He stressed, however, that did not mean by military action, but the use of “other tools” such as diplomatic and economic efforts.

Looking at the overall condition of the military since he became chairman, Dunford said the increased defense budgets the last three years have helped fill depleted munitions stocks, improve the condition of aircraft and ground equipment and the combat readiness of the troops. But, he added, the U.S. technological “competitive advantage” over potential adversaries has eroded due to the earlier budget cuts and spending by Russia and China.

A detailed analysis by the Joint Chiefs showed the need for future defense budget increases of 3% to 5% a year to meet the services’ drive to increase force levels. To those who will come after him, Dunford said, “if you are going to grow capacity, make sure it has capabilities. I wouldn’t grow the force more than can be sustained.”