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Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

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Moderator: Welcome everyone. I'm Thom Shanker, Director of the Project for Media and National Security. Welcome to this Defense Writers Group with Dr. Colin Kahl, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. I was telling Dr. Kahl as we came on that we have almost 50 RSVPs which makes this likely the largest Defense Writers Group in history which shows the great interest in the topics that Dr. Kahl is here to discuss with us and his expertise.

As always the ground rules, this will be on the record, but there is no rebroadcast of audio or video. I'll ask the first question, then we'll go around the room. Quite a few of you emailed in advance to get on the list. I'll call on those first. And if there's time afterwards, I'll get to others. If you do want to be on the list of questioners, please drop me a note in the direct chat, not the group chat. And of course I'll save a minute or two at the end for our distinguished guest to wrap up.

Dr. Kahl, again, welcome. I know your schedule is busy. We're honored to have you with us today.

Dr. Kahl: It's great to be with you.

Moderator: Thanks. My first question, sir, the Pentagon obviously in recent days released a trio of incredibly important strategy documents -- the National Defense Strategy, Nuclear Posture Review, the Missile Defense Review. I saw your fingerprints all over them, of course.

We are clearly in this nation entering a new age of danger, and I was wondering if you could briefly describe what are the most significant changes, updates, refocus in strategy and policy that these documents represent as the Biden administration's plans to continue protecting our nation.

Dr. Kahl: Thanks, Thom, and it's great to be with all of you. Sorry we couldn't be doing all this in person.

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I would point to a couple of things. First of all, we had a great team that worked on these documents. We released a classified version of them back in the spring along with our budget so that the Congress could see our strategic homework when they were evaluating our budget request for FY23.

One of the things that marks this kind of season of strategic reviews as different than the past is that actually all the reviews were done together, and that was quite intentional that the Nuclear Posture Review and the Missile Defense Review were nested within the National Defense Strategy. In part because the risk of doing them separately is that they drift apart from one another, and when you're asking questions about deterrence, for example, if you have a nuclear policy document that sits by itself you're going to answer the deterrence question a particular way, whereas if you nest it within our national defense strategy where, frankly the central premise is how we sustain and strengthen deterrence, then you are essentially right-sizing the role of nuclear weapons within that question.

So I think it was really important to have all these documents combined as one big strategic review, and I think some of the early feedback we've gotten recognizes that that was a good thing to do. So I would hope that actually that is establishing a tradition that will hold moving forward.

In terms of what's different, I would start by saying today is an election day so partisan spirit is in full bloom, but actually I think there's a through line between the 2018 document and the 2022 document. We really see the 2022 document as the next evolution or interaction on the 2018 document. I think that Secretary Mattis and the team that he had that worked on the 2018 document deserve a lot of credit for essentially moving to the post-post 9/11 period and recognizing that the central national security challenge of the United States had shifted away from counterterrorism, not because there aren't still terrorist threats to the homeland, there are. But that the reemergence of great power competition has just changed the geopolitical landscape and the threats to the United States.

So the 2022 document recognizes that as does the national security strategy that the Biden administration puts out. So I think there's actually a lot of continuity there and probably a bipartisan foundation for agreement on some of the challenges

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that we face.

Some of the ways that the 2022 document differs from 2018 or builds on it is, the 2018 document oftentimes lumped China and Russia together. The 2022 document recognizes them both as profound challenges, but not the same type of challenge.

The 2022 National Defense Strategy identifies the People's Republic of China as "the" pacing challenge for the United States and for the Defense Department in particular and that's really because it's our assessment that the PRC is the only country with both the intent and increasingly the capability to challenge the United States and the rules-based international order that's persisted for 75-plus years across the board. Militarily, technologically, diplomatically, economically. Russia does not have that capability to fundamentally remake the global order.

At the same time, Russia as it's showing every single day in Ukraine is an extraordinarily reckless and dangerous actor. I think perhaps their conventional military is maybe not quite as capable as some of us might have imagined say a year ago. But nevertheless, a very capable force and obviously engaged in the most egregious act of aggression in Europe since the end of the 2nd World War.

So our documents describe Russia as an acute threat, and that term acute was chosen very intentionally as signifying both immediate and sharp.

So China is what we are pacing to, both now and for the foreseeable future, while recognizing the different but acute threat that Russia poses. And obviously there are places where the challenge from Russia is particularly acute, like on the nuclear file.

The other two places I would just point to, probably a difference in emphasis from the 2018 document. One is the importance of resilience and how you think about resilience and deterrence and resilience and homeland defense. I think we have greater clarity about our adversary's theory of victory over the United States. Countries like Russia, countries like China have really gone to school on the American way of war that the United States has practiced since the end of the Cold War. They kind of understood the role that certain networks in cyberspace and

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in outer space play in that, and they've really made a lot of investments to try to hold those networks at risk.

We will do everything we can to defend those networks and we have a lot of capability there. We also have the capability to respond in those domains. But we have to acknowledge that the attack surface is very broad. So really to bolster our deterrence we have to make sure our adversaries understand that our networks can operate even in the face of efforts to disrupt them. That we can fight through those disruptions and be resilient in the face of their efforts to bring those networks down. And the reason they would do that is to try to blind us, deafen us, slow us down, turn us inward in the event of a contingency.

So the emphasis on resilience is a big part of the document that is much more pronounced than in 2018 and our budget has backed that up. We're talking about \$28 billion that we proposed to spend this year for space. A lot of that is focused on a more resilient missile warning/missile tracking architecture; \$11 billion in cyber. I could go into other investments as well.

The lastly, related to resilience is that one of the ways in which our resilience is being tested is that there are a host of transboundary challenges that aren't about state actors like China or Russia, but that pose significant national security challenges including to the joint force.

We're just coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenge that that posed to the United States. But really, the document highlights climate change as something that will challenge our infrastructure, create new missions for the joint force, create new contingencies we'll have to respond to. So resilience in the face of these types of transboundary challenges is also another major theme.

Back over to you.

Moderator: Thanks for a terrific setup.

The first question from the floor is Dan Sagalyn of PBS News Hour.

DWG: I'd like to ask about China. How much has the US coordinated with Taiwan with respect to how to respond if China

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does decide to take military action? How much has the US spoken with Taiwan about if China does X, the US will do Y; if China does this, the US will that with Taiwan?

And are there things DoD wants to be able to do to engage with Taiwan that it can't because it doesn't want to provoke China?

My last question is, how does China's growing nuclear arsenal impact US thinking on defending Taiwan?

Dr. Kahl: Great questions. I think as a general matter our overall policy towards China and Taiwan has not changed. We continue to comply with a One China Policy. We oppose unilateral changes in the status quo. From either side. So a forceful reunification or a unilateral move towards independence, these are things the US government and the Biden administration doesn't support.

I think one of the things that is concerns is if there's a pattern of behavior where I think Xi Jinping appears to be impatient about his goals for reunification. And appears to be trying to unilaterally change the status quo. You saw that through the quite bellicose reaction they had to Speaker Pelosi's visit a few months ago, and using the occasion of that visit really to establish a new normal in the Taiwan Strait as it relates to things like aerial and maritime crossings of the center line. Obviously the missile tests and the live fire tests that they did is reaction to that. And I think there is a stepped up effort by the PRC to coerce and bully Taiwan, but also try to coerce the rest of the international community to abandoning Taiwan altogether and I think that's all in service of an effort by the PRC to unilaterally change the status quo across the strait, so that's obviously very concerning to us.

Our policy towards Taiwan continues to be guided not only by the overarching One China Policy as kind of instantiated in things like the three communiques and the six assurances, but by the bipartisan Taiwan Relations Act which essentially commits the United States to providing assistance to Taiwan so that Taiwan can defend itself. But also the Taiwan relations act identifies that the use of force across the Taiwan Strait would be a threat to US national interests and that the United States should have the capability to respond.

That policy has been in place for decades but the way in which

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you manifest that policy will inevitably change as the nature of the security environment changes. So China's in the midst of a breathtaking military modernization. The nuclear piece is part of that and I can come back to that. But as China's efforts to unilaterally change the status quo, and as China's capabilities change, we'll continue to engage Taiwan on their defense needs. I don't really detect that we're being held back by anything in particular. We're in conversations with Taiwan on a regular basis about what they need to make sure that they can defend themselves consistent with the Taiwan Relations Act. We'll continue to do that.

As it relates to China's nuclear modernization, I'd say first of all having nuclear weapons is not carte blanche for regional aggression and it doesn't mean that things will necessarily go well. Russia's the largest nuclear power on planet earth. Their aggression against Ukraine has been a catastrophic strategic disaster for Vladimir Putin. It's hard for me to believe that Xi Jinping would want China to have a similar reaction from the international community that the international community has shown in its solidarity for Ukraine. So the fact that Russia has nuclear weapons has not ensured that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been successful on the ground, let alone as a strategic matter, and I think that's an important lesson for Beijing to take.

I do think that China's nuclear modernization where they're in the midst of tripling and perhaps quadrupling or more their nuclear arsenal by the end of this decade and beyond, will create a new situation for the United States whereby we will for the first time in our history be confronted by not one but two nuclear peers or near-peer competitors, and that kind of three-player equation is something that we'll have to continue to adjust our policy around, and the Nuclear Posture Review makes that clear.

Moderator: Thanks. The next question is from Lara Seligman of Politico.

DWG: Hi. Thanks so much for doing this.

I wanted to ask about Ukraine, in particular with the mid-term elections today and the possibility of the Republicans taking control of the House. Are you concerned about losing GOP support after the elections? And how do you plan to approach

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the conflict going forward with that in mind, and as the winter and spring months come around?

Dr. Kahl: A great question, and obviously, Lara, you would know better about the politics than me. I'm not going to say is the House goes this way or that way, or the Senate goes this way or that way. I'll just say this. First, I think there continues to be considerable bipartisan support for Ukraine. Both sides of the aisle you see considerable support for Ukraine on the Senate side. Every once in a while you're heard some rhetoric coming out of House Republicans but I think there is a strong level of bipartisan support that's likely to persist regardless of how the elections end up turning out tonight.

Second, I think there's a widespread recognition that the stakes in Ukraine are just bigger than Ukraine. Ukraine is not only fighting for its independence, its sovereignty, its territorial integrity, its democracy, but there's a principle at stake here, something that President Biden and Secretary Austin and other senior US officials have emphasized which is that we don't want to live in a world where big countries believe that they can swallow up their smaller neighbors. That is a recipe for global disorder and large countries going on the march. We've lived in a world like that before. It was called the 1930s and it ended in the most catastrophic global conflict in human history. We don't want to live in a world where the rules of the international system are torn up because the strong do what they will and the weak have to suffer what they must. It's just not a world that we should live in.

So I think there are stakes for the United States and for the free world in standing up for Ukraine, and I think that fundamental logic of that argument is widely understood among both Republicans and Democrats, so I'm confident we'll be able to maintain support.

Precisely what that support looks like, we'll have to see. Obviously in the first eight months of the conflict there's been something like \$40 or \$50 billion of assistance. So far we've provided I think north of \$18 billion in security assistance. Ukraine's needs are going to change over time. I'm hopeful that at some point the conflict will die down such that we can put as much emphasis on Ukraine's kind of medium and long term needs as their immediate battlefield needs. We'll have to see whether that becomes a possibility as we head into the winter and then

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into 2023.

But whatever that appropriate level of assistance is, we're committed to making sure it continues. If for no other reason than because I think Vladimir Putin has a theory of victory here, and his theory of victory is that he'll just wait us all out. That we'll get exhausted. That high energy prices, inflation, bickering in Europe, whatever the theory is, the longer he waits, he'll just wait us all out. So I think it's incumbent upon all of us to signal to him it's not going to work.

DWG: If I could just follow up, what is your assessment of the military situation on the ground right now in Ukraine? Can Ukraine actually win this fight? And when I say win, I mean their stated goal of expelling Russia from occupied Ukraine including Crimea. So what's your assessment of the situation?

Dr. Kahl: I think the Ukrainians are doing well. Obviously you saw the huge gains that they made, you know, in the first part of the war, obviously, in defeating the Russians in and around Kyiv and forcing the Russians to retreat all the way to the east.

More recently you've see obviously the kind of sweeping victory the Ukrainians have had up in the northeast around Kharkiv. They also appear to have stabilized the lines in the east around the Donbas. They continue to make kind of methodical progress around Kherson.

I think what we'll all be looking for in the next couple of weeks is how that shakes out before the weather makes it very difficult for the two sides to make much gains.

There are some indications that the Russians intend to withdraw to the east bank of the Dnieper River. They are repositioning their forces in some ways that could be interpreted as providing cover for an orderly withdrawal so that they don't have the kind of disorderly withdrawal they had up in Kharkiv. On the other hand there are still tens of thousands of Russians on the west bank of the Dnieper River. So we'll have to see how that plays out. We're obviously continuing to supply the Ukrainians with what they need to provide the pressure on the Russians to enable the Ukrainians to have success down in Kherson.

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What it means for the long haul, I don't know. The Ukrainians themselves are going to define the terms of what winning looks like for them and it's not our role to define that for them. But I can say one thing with confidence which is Russia has already suffered a massive strategic failure and that's not going to change.

Putin went into this war trying to extinguish Ukraine as an independent sovereign democratic country. He's failed, and that's not going to change. A sovereign, independent democratic Ukraine is going to endure. Russia went into this trying to make Russia, demonstrate to the world that Russia was a global power with an extraordinarily overwhelming military and to emerge from this war stronger and more able to coerce its neighbors. Putin has failed.

Russia will emerge from this war weaker than it went in. They have suffered tens of thousands of casualties in eight months, orders of magnitude more than they experienced in Afghanistan in ten years. They've probably lost half of their main battle tanks in the entire Russian military. They've bogged down more than 80 percent of their land force in Ukraine. They've spent down a majority of their precision-guided munitions in Ukraine. And the sanctions and export controls will make it very difficult for them to rebuild their military to what it looked like before the war. They are not going to emerge from this war stronger, they are going to emerge from this war much weaker than they went in.

Lastly, they went into this war hoping to divide the West, to fracture the free world, and it's produced the exact opposite. NATO is more united than ever. NATO is more forward than ever. We're on the precipice of Sweden and Finland probably joining the alliance which will make the alliance much stronger vis-à-vis Russia.

So I don't know what winning looks like, but I do know that Russia will not have achieved the objectives that Vladimir Putin set out, and that's pretty much a guarantee.

Moderator: The next question is Anton La Guardia of The Economist.

DWG: Thank you Thom, and thank you Colin for this.

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Can I just pick up on Lara's question. You say you don't know what victory and winning looks like. The Ukrainians have a very clear idea and that means getting all their territory back including Crimea. So is that an objective that the US would be willing to support, finance and arm?

And just to pick up the thread on the China discussion. Can you say more about what a three-sided, three-player nuclear deterrence game looks like. Does the US need a larger arsenal of nuclear weapons as some experts have advocated? Thank you.

Dr. Kahl: I think on Crimea, Crimea is Ukraine. It was illegally annexed in 2014. We don't recognize Crimea as Russia. Most of the world does not recognize Crimea as Russia. It's not Russia. It's Ukraine.

The Ukrainians will decide whether they push their wartime objectives to simply go back to the February 23rd lines, or back to the 2014 lines. That's ultimately going to be their decisions.

Our role is to make sure that Ukraine continues to have the capability to defend its sovereign territory, deter aggression in the event that they enter negotiations with the Russians, to enter those negotiations from the strongest possible position won on the battlefield. So that's what our policy will continue to be.

In terms of the ultimate status of Crimea, that will be something to be negotiated or discussed between the Ukrainians and the Russians. But Crimea is Ukraine.

In terms of the three-sided problem, I think what the answer is I think is still very much a work in progress. WE obviously don't live in that world yet. The PRC probably has around 400 nuclear weapons so they're not in a place where they are a peer of the United States yet, but they clearly have intentions to get there by 2030 or the early 2030s. So we do have to start thinking about it.

One caution I would have, though, is this is not a game of arithmetic. I've said in other forums, this isn't a contest in which like the kid who dies with the most toys wins. That's not how we think about it. So we shouldn't think about it that if Russia has 2000 nuclear weapons and China has 1000 nuclear

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weapons, the United States needs 3001 nuclear weapons. That's just not eh way that nuclear deterrence operates.

What we need is to be able to convince any nuclear actor that there is no scenario in which they would be able to use their nuclear weapons against the United States and escape unacceptable retaliation by the United States.

The question then becomes what mix of capabilities do you need to make sure that under any contingency you would have a survivable second strike capability that even if you were in a contingency with another nuclear power, you would have enough in reserve to hold at risk so much that other nuclear powers hold valuable, that they wouldn't dare to challenge the United States. And the good news is, I think we have that capability, I know we have that capability today, and I'm confident that we will have that capability going forward, even with the expansion that the Chinese have contemplated.

That said, the Nuclear Posture Review makes clear that as the security environment continues to evolve, we'll have to continue to relook our force posture.

But I do want to caution folks against the kind of simple arithmetic of this, because that is a one-way ticket to an endless arms race which is not particularly affordable, it is not wise, and it could get you into a period of some of the dangerous patterns we saw during the early parts of the Cold War, so I think we have to be smarter than that.

Moderator: The next question is Dan Lamothe of the Washington Post.

DWG: Thank you very much, and thanks for your time today.

I wanted to ask a question following on the Ukraine conversation here As we look at this, there's this conversation of Ukraine fatigue and I think you've addressed that to some degree already this afternoon. There's also the concern about what this means long-term for US military stocks of weapons and ammunition and what lessons might be drawn from that when we look at future possible conflicts.

As we look forward, what do you anticipate in the coming year in terms of building up additional lines, restocking the American

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supplies that have been sent to Ukraine, and I guess I say that in part knowing there would be conversation with Deputy Secretary Hicks and Bill LaPlante today with some of the industry. Thank you.

Dr. Kahl: Look, we're seeing the first example in many decades of a real high intensity conventional conflict and the strain that that produces on not just the countries involved but the defense industrial bases of those supporting, in this case supporting Ukraine.

There's no question that it's put pressure on our own stockpiles, it's put pressure on our defense industrial base. That's been true of our allies. I will say Secretary Austin has been laser-focused since the beginning in making sure that we were not taking undue risk. That is that we weren't drawing down our stockpiles so much that it would undermine our readiness and our ability to respond to another major contingency elsewhere in the world.

So I am comfortable that the support we have provided to Ukraine has not put the United States in a dangerous position as it relates to another major contingency somewhere in the world, but it has revealed that we have work to do to make our defense industrial base more nimble, more responsive, more resilient. And I will defer to the real experts in our building which are Deputy Secretary Hicks and Bill LaPlante, my colleague who's the Under Secretary for Acquisitions and Sustainment.

But some of the things we're looking at is, how can we make sure that we're making the investments in the defense industrial base, especially the production of munitions? How can we work with Congress to get appropriations and authorities that allow us to spend money over multiple years to create a more predictable demand signal for industry so that they can justify having a production capacity that's higher than what we had before this conflict. How can we get after some of the supply chain issues and bottleneck issues that have been revealed by this? How can we get after the workforce issues? Obviously the tight labor market makes it harder to just instantaneously snap your fingers and get folks who are going to work on the factory floor. It's great news that people are employed. It creates challenges for surging production.

But really I think also thinking about how we can leverage the

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experiences and lessons from Ukraine about the types of munitions we need, but also the types of stockpiles we may need available for other front-line allies and partners in the event that we see a Ukraine-like scenario emerge in some other part of the world.

So we're very focused on learning those lessons. I'm confident we'll be in pretty good shape. And like I said, Secretary Austin's been very focused in not kind of putting us in the danger zone and we'll continue to measure what we provide to Ukraine against our own readiness considerations.

Moderator: Next question is Demetri Sevastopulo of the Financial Times.

DWG: Thanks, Tom. Good afternoon, Colin.

I'm curious, are you satisfied that the US military is doing enough in the Indo-Pacific to counter the growing threat from China? And what more do you think you need to do in the region?

And on Taiwan specifically, and this relates a little bit to what you just said a second ago, how much progress has the Pentagon and the rest of the administration made streamlining the processes for getting US-approved weapons to Taiwan a lot more quickly than happens right now?

Dr. Kahl: I will say as a general matter I think that our deterrence posture in the Indo-Pacific remains extraordinarily robust. Obviously China has invested a tremendous amount in their military. They've designed their entire military around how to counter the United States military and to try to deter and if necessary defeat US intervention in support of our allies and the partners in the region. I am confident that we're in a position where that wouldn't work today. But China is the pacing challenge for the department. So we have to not rest on our laurels, but as the National Defense Strategy said, to sustain and strengthen our deterrence over time.

So the United States remains the most powerful military in the world. We're the most powerful military in the history of the world. Beijing doesn't doubt that. I see no indications that China believes that they've somehow leapfrogged the United States militarily. They haven't. I don't believe they think they have. But we'll make sure we're making the investments to

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stay on the cutting edge and stay ahead of our pacing challenge.

In terms of what we're doing, some of it is what we're investing in. Getting after things like major investments in space, I've already talked about that. Major investments in cyber. We're obviously making a significant investment in recapitalizing and modernizing the nuclear triad and the nuclear command and control. That has relevance for China. We're making major investments in maritime and especially in undersea capabilities where we think we have a significant edge and are committed to maintaining that edge. We are making major investments in long-range fires. So hypersonics, cruise missiles, other long-range fires that would be relevant for contingencies in the Western Pacific and beyond. So we'll continue to get after that.

We're also thinking about our posture in the region. How to diversify that posture. How to take advantage of changes in the geopolitical and political environment. Opportunities to alter our posture in Japan. Opportunities to alter and expand our posture in Australia. Opportunities to leverage AUKUS, the trilateral arrangement between the United States, Australia and the UK. Opportunities for cooperation with other partners in the region like India to include through the Quad mechanism.

So I actually think we have considerable opportunity at the moment to diversify our posture to make it more resilient, more lethal, more survivable across the region in large part because there are a lot of countries in the Indo-Pacific that share our concern that the PRC wants to use its military buildup to impose its will to create a military and political sphere of influence that is just not consistent with the desire of countries in the region to have a free and open Indo-Pacific.

S I think we're going to have a lot of opportunities to continue to diversify our posture over time.

As it relates to Taiwan and security assistance to Taiwan, there are various inefficiencies in our security assistance programs that frankly are a challenge for all of our allies and partners and we're dedicated to getting after that and that will pay dividends for Taiwan as well. We're also in continuous conversations with Taiwan about the types of capabilities that make the most sense as it relates to self-defense, again, consistent with the Taiwan Relations Act. And we're having conversations with Congress, too, to make sure that there are

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the authorities and the appropriations to back that up.

Moderator: Next question is Meghann Myers of Military Times.

DWG: Thanks.

How does the ongoing DoD mission at the Mexico border figure into the National Defense Strategy? And what would you say the outlook is for continuing to commit thousands of troops there for a mission that senior military leaders have said is distinctly not a military mission?

Dr. Kahl: It's a good question. The first priority in the National Defense Strategy is homeland defense so the United States military, DoD is committed to supporting homeland defense in all of its manifestations.

It is true that over time this is a job that the DoD thinks is more appropriately the job of other agencies and departments in the US government. So that is a challenge of setting the conditions, making sure those departments and agencies have the resources that they need, and then transitioning the DoD out of playing that role. We're certainly inclined to do that. But nevertheless, if the President asks us to do things, we will continue to respond.

I would say more broadly, this National Defense Strategy, Thom asked the question at the beginning how it differs. One of the ways I think it differs is not the emphasis on the homeland which has of course been a through-line since 9/11, but how the challenges to the homeland have been conceptualized. It's not predominantly anymore a threat just from violent extremist organizations. Yes, there are still jihadist groups and other violent extremist organizations that want to attack the homeland.

But we actually see the pacing challenges to the homeland as emanating from competitor states like China, from Russia and others in terms of the challenges they pose to us in cyberspace, to critical infrastructure, to our reliance for our prosperity and security here at home on our space architectures. So we're really focused on that.

Also the homeland threat posed by transboundary challenges like climate change. The reason I mention that is, if you look at

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the billions of dollars that we've had to spend recovering from extreme weather events in US military bases over the last few years, it really is an indication of things to come.

There's also I think a sense that the demand signal for the Department of Defense to do more in the homeland to deal with climate emergencies is going to go up. And one data point that I often come back to is that five years ago the Department of Defense spent 5,000 person days of the National Guard fighting wildfires. Last year it was more than 175,000 person days. That's just because there are a lot more forest fires. Weather's getting more extreme, and I think we can expect that the department will be called on to do more of that.

So there's really kind of a more holistic view of what homeland defense requires in the National Defense Strategy.

DWG: To follow up, do you think then that the situation will be more that when DHS stops asking you guys, we'll stop providing? Or are you in a situation where you feel obligated to provide those troops every time they ask?

Dr. Kahl: At the end of the day it's the President of the United States that asks the Department of Defense. And if the President of the United States asks the Department of Defense to step up and it's lawful for us to do and we have the people and resources to do so, we will continue to step up.

It is also true that all else being equal, we think this is a job that would be better performed by properly resource civilian agencies and departments. So I would hope that we'd be able to work with Congress to make sure we have the necessary authorities and resources such that civilian agencies can step up and you don't have this president or the next one or the one after that come back to the Pentagon for this role.

Moderator: The next question is Eric Schmitt of the New York Times.

DWG: Back on Ukraine. If indeed the winter operations there slow on both sides, I was wondering if you can kind of assess, is this providing an opportunity for diplomacy? If not, how do you assess kind of each side using the winter months to position themselves for the spring? Presumably with the new offensives, new operations there renewing.

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Dr. Kahl: It's a great question, Eric, and frankly I don't think the scenarios you paint are mutually exclusive. I suspect it will be some combination of the two.

You're already seeing the sloppy weather in Ukraine slow things down a little bit. It's getting really muddy which makes it hard to do largescale offensives. I think that challenge is going to get worse in the coming weeks.

So we'll have to see whether the fighting slows down as a consequence of that.

Then the question becomes over the next two, three months, what happens?

I think predictably what will happen is that both sides -- the fighting's not going to stop. Even if the intensity of the fighting goes down, I think we should expect both sides to be exchanging artillery fire. The Russians seem intent on continuing to lob cruise missiles and Iranian drones at Ukrainian civilian infrastructure. They may keep that up, assuming they continue to have that supply. So the war will continue even if the intensity of it is somewhat altered.

The other thing is I think you'll see both sides taking some effort on the front lines to rest and refit. So give their forces an opportunity to get some rest, to do some training, to get resupplied. Both sides I think are straining their own supplies of ammunition and hardware. So you can see a focus on recapitalizing some of that in the couple of months.

As it relates to what opportunity this presents for diplomacy, that's really ultimately for the Russians and the Ukrainians to decide. Our position has not been to push the Ukrainians into talks before they are ready, but rather to put themselves in a position such that when and if they are ready they're doing so from a position of strength.

And I think frankly, things on the ground are turning in their direction. So if they were to enter talks this winter, I do think they would enter those talks leaning forward.

DWG: To follow up, there have been some media reports that Russia and Iran have reached a deal not only on sending Russian

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drones to Russia for the fight in the Ukraine, but also ballistic missiles. Are those reports correct? Even if they haven't actually been delivered yet from what you know. And if they were to be, how significant an escalation in capability is that for Russia given its assault with cruise missiles and other things on Ukrainian infrastructure.

Dr. Kahl: I think the big story here is how desperate the Russians have become. A year or two ago the relationship between Russia and Iran was that Russia was the great power that people feared was going to provide a lot of weapons to Iran, and Now Russia has been so attritted in terms of its conventional power in Ukraine, that they're going to Tehran and Pyongyang and elsewhere to try to make up for the fact that they have spent down an enormous amount of their artillery. But also just a huge amount of their precision-guided standoff munitions. A lot of their cruise missiles -- sea-launched, air-launched. So I think the story line here is that this is an indication of Russian desperation and also, frankly, the kind of the power equation between Russia and Iran appears to be kind of out of whack from what we're used to.

I think you've already seen them go to Iran for these one-way attack UAVs that the Russians have been using to attack civilian infrastructure, especially energy infrastructure in Ukraine. The good news is, the Ukrainians have been pretty good at shooting these things down. The bad news enough of them are getting through to cause real damage and real hardship on the Ukrainian people.

I think there's reason to believe that Russia, having spent down so many of its ballistic and cruise missiles, is out shopping for ways to get access to those types of capabilities. They have trouble doing it themselves because of the sanctions and the export controls, so it would not surprise me if they turn to Iran to get these capabilities. I think that certainly lends plausibility to some of those reports that you have mentioned.

Would it be a gamechanger? I don't know that it would be a gamechanger in the sense of the Russians have launched ballistic missiles and cruise missiles against Ukraine since the beginning of this conflict. You know, getting more from somewhere else it would not be a fundamentally different capability being introduced. It would of course prolong Russia's ability to use those types of systems.

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Moderator: Next is Tony Bertuca of Inside Defense.

DWG: Thank you very much. You said in September that DoD was defying the laws of bureaucratic physics regarding the rapid delivery of military aid to Ukraine. What is the status of the FMS Tiger Team that was mentioned around that time? You mentioned that you were trying to sort of capture some of those lessons learned that you used to defy the bureaucratic physics. What is the status of that effort? What change can we expect to be enacted, especially regarding deals with Taiwan?

Dr. Kahl: It's a really great question. The FMS Tiger Team has basically rolled up its sleeves to look at a bunch of different use cases. So not only try to learn the lessons from Ukraine but look at other areas with, it could be Taiwan, it could be the UAE, it could be Poland, it could be South Korea, where there have been FMS cases that have been languishing to try to identify if there are particular fixes that would speed things across not only for those cases but that would be applicable more generally. So I don't want to get out ahead of the Tiger Team's results, just to let you know that they have been actively at work and at the appropriate time will roll out what those findings are.

I would say more broadly, just to keep in mind, we've really been kind of approaching the Ukraine scenario from two different angles. The part that is really defying the laws of bureaucratic physics is our ability to use presidential drawdown authority. Because that is not putting things on contract, that's drawing things out of our own stocks. And the part of it that has kind of pushed the bureaucracy past its comfort level I would say is our willingness to actually dig deep into our stocks. That's one thing. Second is our willingness to skate the edge as it relates to certain bangs on technology security and release and exportability issues, that are probably beyond the comfort zone that we have been in in other situations. So I think we've gotten into a new place on that.

Then just also the sheer amount of logistical effort that we've put in this. I mean the fact of the matter is, if the President signs a PDA package, a presidential drawdown package on Friday, a lot of times we've already started to creep those capabilities forward into Europe and/or put them on standby so that TRANSCOM gets them into theater and then the Ukrainians get them into the

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country sometimes within a handful of days from a signature from the President. So that's really where I think the speed has come from has been on the PDA side.

Then we have USAI which is the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which is really a creative authority because it was given to DoD to do rapid contracting on capabilities. But even rapid contracting, a lot of times these capabilities show up in a couple of months if we're lucky, and sometimes it's out to 6, 12 months or beyond. So we're trying to do both at the same time.

DWG: A quick follow up, just so we can track this tiger team, is there a sort of a deliverable we should be waiting for? Or asking about? How will what you're planning to do manifest itself?

Dr. Kahl: I don't think we've committed ourselves to a particular deliverable. I think once the analysis is done and it gets briefed to the Deputy Secretary and the Secretary and they're comfortable with it, we'll come back to you on what type of public posture we have, but I don't have anything to report out on that today.

Moderator: Next is Travis Tritten of Military.com.

DWG: Thank you so much for doing this.

I have a Ukraine question as well. Can you confirm that DoD intends to put a three-star officer in charge of the new Security Assistance Group Ukraine in Europe? And would that require a congressional action, and do you have like a timeline for that?

Dr. Kahl: I don't have an announcement for you on that. I will say that at the point that we stand up a headquarters which is sometimes referred to as SAGU, a Security Assistance Group for Ukraine, you all will know about it. If it was to be a three-star, it would require confirmation. But I think the most important thing to consider is really what we're talking about with this type of headquarters is simply the consolidation of activities that are already ongoing.

I think you all are tracking that the 18th Airborne Corps just returned to the United States. A lot of the activities that we

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have been doing to coordinate security assistance, coordinate training efforts, information sharing, those types of things were already consolidated under what the 18th Airborne Corps is doing. But now that the headquarters, which is a crisis response headquarters, has returned to the United States, we're looking at options for a more enduring capability.

So to some degree this is simply a new name on top of what we're already doing, but beyond that I don't have news to report on particular positions or personalities.

DWG: It does seem like a more permanent body, though. I'm just wondering what that says about DoD involvement or support in Ukraine.

And you said earlier that you don't know what congressional support might look like in the future I'm wondering if having a SAGU, this kind of official body, would make continuing support more likely.

Dr. Kahl: Permanent is not a word that I typically use. I think it would be an enduring capability which is not probably exactly the same as permanent. But what it would allow, it would allow a predictable institutionalized place that would allow it to be easier to budget against, to put personnel against, to plan against. I don't think you would bill this as just a crisis response entity run out of the 18th Airborne Corps. That's not an enduring solution.

Whether this is a hook to hook on things, the types of resources and support we get for the Congress, I think it could be useful in that way.

I think what it signals, though, is that we're committed to Ukraine over the long haul. We had a training mission with Ukraine before the war. So the commitment to Ukraine is not new. We had a training mission inside Ukraine before the war training the Ukrainians. One of the reasons the Ukrainians have performed so admirably is not just that they're extraordinary and they're fighting for their homeland, but that they received eight years of training from the United States after the Russian incursion and illegal annexation in Crimea and stirring up separatism in the Donbas back in 2014.

So really we just see this as a continuation of what we've been

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doing with the Ukrainians since 2014. It got dialed up as a consequence of Russia's further invasion of Ukraine back in February, but really, it's kind of just institutionalizing what we've been doing since then.

Moderator: We're at the ten minute mark. I have ten questioners on the list. We'll get to as many as we can.

Next is Spencer Ackerman of [Forever Wars].

DWG: Thanks very much.

Colin, the White House recently approved two foundational counterterrorism documents known as the National Security Memorandum on International Counterterrorism Policy and the Presidential Policy Guidance and that latter document requires the creation of country plans that govern the conduct of counterterrorism in each theater.

What can you say about the Pentagon's country plans? How do they, for instance, differ from the Obama administration's in terms of resources, authorities, and senior level oversight? Thanks very much.

Dr. Kahl: You're exactly right, Spencer. By the way, it's good to see you again. It's been a while.

You're exactly right, the documents call for the Pentagon to put together country plans for the various places where we regularly engage in counterterrorism activities. Those plans aren't done yet so it's hard for me to speculate what they will do. So that's not a very satisfying answer, but the teams are working on them. They're just not done yet.

DWG: When do you anticipate it?

Dr. Kahl: I don't know. The not so distant future. Probably not days, but it's probably not months.

Moderator: Christopher Woody of Business Insider.

DWG: Thank you for your time today.

Two questions on different topics. Firstly on Russia and China. From a military perspective, do you view that still as a

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relatively superficial relationship or are they moving towards deeper alignment and more meaningful exchanges?

Secondly on the Pacific, you mentioned efforts to deepen US relationships with countries there. What efforts does the department have underway to get those countries' militaries to work more closely with each other?

Dr. Kahl: On the second one, which countries? My brain short circuited for a second.

DWG: I just asked generally, what efforts does the department have underway to get countries in the Indo-Pacific to work more closely with each other. I'm thinking of First Island Chain countries, but really throughout the region.

Dr. Kahl: As it relates to Russia-PRC, I think there's been this longstanding debate about whether the relationship was purely transactional, superficial, whether it was possible to drive wedges ultimately between Moscow and Beijing because they had divergent interests, because Russia would not want to be a junior partner to a rising China. I've been part of these debates for many, many years.

I think the lead-up to and the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been a bit of a gamechanger as it relates to Russia-Ukraine in a couple of respects. First of all, obviously, on the eve of the invasion, Putin and Xi signed onto this strategic partnership without limits and they've really been much more willing to signal that this thing is edging towards an alliance as opposed to just a superficial partnership. There's obviously been more willingness to do joint military exercises and I really do think that China views Russia as a counterweight to the United States and to other democratic countries, and Russia, increasingly, has nowhere else to go. I think as a consequence of the sanctions and the export controls, Russia's dependence on China economically, technologically, and potentially militarily is going to go up.

Now despite it being a relationship without limits, I think China is nervous about that relationship, at least about too many aspects of that relationship being public. I don't think that China is enthusiastic about getting sideways from US and international sanctions. I think they are wary about doing too much, too openly in terms of openly supporting Russia

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militarily. We'll have to see whether that will change over time. I think we will continue to remind China that we will enforce our sanctions and we will continue to publicize any country that provides military support to what Russia is doing in Ukraine.

But I do think we should expect the Russia-China relationship to deepen, and one of the things that both the National Defense Strategy and the National Security Strategy recognize is that that's more of a reality to kind of the emerging geopolitical landscape.

As it relates to our allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, I think there's not one approach. We are approaching it from all sorts of directions. Obviously there are innovative platforms like AUKUS which I made reference to before. There is the quad and the opportunities that provides for us not just in the political sphere but also to do things as it relates to exercises in the Indian Ocean and to deepen cooperation between four great democracies.

I think you're seeing increasing appetite in the context of North Korean provocations to do things more trilaterally between the United States, Japan and South Korea. I think there may be appetite to do things more trilaterally between the United States, Japan and Australia. The Secretary of Defense recently had a bilat with his counterparts on that score.

And we're looking for other ways to have more European powers more involved in the Indo-Pacific because we think that's important to show that the world has stake in stability in the Indo-Pacific whether that's across the Taiwan Strait, whether it's in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, or more broadly.

Moderator: Jonathan Guyer of Vox.

DWG: Thanks.

It seems to me that the war on terrorism as Spencer notes is continuing in the margins with some pretty old authorizations. Can you talk us through what the strategy means by an Iraq and Syria policy by, with and through? And just to add on that, why isn't Somalia mentioned in this strategy if US forces are being sent over there?

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Dr. Kahl: As I mentioned, the number one priority in the National Defense Strategy is protecting the homeland. There still is a homeland threat from violent extremist organizations in various parts of the world. I think that threat has been right-sized relative to the overall challenges we face more broadly, whether it's China-Russia, climate change, or a whole bunch of things.

I think we can all admit that after 9/11 obviously the pacing challenge in the United States was al-Qaida and ISIS, to be frank. Right now the pacing challenge of the United States is China and the acute threat is Russia.

But we still have to be vigilant against organizations that could plan to attack the US homeland. So we are continuing to get after that challenge, whether it be making sure that ISIS doesn't make a comeback in Iraq and Syria. The strategy is pretty clear, especially in the Global Posture Review that precede this strategy. We don't envision significant posture changes in Iraq and Syria. We think we're right-sized there.

We have in recent months, we have a few hundred folks who have been going in and out of Somalia who are now there on a more enduring basis to provide assistance to groups that are going after, you know, to the government of Somalia, that's going after Al-Shabaab, because Al-Shabaab is one of the more capable jihadist organizations that does have the intent and capability to conduct external operations. We've been focused on that.

We're also looking elsewhere. We're looking closely at the threat to make sure it doesn't grow and metastasize in the Sahel. We obviously continue to have our eye on the ball as it relates to the over-the-horizon counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan. You saw the operation against Ayman al-Zawahiri not too long ago.

So I think what we're trying to do is right-size -- not unlike, by the way, the 2018 National Defense Strategy. Right-size the terrorist challenge of not saying we can ignore it altogether, but not letting it dominate our defense policy in the way that it did, understandably, but the way that it did in the two decades that followed 9/11.

Moderator: Thank you.

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Apologies to the people on the questioners' list that we don't have time for.

Dr. Kahl: It's not Thom's fault, it's my fault. It's not the questions being long, it's the answers being long.

Moderator: Before I invite you for any concluding comments, Dr. Kahl, I want to thank you for your time and for your work on behalf of our nation, and to thank you specifically for a really thoughtful and thought-provoking discussion today. I learned a lot.

Over to you, sir, for any concluding thoughts.

Dr. Kahl: First of all, Thom, thank you for this. Thank you for organizing. Thanks for all the great questions. I'm sure the other questions would have been great as well. I'm happy to have our team follow up with you if there's something really pressing.

I'll just say this. Today is a day of midterm elections. A lot of partisan blood is going to be boiling. But I think on the issues that we've talked about today, China, Russia, and the other challenges that we face, one thing that I'm gratified is that actually I think there's a lot of bipartisan consensus around these questions. And I think that a fair reading of the National Defense Strategy is that it is not a political document. It is a well thought-through strategic document. I'm sure people can challenge it in certain places, but not because it's an ideological document or a political document. It is a strategic document around which I think we can forge considerable bipartisan consensus and I think today is a good day to remind ourselves that's still possible.

Moderator: Terrific concluding though.

Dr. Kahl, thanks to you and your staff for your support and to all the correspondents. Thanks on behalf of the Defense Writers Group.

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