Building a More Resilient Indo-Pacific Security Architecture: A Conversation with DoD’s Ely Ratner and Lindsey Ford

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

- Dr. Ely Ratner, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs
- Lindsey W. Ford, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia
- Patrick M. Cronin, Asia-Pacific Security Chair
- Rebeccah L. Heinrichs, Senior Fellow and Director, Keystone Defense Initiative

Disclaimer: This transcript is based off of a recorded video conference and breaks in the stream may have resulted in mistranscriptions in the text.

A video of the event is available: https://youtu.be/KG_lk3bs-vU

About Hudson Institute: Founded in 1961 by strategist Herman Kahn, Hudson Institute challenges conventional thinking and helps manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary studies in defense, international relations, economics, health care, technology, culture, and law.

Hudson seeks to guide public policy makers and global leaders in government and business through a vigorous program of publications, conferences, policy briefings, and recommendations.
Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Well, good morning. Welcome to those joining us in-person here and online to this discussion at Hudson Institute, where scholars research, analyze, and make recommendations that embrace American leadership, global engagement, and the furtherance of security, freedom, and prosperity.

Before the new year, the Pentagon released the China Military Power report, which, in my view, is one of the best unclassified documents that really outlined Chinese capabilities and their national intent. Over the Christmas holiday, I was reading the rollout from various officials of this report, and I came across a great event that Dr. Ratner had done at AEI, which is what prompted this whole idea of doing this because the environment is very fluid; it's very dynamic, and even as good as that report is, there's still things that are moving. In that event that Dr. Ratner was a part of, he had mentioned something that various officials have continued to amplify, and that's that this year, 2023, is going to be very important for the United States as we seek to do things that would deter, what we believe, our Chinese potential plans to do things against US interests.

This audience is very familiar with the PRC's conventional military modernization. But as the previous STRATCOM commander and then the current STRATCOM commander have warned, China is also engaged in a strategic breakout of its nuclear weapons program. China's making their nuclear triad mature and more capable, but we're not only concerned about, of course, Chinese capabilities. China has also become more aggressive in its operational behaviors, provocations in the East and South China seas.

Also, as articulated very well in the report, the China military challenges are not strictly regional. The PLA is expanding its presence globally, pursuing installations around the world, which underscores its ambitions to contest the United States and the interests of ourselves and our allies, interests that Americans have benefited from for decades. We've heard from several DoD officials, again, that we are on the early end, I believe, and I'd love to hear from our guests more about what we're doing in response to this. So, we're very eager to hear from these wonderful, prestigious guests that we have here today.

What we're going to do now is I'm going to turn the floor over to my colleague here, Patrick. He will introduce our guests and then begin with the first series of questions, and then we hope to save some time at the end for questions from the audience. So, with that, Patrick

Patrick Cronin:

Well, Rebecca, thank you very much. What a great pleasure it is, as Rebeccah Heinrichs has just suggested, to have Ely Ratner and Lindsey Ford here from the Pentagon taking some time out. If you were looking for the best person possible for the Defense Department of the United States to take on the pacing challenge of China, you would look quickly to someone like Dr. Ely Ratner. His academic pedigree, his research pedigree, what he's done before in terms of White House, working for then Joe Biden as vice president, but also at the State Department back in the great days of Scarborough Shoal, working in the office of China Mongolian Affairs. He's
been there, thinking about these issues, constantly writing about them. So, it's a really great pleasure. We're going to ask Ely to kick things off here with brief comments.

But first, let me just say a few words about Lindsey Ford because we're also delighted. She's an exceptional public servant who's also been thinking about these things analytically at places like Brookings in the Asia Society Policy Center or Institute. But she's got experience working in the office of the Secretary of Defense. The thing she's doing now and she's in charge of as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South Asia and Southeast Asia, things like the first US ASANDM, that's the Association of Southeast Asia Nation Defense Ministerial. That was something she designed, thinking about the maritime strategy when you're thinking about the South China Sea. So, we're really dealing with people who have been at the cutting-edge, for especially the past decade or more, on these critical issues. So without further ado, let me turn it over to Ely and then to Lindsey for opening comments. And then Rebeccah Heinrichs and I will have a few questions, and then eventually we'll open up to the audience.

Ely Ratner:

Okay. Well, thank you, Patrick and Rebeccah. Thank you to Hudson for the opportunity to be here. Good morning, everyone. The one important part of my resume, which Patrick did not mention, is that when I left the State Department in 2012 had the opportunity to work for and with Patrick and learned an enormous amount from him at that time and continue to benefit from his knowledge and experience. So, please take credit for whatever has come since then.

As Rebeccah mentioned, there has been a lot of anticipation around the activities this year. We had a chance to talk with friends at AEI in December and preview what we were looking toward. I think the fact is we find ourselves here now only at the beginning of March, and it's already been, really, a breakthrough year for US alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, really groundbreaking right out of the gate as it relates to delivering on major initiatives with respect to capabilities, posture, interoperability, and otherwise building upon a lot of the work that we've been doing over the last couple of years coming to fruition.

We saw that in the secretary's recent trip to the Philippines, and we were meant to meet just after that trip. I was called to testify before the foreign relations committee just before that. That's a hard thing to say no to. So, it was an obligation that I had to fulfill, but glad to be here today. This was Secretary Austin's second trip to Manila, first trip of the year, had a chance to meet with troops down in Southern Philippines, also with President Marcos and the whole new national security team out in Manila and was able to provide a major announcement out of that visit of an agreement on four new EDCA sites in the Philippines, which provides access for US Forces to Philippine military sites, which is really going to help our ability to deepen the alliance, respond more effectively to crises and contingencies in the South China Sea, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and otherwise. We've got a lot of momentum in the Philippines relationship. That's one that Lindsey manages day-to-day, and we're looking forward to other big engagements this year.

I think a really exciting part of the Asia Pacific portfolio, and one that Lindsey and I have both been working on for quite a time now, on the day after that we returned from Manila, Secretary Austin met with Deputy Minister Marles from Australia, who's also dual-hatted as the defense
Building a More Resilient Indo-Pacific Security Architecture: A Conversation with DoD’s Ely Ratner and Lindsey Ford | March 2, 2023

minister. They had a great discussion about where we are on OCCAS, which we are feeling quite good about, making strong progress, heading toward really the end-game of the consultation period and also having an opportunity with Minister Marles to discuss a number of the initiatives that came out of Osmond at the end of last year associated with new posture efforts to enhance the number and activities of US Forces throughout Australia and across domains. So, really important set of initiatives there.

Of course, just prior to that in early January, we had our 2+2 at Japan, which for those of us, and Patrick has spent a huge amount of his career working on that relationship... I think it was really a historic meeting, historic set of announcements in the context of Japan's new national security strategy, major announcements on posture, US posture in particular, the first forward deployment of the Marine littoral regiment in Japan, which is really important for our capabilities inside the first island chain as well as a number of announcements as it relates to the alliance.

I'll just say, kind of wrapping this up, as part of the trip to Manila, secretary also went to Seoul, had a chance to meet, obviously, with his counterpart, Minister Lee, as well as President Yoon. They had a great discussion about the alliance, about all the efforts we've been taking to revitalize a number of our alliance activities that had atrophied over previous years and talk specifically about the steps we're taking to strengthen our US-extended deterrence commitment, which may be something we may want to get into in a little more detail.

Then the final relationship, I do want to mention another one that Lindsey is managing day-to-day, is the India relationship, where we're making a lot of investments and spending a lot of time at senior levels to, as we describe, uphold a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. You may have seen the launch of a new technology dialogue, the ISET with India in January, which is part of a broader effort to try to deepen our co-development, co-production activities with India, which is an important priority for Prime Minister Modi and for India, but an important priority for the United States as well as we make our defense industrial bases closer and more integrated.

I will say, Rebeccah, just following up on your description of the security environment, it does continue to evolve. It does continue to be more challenging. I think that's why we're seeing much of the activity that we're seeing with our partners, and we are seeing a PLA that is growing more capable, but as you described, growing also more willing to take risk, more willing to use the military instrument of power in a way that we haven't seen in previous eras.

That has manifested itself in unsafe intercepts, which is an issue that I have been talking about, that the secretary has been talking about, and is of particular concern insofar as we have seen the number of unsafe, dangerous PLA activity, particularly in the air domain, against the United States, against allies and partners engaging in lawful activity in international airspace, in accordance with international law, being approached by PLA aircraft in ways that are destabilizing and potentially dangerous. We saw this against an Australian P-8 in the South China Sea last June, where the PLA fighter released chaff that was ingested by an Australian aircraft, quite dangerous activity. We've seen PLA harassment, dangerous maneuvers around Canadian aircraft that are involved in the enforcement of UN Security Council resolutions. So, here's a ally of the United States on the other side of the world, helping to enforce UN Security
Council resolutions against North Korea resolutions, which China voted for. And the PLA is coming out and intercepting these aircraft in a dangerous way and doing it multiple times.

Then, of course, you heard from Indo Paycom in December of a similar event of a PLA navy aircraft coming within 20 feet of a US aircraft. Again, quite dangerous. And these aren’t isolated incidents. This is a pattern of behavior, and it’s dangerous and destabilizing. It comes alongside other, what we would describe as sort of coercive, malign PLA activity around the region.

You mentioned the Philippines. We’ve seen the PRC maritime militia massing vessels around contested features or what they would call contested features that are in the Philippines, EEZ. We saw an event or an incident just in the last couple weeks with the PRC Coast Guard directing a military grade laser at the Philippines crew, dangerous for the crew, dangerous in terms of operational behavior around Second Thomas Shoal. Secretary Austin had a chance to speak with his Philippines counterpart shortly after that event. That was an important opportunity for them to sync up on how we’re going to deepen our cooperation in the face of that kind of behavior.

But we are seeing this kind of activity and, of course, for close South China Sea watchers, in which Lindsey and I are part of that club, as is Patrick and others around town here you may have seen the news about covert PRC maritime militia land reclamation in the South China Sea, which is really destabilizing activity and big news for the region. So, this is a pattern of behavior. It is happening across the region. It extends out, of course, to the lack and against India. It is, I think, reformulating and informing our approach, but also creating urgency around the kind of activity that we’re engaged in with our allies and partners.

I’m going to turn it over to Lindsey in just a minute. But I will say, I do think amidst a world and a news cycle... Rebeccah said when we were outside, "I hope you have some good news," because, man, things feel tough these days. In a world of a lot of challenges, I think that the story of the US position in the region and the degree to which we are deepening our partnerships with our allies and partners, the degree to which they’re investing in their own capabilities, their ability to contribute to regional security and the degree to which they’re working with with each other is really news for optimism. I think it is creating a more stable and enduring security environment even as these challenges from the PRC become more intense. So, I do have optimism about the direction we’re heading in part based upon some of these items. But let me turn it over to Lindsey, to build upon and add.

**Lindsey Ford:**

Thanks, Ely. I guess picking up on perhaps the optimistic side of the equation, Ely laid out a lot of the work we’ve been doing bilaterally on our alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, but I think we are very pleased about the progress that has been made over the last year and what we anticipate to be a very busy season ahead in 2023 for many and multilateral cooperation, and really, I think, bringing much more concrete initiatives behind some of the work that’s been underway for a long time, thinking about how we network alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region together. That’s been something that certainly is not new as an effort for the Biden administration. This has been something that multiple administrations have been working on because the security architecture in the Indo-Pacific is different from what we have
in Europe. It's a little more fluid and it has multiple institutions but also what we would consider more coalitions, operational coalitions. And we're looking at how we bring all those together.

So, in the past year, some of the things that I think we've been most pleased about, certainly the US-Australia-Japan trilateral cooperation, I think, has been at the leading edge of what we are doing on the mini-lateral front. We're looking at ways that we're integrating Japan into some of the US-Australia force posture work we're doing right now, so including Japan in rotational training exercises we'll be doing in Northern Australia. The secretary has been meeting not just bilaterally but trilaterally, repeatedly with his counterparts to talk about what's next. US-Japan are okay. Trilateral cooperation, I think, is also in a really good spot, where we're seeing a lot of progress: things like anti-submarine warfare exercises, ballistic missile defense exercises that we consider really important as we're looking at how we continue to deter what has really been an increasing pace of DPRK provocations recently.

The other thing I would flag that I think has gotten less attention because it's relatively newer, but was a big topic of conversation for us when we were in Manila recently, is US-Japan and Philippine trilateral cooperation. Just this past year, we looked at the trilateral defense policy dialogue, is a new trilateral dialogue that we launched between those three countries. Recently, the Philippine, Japan, and US Army Chiefs met the first time for their first trilateral meeting. I think you're going to see a lot of increased high-level engagement between those three countries in the coming year.

I think, also, we're really pleased, recently, Deputy Prime Minister Marles from Australia held meetings with his Philippine counterparts, a lot of work underway between Australia and the Philippines as well looking at what we can do bilaterally there. So, I think a lot of the work that you've heard for a very long time around the idea of greater mini-lateral cooperation is now really beginning to come to fruition in the Indo-Pacific, and that's something we're really pleased about.

Of course, the quad, which I know is always a topic of great interest. Though the Defense Department is not the leading edge of quad cooperation, we are particularly pleased that the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative, which was something that was launched at the last Quad Summit, we see as exactly the kind of work that the quad should be doing. It is just focused on bringing practical public goods to the region. How we begin to build a common operating picture in the maritime space, which I think, for those of us who work on maritime security has been an ambition for a very long time. We are now harnessing new technologies between countries that have the capacity to do that, to bring that to Southeast Asia is where we sort of started the pilot of IPMDA, and I think leading up to new quad meetings, you're going to see that initiative grow and expand into other parts of the region.

Then I would say finally, of course, we are continuing, despite all this mini-lateral cooperation, to really invest in OSSIAN and our OSSIAN engagement. So, Secretary Austin was at the Ossian Defense Ministerial in Cambodia in November. We talked about a number of new initiatives that we have underway with OSSIAN. One I would really point to that we're particularly excited about is our new OSSIAN Emerging Defense Leaders Initiative that we're focused on.
We think that for some time, the initiative the Obama administration started, YSEALI, the Young Southeast Asia Leaders Initiative, has been one of the most positive elements of our cooperation with Southeast Asian countries and with OSSIAN where we have a really young, dynamic growing population, and we wanted to do something similar on the defense side. So, this is a way that we begin to bring together emerging leaders on the US side with a lot of our OSSIAN counterparts to really sort of strengthen that network going forward.

So, those are just a few of the kind of multilateral initiatives that we have underway, which are really complementary to a lot of the work Ely developed. I think when you look at that all together, you should take away that the picture here is one in which the US and other partners are creating a security architecture that is going to be a lot more resilient, and we're going to see a lot more going on on a practical basis. It's not just words; it's actions. Thanks

Patrick Cronin:

Well, it's exhausting just to listen to the breadth of what you do as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Affairs and the DASDY for South and Southeast Asia and your other colleagues there at the Pentagon, what you're doing in terms of building this lattice work of national, bilateral, mini-lateral and multilateral institutions.

Now, there's a reason why these allies and partners are so ready for cooperation. It's not just your brilliance and your planning, which is part of it. It is the threat, the environment. So, let's just start by going back to, if not the PLA report, why has China embarked on such a massive military buildup? And how do you see the threat of deterrence failing in Asia as a growing possibility? How would you characterize it, Ely? And Lindsey as well?

Ely Ratner:

Yeah. Well, it's a good set of questions. Those are obviously big questions. I think the simplest answer to your first question about why is the PRC doing this is one of the striking things about the strategy documents that have come out of the Biden administration, to me, if you look back right out of the gate with the international security strategy document that came out right at the beginning of the administration, the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, the China Military Power Report, is a line that is repeated again and again, which is that the PRC is the only country with the capability and the intent in essentially overthrowing the international order as we know it in a way that runs directly counter to vital US national interests. That has been recognized, and it is the marriage of the power and the intent and the ambition that I think we do see as a serious challenge. We see that manifested in a challenge to the order in the Indo-Pacific, the rules of the road, the institutions, the norms, the efforts to undermine US alliances and partnerships. We see the execution of that strategy underway.

I think that directly links to your second question, which is how does this relate to deterrence? I think what we are aiming to do is to ensure that we are working on our own capabilities, but also with allies and partners to ensure that that kind of coercion and aggression doesn't succeed. From a deterrence perspective, very focused on, as Deputy Secretary Hicks said recently, and then interestingly, Representative Gallagher echoed her almost verbatim a couple days later in the Wall Street Journal, that when leaders wake up in Beijing, they think today is not the day.
Our assessment is that that is true right now, that deterrence is real, deterrence is strong, and we're doing everything we can to make sure it stays that way tomorrow and into the future. I think we can do it. I think we can do it. I was asked at the foreign relations committee hearing that landed on the day when we had previously scheduled this event. At the very end of Senator Rubio's question, he said, "I just have one question." He had five seconds left in his time. He said, "Yes or no answer. Do you think there's any chance that we can make it to the end of the decade without, essentially, a PRC invasion of Taiwan, without a breakdown in the kind of deterrence that you're talking about?" And my answer was, "Yes, I think we do."

It's not going to be easy. The challenge is enormous. The capabilities are growing; the ambition is there. We know that. But what we're doing is reinforcing that deterrence, ensuring that the costs of aggression remain unacceptably high to Beijing. I think we have a pathway to do that, through our own development of our own capabilities, revision of our posture, introduction of new operational concepts, and then all of the work we're doing with allies and partners. Then, of course, the entire whole of government effort, which is as important as the military piece, economics, diplomacy, and others that reinforce that deterrence. So, I think it's doable. It's going to be really hard, but I think we're getting after it with urgency but also with confidence that we can do it.

Patrick Cronin:

And if I could just rework this question for Lindsey in terms of the context of Southeast Asia, where I think it was Mike Gallagher, the chairman of this new CCP committee in Congress, said that the strategic competition is not a tennis match. He was almost channeling Mao: "Revolution's not a dinner party." But in Southeast Asia and South Asia, Lindsey, strategic competition is a very scary thing when you're talking about when China and the US could come to blows over this. So, how are you managing and how is the US government and how is DoD managing to build these closer relationships, like what you just did in the Philippines, despite the fact that they're also worried about conflict erupting?

Lindsey Ford:

I think you've heard the secretary and other leaders say repeatedly, we say this every time we're in the region, that we don't think that our partners in Southeast Asia, in South Asia, in the Indo-Pacific, have to choose at the strategic level between having a relationship with the United States and having a relationship with China. What we're focused on is making sure that they have the space to make the choices that they want to make and the ones that they think are in their own sovereign interests.

What you see, I think, and why some of the developments like we had when the secretary went to the Philippines are possible, is because I think increasingly, partners feel like they don't actually have the space that they need to defend their own interests and make their own choices. So, we see that in places, like along the line of actual control between China and India, where the Chinese are continuing, I think, to do things like dual-use infrastructure, provocations. We see that in the South China Sea.
Just by way of anecdote, on one of the trips that I did to Manila, we did a round table discussion with a bunch of young female national security leaders. The thing that they were focused on, one of them said, "You know what upsets me? I go to the grocery store and there's this fish." I won't even pretend that I know the name of it. She said, "There's this fish. This fish swims in our waters." Like, this is a fish that is well-known, has been a part of Philippine cuisine for a really long time. She said, "I go to the grocery store and I buy it and we're importing that fish from China because our waters are so overfished." Those are the kinds of things that, I think, on a daily basis come home to countries in the region, that this is about their own sovereign economic and security interest, and that without the United States there as an ally and partner, they don't actually have the ability to defend those. So, I think that's why there's so much interest

**Ely Ratner:**

If I could just amplify, Patrick, because I think that this last point that Lindsey makes is really important, which I think, as you said, it's not just our great diplomatic work that's animating some of this behavior; it's the nature of the threat. But what we hear again and again is as countries are thinking through the formula for how they want to defend and protect their sovereignty and their interests, a deeper relationship with the United States remains part of that. And that's fundamentally important. So, I think they want to see a United States that that's committed. This administration is committed. But we're part of that formula even as they're going about strengthening their other relationships and strengthening their own capabilities.

**Patrick Cronin:**

Thank you

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**

I want to take us back to the conversation, Ely, about specifically these operational, very dangerous, reckless behavior on the part of the PRC. You talk about how it's driving ally interest and willingness to collaborate more, but that's very good. But how are we responding to these? How are we leading with our allies in response to these and collaborating, to some extent, on how restrained to be and sort of how we're talking about that? And then also, what are we doing and what are we staying or what are we trying to communicate, then, to the PRC when these events happen? And then relatedly and more broadly, how are our crisis communications, our lines of communications to try to prevent unintentional challenges, or otherwise? It seems to me like they're kind of picking a fight. How would you respond to that?

**Ely Ratner:**

Well, I don't think they're picking a fight. They may be trying to coerce and bully, but they're not picking a fight. I think they're smart enough not to do that, and that's an important distinction. What we say privately to the PRC and what we say publicly is exactly the same in response to these activities, which is, number one, we will not be coerced and we will not be bullied if that's what your intent is. And number two, we will continue to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows.
I think sometimes for folks that sounds trite, but in this instance, it's fundamentally important and fundamentally true. So, we have continued our operations in the face of this activity. We have not drawn it back in the face of this coercion, nor have we hyper-amplified it in response. We are going about engaging in operations that we believe sustains the rules and norms of the international order, and frankly, I think the world looks to us to do that. We are continuing to ensure that these kinds of activities are not going to create artificial or illegal no-go zones for military, much less economic activity in the region. So, that is the message privately and publicly, is we're going to keep flying and sailing, operate, and we're not going to let this behavior intimidate us.

As it relates to the issue of mil-mil relations and crisis communications and engagement with the PLA, I will say we are not where we think we need to be. The secretary met with Minister Wei, his counterpart at the time at Shangri La for the first time last summer. He met with him again on the margins of the ADMM+ when we were out in Cambodia in the fall. Of course, President Biden has been meeting or speaking with President Xi at times, and they have shared the view that military-to-military relations are an important channel to keep open. That has been Secretary Austin's message, which is, despite ongoing tensions, it's incredibly important for the US and the PRC military to have open lines of communication.

But the problem is that the PRC and the PLA continue to use mil-mil relations in those channels' communication as a means of signaling displeasure over issues related to security and not. So, they will turn off for extended periods of time and be unwilling to engage at times when we think it's important for us to be talking.

For instance, you may have seen on the day that we brought down the PRC spy balloon over the waters above South Carolina, immediately Secretary Austin put in a call request to the PRC to say, "Look, these are the kinds of times when we need to be talking about what our intentions are, what our perspectives are." That request for engagement was denied. We've seen similarly with Chairman Milley, on other occasions with Secretary Austin, similarly with Admiral Aculino, as well as some of our working-level dialogues that are meant to manage the pol-mil part of this, our DASDI, Michael Chase's dialogues, as well as some of the operational dialogues that Indo Paycom holds with the PLA, that they have turned all of that off for now. We think that's destabilizing and dangerous, and we think we both ought to be doing a better job of managing it.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

That's great. If I can just real quick, then, for Lindsey, too. I say pick a fight though, too, not necessarily for it to escalate, but to cause us to do something that they could point to us and say, "Look what they've done. They've done..." Like what they did, even in the case of the spy balloon: We shot it down over our own airspace and then they accused us of violating international norms. But since you brought up spy balloon, let's just stick with spy balloon for just a minute, if we could, and talk about...

Ely Ratner:

Let me find my spy balloon card real quick.
Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Well, I thought it was really interesting because in the Pentagon briefings, kind of right after this happened, there was a little bit of a teaser or a little bit of a talk about the potential of revealing more about what the Chinese are doing globally in other countries that did not know that there was surveillance UAVs and spy balloons flying over their own territory. Maybe some dishonest activity on the part of the Chinese of not revealing this is what they were doing, commercial activity, but they're using it for military purposes. So, can you speak to that, too? And also just with partners in the region who don't want to pick and choose, but maybe this is something that if it is going on in their aerospace or in their country, that they should know about. Just a little bit about that from both of you.

Ely Ratner:

Yeah. Just quickly on the surveillance balloon. I think the first thing to say is this was a surveillance balloon, period. Okay. There is no ambiguity about this. The equipment on board was for intelligence surveillance. It was equipment that's inconsistent with weather balloons or whatever they were claiming it was.

This balloon is part of a broader fleet of capabilities that we know the PRC has developed to conduct surveillance operations. As you mentioned, we know that these surveillance balloons have flown over more than 40 countries across 5 continents. So, this was not just an isolated incident and have not heard a plausible explanation for this activity.

I will say, I think embedded in your question there, was what's our understanding and why haven't necessarily we've been saying more about it? I think one of the important parts of this is because of the nature of the spy balloon. This is inherently an intelligence issue that is being handled as such in terms of the ongoing work associated with it. Obviously, much of the balloon itself and the associated equipment was recovered in salvage operations and is being examined very carefully now by the FBI and other elements of the intelligence community and the US military. But we want to do that carefully, and at the appropriate time, we'll be able to share the findings associated with that.

Lindsey Ford:

I guess I would just add, not on the spy balloon specifically, but there is a pattern that I think a lot of Indo-Pacific partners are very familiar with, where you see the PRC do something that very clearly violates sovereignty, in this case of the United States, in many other cases of other partners, and then there's a bit of an effort to, with talking points and whatever, say this is fake news; nothing to see here. This is where I think we believe it's incredibly important, not just in private conversations, but publicly, to shine a light on what's actually going on and to make sure that the facts are actually out there.

For example, you saw, back in the wintertime there was an incident in which PLA rocket debris fell into Philippine waters. You saw Philippine fishermen went and were recovering it, and then the Chinese came in and essentially ripped it away and drove off with it. When the Philippines tried to come out and say what had happened, the PRC basically said, "Fake news, nothing to
see here.” And the Philippines said, “Here’s the receipts,” and they put it up and showed the video. That kind of transparency, for the United States, but for other countries, I think, is a big part of what we’re trying to do. It’s part of why the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative is important. Let’s actually show what’s going on in the region. It’s why we have very candid and honest conversations with our partners about what we see because we think it’s important to not allow these kinds of activities to go on unnoticed because that slowly, I think, erodes the rules-based order in a really non-transparent way.

Ely Ratner:

Do you want to just take 60 seconds on what the IPMDA actually is for those...

Lindsey Ford:

Sure. Sure.

Ely Ratner:

... who may not know...

Lindsey Ford:

Of course.

Ely Ratner:

... because it's a really important initiative and, as Lindsey said, it's one of those things that thinktankers have been talking about for two decades, but is finally materializing here, probably because you have two thinktankers now working in government. But anyhow, important to sort of share what this actually is.

Lindsey Ford:

Yeah. Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative is an effort... We announced it at the Quad Summit. But essentially, we are working through new emerging technologies, including commercial radio frequency technologies, to create a common operating picture that is much more comprehensive and facilitates, for our partners, real-time data on what is actually going on in the maritime domain that folks can see bilaterally and that we can begin to share multilaterally in the Indo-Pacific region.

Quad countries are contributing to providing this data elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific region. As I said, we started with an initial pilot just in Southeast Asia, where we've already begun providing a much more thorough, think of it as if countries maybe had two layers of a cake in terms of what they could actually see happening in the maritime domain, and suddenly they're looking at a seven-layer cake in terms of the data that they're giving. Instead of waiting an hour for that cake to be baked, it's served on a plate immediately. That's sort of what we're talking about here.
So, we've started in Southeast Asia, but are going to be, I think, increasingly rolling out this kind of information and data streams elsewhere in the region. What that does, it enables things like, for example, ships who have turned off their AIS signals, so they've gone dark and you may not have been able to see them in the past. Now you can, because technology has evolved to the degree that you can't essentially do these things actually in the dark anymore. So, this, for us, is just a way of saying, "Hey, let's all see the same thing. Let's all understand what's going on," so that we can't have countries who essentially are denying what's actually occurring. So, we're really excited about this initiative.

Patrick Cronin:

Well, and Lindsey, it is a great initiative. The information sharing is so important to all these countries for their own defense and security and their economies, but it's also part of the technological cooperation you're building up, I think. You mentioned ICET, for instance, the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies, Ely, and also OCCAS and the second pillar, for instance, and all of the advanced technologies they're going to be working on. Looking for that announcement soon. If you want to preview it here, we're happy to hear it.

Ely Ratner:

That would get me in a lot of trouble, as much as I would like to do that right now.

Patrick Cronin:

But I wonder if I can switch the subject to another country that's giving us problems, and that's North Korea. North Korea's buildup of missiles and nuclear weapons is eroding confidence in South Korea, not the Yoon administration, but in South Korea in general. That's what polls show. You've just gone through a series of interesting issues on a tabletop exercise with the South Koreans and dialogue and extended deterrence. How well can we manage the extended deterrence question when we've got a country like North Korea, which is trying to field tactical nuclear weapons to kind of blackmail South Korea and Japan, and field ICBMs to kind of blackmail the United States? How do you see this playing out just with North Korea, separate from China altogether?

Ely Ratner:

Yeah. No. It is a good question and it is an important issue. Secretary Austin has been traveling on a few occasions out to Seoul to have these discussions. I think he's developed, actually, quite an excellent working relationship and frankly friendship with Minister Lee, his counterpart out in Seoul. So, they've got quite a good relationship and are talking regularly.

What we have been focused on over the last several months, and particularly since President Yoon came into office, is, as I said, sort of restoring elements of the alliance and elements of deterrence in US-extended deterrence in ways that I think are in some instances unprecedented in response to what we're seeing out of the North. We've had the restart of the deployment of US strategic assets to the peninsula, which had not happened for a couple of years. We've had the restart of new dialogues, senior-level dialogues up to the undersecretary level around
extended deterrence, which was something that came out of a presidential summit, which is also the Defense Department does with the State Department. So, that's Collin Cowell with Bonnie Jenkins at the undersecretary level, which is an important dialogue.

We're in discussions now about new mechanisms and new consultative mechanisms to get after some of the issues that we know are really important to Seoul, which is to better understand our strategic operations and planning and thinking and whatnot. So, we're looking toward developing those as well. We've also been doing site visits with senior Korean officials to go to US strategic sites to actually see and understand and meet with folks there about what we're talking about in a very concrete way. Then, of course, as you mentioned, held an important tabletop exercise last week on these issues. For those of you who are interested, it was a very extensive readout, for those who follow these things, and a lot of detail in there about the nature of that event, which walked through between, again, senior US and South Korean officials, what our thinking would be in the event of North Korean nuclear threats and actual employment.

So, those are really important conversations. I think across the range of these, we, I think, are feeling good about the alliance. We've also restarted major live fire exercises, which is something we haven't done. Again, I think it's important to remember the goal of these activities, which is to deter aggression and to deter conflict. It's not to deter Kim Jong-Un from killing a bunch of fish with his missiles. That's something that we're focused on readiness; we're focused on deterrence, and we're focused on ensuring that, again, Kim Jong-Un doesn't take risks that go way beyond his capacity.

Patrick Cronin:

Of course, his sister, Kim Il-Jung, has basically threatened that they're going to a long trajectory toward the United States closer with their future ICBM testing. So, we'll wait to see what the response is when they do that.

Ely Ratner:

Yeah. It's not a dissimilar answer, I don't think, to Rebeccah's question, which is what do you do in the face of these threats? You keep doing what you're doing, you keep strengthening deterrence, and you do it with a sense of confidence and you do it in a way that signals that the costs of aggression would be higher than your adversaries are going to bear. That's pretty bread-and-butter deterrence. We're focused on that. We're focused on readiness, and we're not going to slow down because of these threats.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Yeah. Real quick here. I want to stick with the deterrence theme. You talked about how we brought some strategic systems back into the theater for deterrence purposes, and with these announcements of increased US-ally collaboration, access to bases in a greater degree. But how can we expect, though, decisions about, perhaps, increased US, actually, troops and weapon systems, conventional weapon systems in particular, that various allies have been talking about that they would feel comfortable hosting? In other words, what I'm trying to get at, ally cooperation is great, but it's great to the extent that it enables us to convince the PRC that
these acts of aggression are not going to be worth it, that we have the ability to respond, in a way. And so talk about just that. And then if I can, specifically, US troops to Taiwan, and should we expect to see more of that for training purposes and then in other parts of the region?

**Ely Ratner:**

Okay. Well, I've already forgotten your second question, so I'm going to answer the first, which is that...

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**

I figured you might.

**Ely Ratner:**

Yeah. I guess one way to sort of restate the question that you were asking, which is sort of we've seen some of these posture announcements, what about the capability side of the house? It's an important question, I think that is coming alongside. You will see, in the FY24 budget, major investments in the kind of capabilities that are relevant for the theater. But more immediately, we are talking, obviously, with Japan about their own capabilities and their announcement that they're going to pursue a counterstrike capability. And the Marine littoral regiment, which was, again, the centerpiece of the posture announcements in January with the 2+2, are bringing with it anti-ship capabilities and much more lethality than US forces had prior to that. So, those are coming along.

Then, of course, in the OCCAS context, I think we will be seeing what is described in the pillar two domain, but also with the submarine efforts itself, more capability flowing into the region. So, I tend to think of the posture capabilities and concepts as sort of the iron triangle of deterrence in the region. We're working hard on all fronts. I think those three together do create that kind of deterrence in terms of more advanced capabilities that are responsive to the types of operational challenges that the PRC has tried to pose, doing it through a posture that is more distributed, more resilient, more mobile, more lethal. And then as it relates to concepts, actually operating in new ways that's quite different than the way we've operated before. So, all of those things are moving on quick tracks together.

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**

Great.

**Patrick Cronin:**

When you think about the scale and the scope of exercises, I mean, Lindsey thinking about what's coming up in the Philippines off the coast with amphibious exercises there in President Marcus' hometown, I believe, or near it. That's exactly the kind kind of way to signal capabilities, but also political will, shared political will, I think, to defend and deter. We're over time already in terms of we wanted to get to the audience because we've got a great audience here. So, I
wonder, Rebeccah, we can just turn, and I know my friends from the Wall Street Journal are here and Financial Times there. So...

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Let's do those two.

Patrick Cronin:

Michael and Demetri? Yes, please. Is there a microphone?

Patrick Cronin:

May not be able to dodge this question.

Michael Gordon:

It's not a hard question. Michael Gordon, Wall Street Journal. A question on you noted a number of initiatives to improve deterrence in the region. I have just some specific questions about them. So on the EDCA sites, a question I have on that is what's the next step on that? It's good that you have access, but are they going to be further developed? Are you're going to bring in fuel bladders, construction store equipment there, rotate troops through? Or is it just going to come as you are? What's envisioned for that and when's it really going to happen?

Then you mentioned the Marine littoral regiment, what the Marines would call a stand-in force as opposed to standoff in their vernacular, or the blunt layer in the previous NDS. What else is envisioned in terms of stand-in forces that operate within the contested area under your strategy? And when is that going to happen? Because even in the case in the Marines, this is a capability projected for 2025, and they're operating with an existing force design and there's a unit in place and all that, and it's still a couple of years to make that happen. So, what are the next stand-in forces and posture and infrastructure changes that you're going to make to build up that deterrent capability?

Ely Ratner:

Okay. Lindsey, want to take that first one?

Lindsey Ford:

Sure. On EDCA, I would just say what I think is particularly important is to say that any decisions about the infrastructure development that occurs at sites and what kind of capabilities will be there is something that obviously happens in consultation with the Philippines because these are Philippine military facilities that we have access to. So, over the next several months, I think we're finalizing with the Philippines the details on those four sites. A part of that will be taking a look at the sites themselves, determining what infrastructure is needed in order to enable us, in an alliance context, to operate more effectively together, or in terms of other kinds
of crises or disasters we would be responding to in the region. So, those conversations, in the
next several months, I think you'll see a lot more details on them.

Ely Ratner:

And I would say on the second question, I think it's important to remember that the 22 NDS was
the first one ever to identify China as the priority and as the pacing challenge. So, we have only
been after this for a few years in terms of the intensity and the prioritization. I think each of the
services themselves are thinking through, okay, what is our role in the Indo-Pacific? And in
particular, what is our role forward? We're seeing that from the Marines in the context of the
Marine littoral regiment, and the one in Japan will not be the only one in the region. We're
seeing it from the Army in terms of their multi-domain task force, which is operating, again, in
new ways, in exercising and in different parts of the first island chain and the Indo-Pacific.

The Air Force is obviously thinking through new concepts of how to operate in a more
distributed way throughout the region, et cetera. Our Special Forces obviously are thinking
about what does it mean to be rebalancing their focus from one that was very heavy on counter-
terrorism to one that still includes that mission, but also is focused on the pacing challenge of
the PRC and what might be their role in the region. So, I think we're in the early stages of these
conceptualizations, but we're already seeing them coming together, and the MLR was one;
again, the Army is there, the Air Force and Special Forces as well. So, I think that we are likely
to see in the coming years, again, sort of the development of these concepts. And I think there's
broad recognition that having forces forward is incredibly important and including for the
deterrence mission.

Patrick Cronin:

Demetri Sevastopoulo.

Demetri Sevastopoulo:

Thank you. Just in the spirit of camaraderie, can I point out we have deterrence in the media
world and it usually means two Wall Street Journal reporters for everyone one FT. In the spirit of
 camaraderie.

Lindsey, question for you. You talked about it's important to be transparent and show what
China's doing. How much discussion has there been about actually releasing a lot more videos
showing what the Chinese fighter jets are doing vis-a-vis US and allied aircraft in the South
China Sea?

And Ely, you've had an amazing range of successes over the last six to nine months with allies
in creating what Lindsey was describing as this latticed network. But there's one area where
allies are very frustrated, and particularly the UK and Australia, 25Is members, and it also
applies to pillar two of OCCAS, which is they say, if there's a conflict in Asia, the Australians are
probably going to be called to help. And yet the US has these antiquated, no-foreign, cannot-
share-certain-kinds-of-information-with allies rules, which are decades old. So, you're trying to
create a security architecture for the future with rules from the past. I hear from London and
Canberra all the time that those two don't compute. Is there not more political will needed at the top of the Pentagon, and for tech transfer at the State Department and even from the president, to say to people in the bureaucracy, "This is a big strategic deal; fix the problem."

**Lindsey Ford:**

You go first. I guess, Demetri, on your first question, I think overall, you are seeing, whether it's the US or oftentimes it's other partners. It's one of the brilliant parts of advances in technology. It's not very hard to hold a GoPro camera if you're just sitting on a fishing boat in the South China Sea. So, I think you're seeing a lot more of that from a number of nations on a common basis just to say, "Okay, we're not going to fight you in talking points. We'll just show what's actually happening." I think that's actually been pretty effective, especially for smaller countries who may not always have the military capability to push back. I think they have become quite effective in winning the information war, a lot of times, and just putting the facts on the table out there for everybody to see.

Certainly, from the US side, when it comes to the concerns we have around PRC operational behavior, I think you've heard us be much more vocal about that. That's a conversation. Obviously, we talk to partners and we're talking publicly about, because we think it matters. We think it matters for people to understand not just what's going on, but as Ely said, for us to say publicly the same things that we're saying to the PRC privately, which is, look, these kinds of unsafe operational behaviors carry real risks with them.

And seeing something like an accidental incident because of unsafe behavior turning into a conflict is something we all want to avoid. So, that's one of the reasons you hear us talking a lot about this right now.

**Ely Ratner:**

Yeah. I would say, Demetri, to your question, I agree with your characterization, which is that, yes, we have antiquated systems that need to be revised and we're in the process of doing so. I think the nature of the types of cooperation that we're trying to realize here are driving those changes. OCCUS is a good example of that, where if it relates to technology sharing, yes, we need to change the way that we share technology with our partners. We're having those conversations in the India context, as well as we're thinking about previously parts of the bureaucracy that would've said, "No, we can't share that." The answer from the policy and strategy perspective being, "No, we're going to have to share that to make this work," in terms of getting to the kind of more capable, integrated future that we want in the Indo-Pacific.

So, I think you are seeing sort of live evolution of processes around technology-sharing, around foreign military sales, around our own defense industrial base in response to this. We're also seeing it, sort of embedded in your question there, I think I would submit that in our closest alliances and partnerships, we're having much better conversations about issues related to operations and planning and no-kidding defense areas such as that in a way that hasn't happened previously.

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**
We’ve got time for just one very quick question. I want to respect their time. And then I’ll close this out with one last one. So we’ll just go right here. You can state your name, please.

**Isa Muro:**

I’m Isa Muro. I’m a medical doctor and a retired military. When I was in CENTCOM region, we used to get the surgeon generals of areas and discuss in our areas of operation, collaboration, in terms of nonlethal assistance to our allies and partner nations in the region you discussed. Can you tell us about initiatives where we can... tell us about initiatives in terms of collaborations at the healthcare and medical engagement?

**Lindsey Ford:**

Sure. Happy to. I would just say, one, we still have the Indo Paycom does a lot of work related to military-medicine cooperation. And certainly over the past few years under COVID, we have seen that the work that the United States has done as a whole in terms of vaccine delivery, but also that the Defense Department has done supporting that, not just for other partner defense forces, but helping them actually do COVID relief in their own countries has been one of the most impactful things that we consistently hear from partners that they have appreciated about the United States and our engagement over the last few years.

Let me give you an example. In Vietnam, the US Department of Defense helped facilitate cold storage for vaccines in every single Vietnamese province. That supported the work that the United States was doing giving vaccines to that country.

We saw the first time that the secretary went out to Manila, which was still under former President Duterte. One of the first things we heard from President Duterte and his administration was the number one thing they appreciated was the, I think, over 60 million vaccine doses that the United States had given to the Philippines. We gave those things free, and we provided that support with no strings attached. I think our partners understand that that is an important and a different part of how the United States does business.

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**

If I could just ask this last question, that’s going to be an impossible one, I think, to answer in a short amount of time.

**Lindsey Ford:**

It's yours.

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**

But I think it's really important. We're focused right now on China and what China is doing regionally, but across the planet. But there is a very significant, terrible war going on in Europe: Russia's unlawful, illegal, unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine. My question is I just want to hear your response, with the busy work that you all are doing right now on really trying
to tackle the China problem, do you feel as though the country is overly distracted with this war to a disadvantage of the work that you believe needs to happen to deter and then prepare to defend, should deterrence fail?

Ely Ratner:

No. I don't think we're distracted from the China challenge. I think you've seen the strategy documents out of the Pentagon. For those of you who have worked in the Pentagon, it is a very strategy and guidance-directed organization. Those things just don't sit in the shelf, on the shelf underneath them. They have guidance documents and implementation documents. I think as it relates to attention and resources, the Defense Department is living the stated prioritization of the PRC, even while it's managing, obviously, the war in Russia, which is the urgent challenge there.

Lindsey Ford:

I would say you can see that in the secretary's time and in his travels, too. I mean, in September, he had the United States, Japan, Australia, the Philippines, sort of an unprecedented meeting where we had allies together in Hawaii. In November, he was in Cambodia doing the ADMM+. In January, he was visiting with Manila and the ROK. He is putting his money where his mouth is in terms of making sure that he's showing up to engage our allies and partners and talk about what integrated deterrents in an alliance context looks like.

Patrick Cronin:

This has been a great discussion. I wish we had more time, but I think the thing that just stands out for me, Ely and Lindsey, is that for all the bad things that are happening, the alliances, the partnerships are getting stronger, more resilient. You are building this creative, broad architecture. Good luck for both of you to do even more of it, to implement more of it because it's urgently needed. So thank you, again. Thank you, Rebeccah, and thank you all for joining us at Hudson.