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**Defense Writers Group**  
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**Moderator:** Good morning everybody. Thank you, and welcome to what I know is going to be a great Defense Writers Group discussion with Dr. Ely S. Ratner, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs.

The ground rules, as always, this is on the record, but there is no reposting of audio or video. Feel free to record for accuracy and quotes, of course.

I'll ask the first question then we'll go around the table. I have a huge list of people who asked in advance. We'll get through as many as possible before giving the final five minutes to Dr. Ratner.

Thank you for joining us today, sir.

My opening question. Exactly one year ago, December of '22, you spoke to AEI, a great discussion there, and you said, and I quote, "In my view 2023 is likely to stand as the most transformative year in US force posture in the region in a generation." A pretty dramatic quote.

So here we are, a year later, what's your AAR? I know it's slowly work in progress, but what progress has DoD made? What are the greatest challenges? And what's on your to-do list? Help me understand the risks -- higher, lower, mitigated in the Indo-Pacific?

**ASD Ratner:** Thom, thanks so much for the opportunity here. You've just asked about eight really important questions that I could spend the entire time on, so let me take a swing at a couple of them, and then I really look forward to the discussion

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here with so many good friends.

That's right. Last December I was at AEI, looked forward to 2023, arguing that it would be the most transformative year in a generation for US force posture across the Indo-Pacific. And the answer to whether we have answered that call is an unequivocal yes. So 2023 has been the most transformative year in a generation for US force posture in the Indo-Pacific.

I'm going to build on that in just a minute, but before doing that, I do want to say just a minute about the challenges before we get into the achievements. Because it is, as I articulate what a big year 2023 has been, it has not just been in the force posture space. It's been across a number of dimensions that I'm happy to talk through. But it is still the case that the 2022 National Defense Strategy identified the People's Republic of China as the department's pacing challenge. That is because in the assessment of the department but also in the National Security Strategy, the PRC has been identified as the only country in the world with both the will and increasingly the capability to reshape the international order. That was the assessment at the time of the release of the National Defense Strategy and that remains the assessment today.

And for those of you who have had the chance to see the department's China Military Power report which is our annual assessment to Congress, there is an articulation there of both how we understand the PRC's ambitions and will, and how we understand their growing capability, and this remains, in my view, the national security challenge of our time, and that has not changed. So that is the context within which I'm happy to articulate some of the achievements that we've had over the last 12 months because I think we are rising to that challenge.

If we wanted to trace a year ago from now, I would look at the Secretary's travels around the region which have really documented a number of major achievements starting in December of 2022. The AUSMIN talks, the Australia-US Ministerial annual

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2+2 talks here in Washington where we agreed upon major new force posture initiatives in northern Australia.

In January 2023 as part of the US-Japan 2+2, again, Secretary Austin with Secretary Blinken and counterparts, announcing major revisions to US force posture in Japan, bringing forward in 2025 a marine littoral regimen into Okinawa, the Marines' most advanced fighting formation as well as a number of other revisions to make US posture in Japan more resilient, more mobile, more distributed and more lethal. Agreeing at the time to increase cooperation in exercises in the southwest islands of Japan. So major achievements at that time. Having discussions about Japan's counter-strike capabilities in the context of Japan making major increases to its defense budget.

The next month, in February of this year, the Secretary traveled to Manila and agreed with Philippines counterparts to four new EDCA sites. This was an agreement from 2012 for the United States military to have access at the time in 2012, to five Philippine military locations. And what we agreed to in February was to add four additional strategic locations to that list, expanding the geography and the strategic opportunity for the United States to be working with Philippine counterparts.

In March, of course, the budget came out. You've heard department leaders describe this as the most strategy-driven budget ever in the department's history. A strategy focused on the PRC as the department's top pacing challenge.

Then in May, the Secretary returned to Tokyo, again, to take steps in the context of Japan doubling its defense budget. Went to the Shangri-La Dialogue and spoke about a shared vision for the region that we hold with our allies and partners throughout. I'm happy to talk a little bit more about that, because it's quite significant that the articulation of US strategy in the region is shared by ASEAN, by India, by Australia, by Japan and South Korea and the Philippines, and the Europeans as well. This is not an American vision for the region. This is a vision

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shared by our allies and partners. The Secretary made that point at Shangri-La.

Then he went on to New Delhi. We went to India. The Secretary signed a new Defense Industrial Base Cooperation Roadmap with his counterpart. A historic agreement that is setting our countries toward a deeper level of cooperation in an area to which there has been aspiration for decades, and often fits and starts. And in terms of integrating our defense industrial bases working more in that area, we announced this summer a major agreement around jet engines and we launched something called INDUS-X which is a new effort to try to advance our private sector cooperation, particularly related to defense startups. That is really exciting and put a lot of energy behind.

The next month, in July 2023, Secretary Austin was the first US Secretary of Defense ever to travel to Papua New Guinea, and there took steps forward on the new Defense Cooperation Agreement that we have with Papua New Guinea as we are looking to increase access in PNG through some upgrading of their port and airport facilities. Another critical step in terms of working toward that more distributed posture in the region. Then down in Brisbane, another really productive 2+2 AUSMIN talks with the Australians, again furthering force posture cooperation across all domains including space.

Then just this November, we've just gotten back from another ten-day trip to the region. We went to New Delhi, and again announced another major step forward in our Defense Industrial Cooperation Initiatives. Onward to the ROK where we put forward a full vision for the alliance there and held a trilateral talk between Japan, ROK and the United States.

And then down to Jakarta for the ASEAN Defense Minister meeting plus, which is the annual Defense Minister meeting gathering in Southeast Asia with counterparts from throughout the region plus the ASEAN-plus countries.

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At the end of that trip, having had some face-to-face meetings with some of his counterparts that he hadn't met in person, within a 50-day period the Secretary had met face-to-face with all five of our treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific region. That's Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, Japan and South Korea. So just remarkable engagement with our allies during a time in which I don't have to tell you in this room, there are other things going on in the world. So intensive engagement in the Indo-Pacific with lots else that's going on.

And of course the Secretary just recently was, last weekend, was out in California for the Reagan Forum -- maybe some of you were out there -- and held an AUKUS Trilateral meeting underscoring the last two years of progress.

Again, sorry to go on a little bit but I think it's important to lay down that record. This question of what's happening in the region, that's what's happening and a lot more. I'm happy to talk about that, but we are I think through the investments we are making we are more capable in the region, we're more forward in the region due to the force posture changes that we made, and we're more together in terms of the really remarkable progress and deepening our cooperation with our allies and partners.

Let me stop there as kind of an opening chapeau, and I look forward to the discussion.

**Moderator:** Great. Thank you, sir.

The first question from the floor, Demetri Sevastopulo, Financial Times.

**DWG:** Ely, in the wake of the summit in San Francisco President Biden and President Xi, two things. Have you seen any change in Chinese risky behavior over the South China Sea, either at sea or in the air? And now that you've been briefed on the summit, did you hear anything that reassures you and makes you less

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concerned about what China's thinking about Taiwan?

**ASD Ratner:** From my perspective, I have not seen anything over the course of the last couple of years that has indicated a change in China's strategic ambitions.

Having said that, it is incredibly important that we and the PRC have open lines of communication. That is what, in terms of the defense relationship, our leaders agreed to reopen, renew military to military talks. That's something that the Pentagon has been calling for for years now. You've heard Secretary Austin reiterate this a number of times. And we think that's really important. But I would say as it relates to -- let me just say a word for those who are maybe not following this issue quite as closely, the issue that Demetri raised which is that we have seen a pattern of risky and coercive air intercepts by the PLA over the last couple of years.

Admiral Aquilino and I a couple of months ago joined a Pentagon press conference to describe what was happening and why this was so important, and cited a phenomenon whereby there had been since 2021, fall of 2021 through fall of 2023, about 200 what we characterized as risky and coercive air intercepts throughout the region from the East China Sea to the South China Sea. And if you add in our allies and partners there, you would have about 300 total.

So this is coercive behavior. In certain instances this is quite dangerous behavior that could lead to crisis or inadvertent conflict. We released a huge number of photos and videos associated with that behavior. Actually one from each month over the last year. And this is something that, again, has been occurring not just to the United States, but to US allies and partners. We saw an incident against -- and again, not just in the air domain, though that was the focus of that release, but also in the maritime domain as well, and in some instances on land as well. We just saw a recent incident against the Australians. We've seen others against the

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Canadians, the Philippines. This remains an issue of PRC assertive behavior, particularly against countries operating consistent with international law, remains a major concern.

**DWG:** What about since the summit? Has there been an uptick, downtick change that you've seen? Any patterns?

**ASD Ratner:** I don't have a comment on that today.

**Moderator:** Tony Bertuca, Inside Defense.

**DWG:** Thank you.

I wanted to ask about the National Security Supplemental. Obviously most of it's for Ukraine, some for Israel. It does mention the Asia-Pacific in there. How necessary is it that money come and start flowing? And what in there would aid Taiwan?

**ASD Ratner:** A couple of thoughts here. Let me just make a quick comment about as it relates to security assistance towards Taiwan which is that one of the things we have done over the last year is ensure that we are using all of the tools available to the administration to fulfill our commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act. So traditionally the focus of that for the US government has been on foreign military sales, but over the last year for the first time the United States has used both Foreign Military Financing and Presidential Drawdown Authority.

In last year's National Defense Authorization Act, Congress put forward authorities against PDA, Presidential Drawdown Authority and Foreign Military Financing. And Secretary Austin has been on the record repeatedly saying that for the department to effectively leverage those authorities, it's going to be required to get appropriations against them.

So to the extent that the supplemental provides appropriations against the authorities that Congress has provided that enables

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us to fulfill our commitments against the Taiwan Relations Act, then that would be welcome.

And consistent with what the Secretary has asked for and the particular -- go ahead.

**DWG:** PDA gets to my follow-up question. We hear a lot about the PDAs from Ukraine, as small as \$100 million. We've heard about the one to Taiwan, and we did find out what was in it from DoD. Will there be more coming out about PDA for Taiwan, or is the policy to just say we're not going to talk about a PDA to Taiwan when we do it?

**ASD Ratner:** Again, Congress provided an authority against a billion dollars of PDA this year. There was no appropriation against that. So significant distinction between Presidential Drawdown Authority for Ukraine and Presidential Drawdown Authority for Taiwan. The Presidential Drawdown Authority toward Ukraine has been appropriated against for backfill which is quite significant because it allows the services to be able to provide those capabilities with lower levels of risk associated with readiness.

The appropriation against PDA for Taiwan was not provided in 2023 and we went ahead with a major delivery or package of PDA earlier this year. And we are going to continue to assess the ability to provide that in the future. Some of that will be based upon need. Some will be based upon the funding and resources available. But I would consider PDA part of, as I said, the spectrum of tools that the administrations look forward to using to fill our commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act.

**Moderator:** Chris Gordon, Air and Space Forces Magazine.

**DWG:** Thank you, sir for doing this.

There's been a lot of discussion about whether America is



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diverting resources from [inaudible] to the Middle East recently. [Inaudible] not asked about US force posture. [Inaudible] goal in the Middle East. We've had numerous naval vessels there operating for years and trying to [inaudible] partnership. What's their end game? What is their goal there?

**ASD Ratner:** I think you'd have to ask them exactly about what their goals are there, but I will tell you, we have said when we articulate China as having both the will and increasingly the capability to reshape the international order, that is to create an international order that better suits their authoritarian preferences and the interests of the Chinese Communist Party. So that is the primary lens through which they're going to review their foreign policy decisions throughout the world. And as it relates to the defense issues, we have expressed concern about the PLA's ambitions to be expanding its overseas presence around the world. We've expressed concerns about PRC support for Iran and support for Russia, obviously, as well. So those are some of the trends that we continue to watch.

I don't know if you have a follow-up, particularly which element of it --

**DWG:** I'll be honest, it's really a second question.

How concerned are you about China's ability to disrupt in the case of a possible conflict America's military logistics through your involvement in commercial ports, both through ownership and the technological control? This is something TRANSCOM has brought up as a possible issue.

**ASD Ratner:** In the Middle East in particular?

**DWG:** No, no. Globally.

**ASD Ratner:** Sorry, could you restate the question again?

**DWG:** China's control through ownership or the technology behind

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commercial ports possibly disrupting American military logistics in a conflict. These trends [inaudible] possible issue. What are your thoughts on that?

**ASD Ratner:** I don't have a very specific answer to that question except to say that ensuring that we have sufficient logistics to be able to project power in the Indo-Pacific and sustain and maintain our military in peacetime, but of course through crisis in conflict remains a major focus, including for TRANSCOM but for INDOPACOM and the department as well. And we have to be looking at potential vulnerabilities across the board. I think we are -- it is no secret that the PRC's military strategy is predicated I part on trying to prevent the United States from doing just that, from projecting power into the region and being able to maintain it. Some of you who follow these issues have heard the term anti-access area denial, and I think we have to be very clear-eyed about the PRC's attempts to disrupt the United States military's ability to do that every step of the way.

**Moderator:** Thank you, sir.

Courtney Kube, NBC.

**DWG:** Thank you.

It happened about three weeks ago, [inaudible] asking every day if there were any discussions between the Chinese and the US. The agreements [inaudible]. MMCA or anything like that? Did I get that acronym wrong?

**ASD Ratner:** MMCA, that's right, that's one of our operational talks that we have held historically with the PRC. So no, we have not held a round of the MMCA, nor would one have expected that to occur in the short period of time since the APEC meeting. Those meetings tend to take a considerable amount of preparation, both logistical and substantive.

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Where we are today is that the leaders in San Francisco signaled a willingness on both sides to renew military to military engagements, discussions and we are currently in the process of discussing with the PRC, the Defense Department is, about what that's going to look like in the months and year ahead, and the combination of what will be meetings, calls, dialogues and engagements over the next 12 months. So nothing to announce on where that has landed. But yes, we're in regular discussions at the working level right now to try to set forward a path on that.

**DWG:** So there haven't been -- I think there was an assumption and maybe it was a mistaken one, that there would maybe quickly be some sort of a phone call or something. And I was never really clear if it would be at the highest level, like the [inaudible]. I don't really know who because I don't [inaudible] right now.

So has Secretary Austin or anyone in the Pentagon at the senior level reached out since APEC and the call not been answered? Or has there been an overture to try to have some communication?

**ASD Ratner:** What I would say is we're in discussions right now with the PRC about what that schedule of engagements is going to look like and what the sequencing is going to be.

**DWG:** So is it months away, years away?

**ASD Ratner:** It would depend which elements you're talking about. Again, some require more preparation than others.

**DWG:** -- the first touch point since they met, how long do you think that will be before that is? Months?

**ASD Ratner:** At the very latest months. And sooner than that, hopefully.

**DWG:** Sorry, month or months?

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**ASD Ratner:** Look I don't want to put a timetable on it. Again, we're in active discussions. I think both sides are following up on what the leaders agreed to, and again, this is consistent with what Secretary Austin has been saying all year about the importance of open lines of communication. So our policy and approach from the Pentagon has not changed. We have remained open to these kinds of talks and dialogues and engagements over the last couple of years, and right now we're in discussions with the PRC about what that sequencing is going to look like.

**Moderator:** Thanks.

Eric Schmitt of the New York Times.

**DWG:** Two questions. One is, can you give us an update now on what the current state of transfer of technology or arms, anything else, assistance from China to Russia that can be used in the Ukraine war?

And the second would be the same kind of question about North Korea ammunition, artillery rounds, and reports of missiles also [inaudible] to Russia. Where do things stand on both of those?

**ASD Ratner:** I'm not going to get into specifics about exactly what our latest information is on either of those accounts today.

**DWG:** Can you start with the PRC? Do you see any change in what they're providing to Russia --

**ASD Ratner:** I continue to remain concerned about the support that China's providing to Russia for its war in Ukraine. That's in a variety of ways. Certainly on the question of DPRK support to Russia, that is deeply concerning as well, and you've seen some specific information that the White House has put out on that. It's something we continue to watch very closely.

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We were, again, just in Seoul and had the opportunity to talk -- Secretary Austin had the opportunity to talk with Minister Shin and Minister Kihara about this specific issue and it is an issue that not only is of concern to our allies in Northeast Asia but is of concern to our European allies as well.

So I think it's a really dangerous trend. It's also a violation of UN Security Council Resolutions and I think we are, as it relates to some of the support Russia may be providing back to DPRK, and I think this will be an important issue for us to remain focused on the denuclearization agenda as it relates to North Korea, and I think it's a question for Beijing about which side of that debate does it want to be on in terms of whether it is going to continue to enforce UN Security Council Resolutions that it has voted for.

**DWG:** What is your personal assessment of the impact that the ammunition in particular that DPRK is providing, what impact will that have as we enter this new kind of winter transition, winter war transition phase?

**ASD Ratner:** I'd defer to colleagues who are day-to-day working on the Ukraine conflict.

**DWG:** Is the volume you're seeing now even more troubling than the last White House briefing?

**ASD Ratner:** Again, I don't want to characterize its operational effects on the war in Ukraine. That would be a better question for Celeste Wallander and others in the ISA account.

**Moderator:** Next is Mallory Shelbourne of Naval Institute News.

**DWG:** Hi, sir.

There's a pretty significant effort in the Indo-Pacific to develop some new technologies, pretty [inaudible] unmanned out there since it's sort of [inaudible] this problem that you have.

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How is that feeding into your work on the policy side and the conversation you're having with allies and partners in the region and how [inaudible]?

**ASD Ratner:** On the technology cooperation broadly?

**DWG:** Yeah, with unmanned and --

**ASD Ratner:** Unmanned systems therein.

It's a good question because if you look back on this past year, one of the significant achievements that we've had but also trends that you will see is that the administration has been opening up a number of technology-focused dialogues with our allies and partners.

The first major one of these was the iCET with India at the national security level in January. We launched another one with Singapore just a few months ago. And within each of these there has been a major defense component. That's something that, again, we've been very eager to participate in.

Again, as part of that, the Defense Intelligence, DIU has taken a very active role in terms of thinking about what is the role of commercial technologies therein. Doug Beck, the new Director there has been very ambitious in terms of the international agenda and also in terms of building international partnerships. Part of that has been looking at some of these unmanned, low cost solutions, particularly in the maritime domain as it relates to the Indo-Pacific.

We have been in a number of our engagements, whether it's with partners in the South China Sea, with India, with other high-end partners, we have been talking with them about opportunities we see for them to integrate some of these low-cost unmanned systems into their militaries, particularly for maritime domain awareness and to help them police their littoral areas, which is

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an area coming back to some of the concerns about China's coercive behavior, an area where the PRC has been very active. So it's a huge benefit for these allies and partners to have greater awareness around what's happening in their area, and these kind of unmanned systems are critical to that, including subsurface.

So what you're articulating is very high on the agenda. Deputy National Security Advisor Finer is in India I guess yesterday or on his way back just now, following up on some of these issues, and it's going to remain at the top of our agenda. And just having been in Southeast Asia with the Secretary in his meetings with Southeast Asian partners talking a lot about these opportunities.

**DWG:** A quick follow-up on the intercept that we talked about in discussion. It may be [inaudible] we say that most of their [inaudible] interceptor [inaudible]. [Inaudible] about two months ago, he said an uptick [inaudible] 2023, but what does that look like before 2021? I don't think we have a sense of the denominator here. Is it that there's more intercept happening and therefore some of them are more aggressive? Or is it that there's [inaudible] happening and they actually are more aggressive? How does that sort of sift out?

**ASD Ratner:** I should have said, sorry, the second part of what I should have said when I was articulating the data a little bit earlier, was that the amount of these riskier [inaudible] of intercepts that we've seen over the last couple of years is more than we've seen in the decade preceding it. So the overall number of these events has increased significantly. I'm not going to get into the denominator question as it relates to the exact frequency of our operations, but while it is true that the overall majority of PLA intercepts are standard and professional, one of these is too many and there have been hundreds. Some of them extremely dangerous. Don't ask me, as Admiral Aquilino who's a fighter pilot and came to the podium to express real concerns about this and he said the same just out

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at Reagan last weekend. So this remains, again, a significant concern. It is, the number of these has gone up substantially and it continues to be a problem.

**Moderator:** Thank you, sir.

Next is Nick Schifrin, PBS Newshour.

**DWG:** One about Chinese behavior and one about the impact of the war in Israel.

When NSC was briefing us ahead of the Xi summit, there were three variables given as evidence that the US was ascending and Beijing was looking at that. One was that Beijing believes Washington is not declining the way it used to. Beijing sees risk differently today, and Chinese headwinds inhibit certain activities on Taiwan.

Do you agree? And what does that mean?

**ASD Ratner:** I'm not sure I want to characterize the exact framework, not being entirely familiar with it. I will say just a couple of things associated with this which is it's certainly the case that the PRC has been driving a narrative of Western and American decline for years. You can spend five minutes on social media and you'll see that.

We can talk about a couple of elements of this. One thing we have seen over the last year, and as recently as this morning, is that the PRC is facing significant headwinds, and some of you may have seen Moody's announcement that they downgraded their credit rating for PRC government credit to negative due to their property crisis, due to the local government debt, due to weak growth and general assessments are now that the PRC economy may be growing at around 3 and 4 percent. If you rewind the tape back not that many year ago, that would have been unthinkable.

So we're in a situation now where the PRC economy is stagnating.



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Predictions of the PRC overtaking the US economy is sort of a metric of what we used to talk about as China's rise, is clearly no longer the trend of the time, to use one of their phrases.

So that's significant and that causes tradeoffs in terms of how they're using their resources, where they're spending their money, and where they're spending their focus.

We've also seen significant corruption issues inside the PLA and other domestic political issues. We had a question earlier about the Secretary making a phone call to the PRC Defense Minister. The PRC doesn't have a Defense Minister right now.

And at the same time, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, I think we are seeing a resurgent United States.

**DWG:** That doesn't sound like you're translating that to the change in Chinese behavior. Whether or not --

**ASD Ratner:** Why don't you spin that out a little bit so I understand exactly what you're asking. What kind of behavioral change would you expect?

**DWG:** You've got headwinds and lots of people in this government are describing that [on a] Beijing basis. But at the same time you described that strategically Beijing is not changing its stance. Xi Jinping is not challenged. And the context for what you're saying is continuing Chinese behavior that you see as negative. So is there any actual translation of headwinds into a change in behavior about Taiwan or anywhere else?

**ASD Ratner:** Again, at the expense of giving you an answer that's going to be unsatisfying, it's just not the lens through which at least at the Pentagon we're looking at the problem, which is that we've articulated the PRC as the pacing challenge. We've articulated why we have, again, a clear-eyed view of their ambitions. I don't think those have changed.

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They are still engaging in rapid military modernization on a number of fronts. They're still engaging in coercive and destabilizing and risky behavior and we are committed to building a free and open Indo-Pacific and strengthening deterrence against the use of aggression and we're doing that through the investments we're making and are focused on capabilities applicable to operational challenges in the Indo-Pacific. We're doing it through the development of new operational concepts which is I would say as strategically significant as the investments in the capabilities, in an area where we're making significant headway in new operational concepts. We're doing it through our force posture we described earlier, and we're doing it through our work with allies and partners. What we are trying to do is cumulatively engage in a set of activities that maintains the stability that we've seen despite the trends that you're describing. And there can be parlor games around does the invasion of Taiwan become more or less likely as China faces economic or internal challenges.

I did a PhD in political science and you could fill this room with books about how domestic trends affect international behavior that would lead you to different answers to that question. So we're going to continue to strengthen deterrence and stability as best we can. I think we're making headway.

**DWG:** Have you seen any impact of the war in Israel in your discussion with partners?

**ASD Ratner:** What I would say is the Secretary had very in-depth discussions with a range of -- throughout our trip to India and Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, including with ASEAN partners. Secretary Austin had in-depth discussions with allies and partners about this issue.

**Moderator:** Jim Garamone, DoD News.

**DWG:** I've been traveling with you for more than two years now, and there's one aspect of it that you always discuss when you

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talk about the pacing challenge, but it's the centrality of ASEAN. And I've always wanted to ask you this question. What do you really mean by the centrality of ASEAN? And how does it manifest itself? And where do you see the US relationship with ASEAN in five years?

**ASD Ratner:** A great question. Let me answer the second part and then come back. The US relationship with ASEAN I would say is strong and growing stronger. We were just, again, out in Jakarta and Secretary Austin was there as every single US Secretary of Defense has attended the ASEAN Defense Minister meeting plus since we first started attending. That certainly can't be said for a number of other countries in the region. So we've really put forward our commitment. Obviously we've upgraded our relationship with ASEAN and the Secretary sat down with all of the ASEAN Ministers and met as a grouping out in Jakarta as he does on the margins of the Shangri-La Dialogue as well. And of course outside of the military domain, the President has been engaging ASEAN leaders as well.

So I think it's clear that we view it as a really significant institution, and this trip -- when we think about ASEAN centrality, it's the institution that brings together the region in a way no other institution in the Indo-Pacific does. Just looking back at the trip we were there just the last couple of weeks, I mean at this time given the war in Ukraine, the situation in the Middle East, all that's happening in the Indo-Pacific, it is ASEAN that is bringing together not only the ASEAN members but the ASEAN plus members as well. That includes the Japanese and the Koreans, the Russians, others, all to sit around a table and hear each other out. That has been really important in terms of an opportunity to share perspectives and also for the ASEAN members itself. ASEAN has been a place where their ability to work together through collective action is going to be far greater than individually.

So I think it remains such an important institution and even as the United States is building additional what we sometimes

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describe as minilateral or other types of groupings in the Indo-Pacific, whether it's the Quad, whether it's AUKUS, whether it's our trilateral relationship with Japan, South Korea and the United States. All of these are complementary to ASEAN and in no way are meant to somehow displace what ASEAN is. So fundamentally important and we're going to keep showing up as we are invested in that institution.

**DWG:** The maritime awareness at least from my experience, has been crucially important throughout all the ASEAN, frankly all through the Indo-Pacific. IS there a way that ASEAN could sponsor that maritime awareness and be like the "headquarters" for maritime awareness for the region?

**ASD Ratner:** There are, I would say, a number of maritime domain awareness centers around the region including in Singapore. So whether it's sort of ASEAN as an institution, as you suggest, we have been invested as I described earlier, in building out maritime domain awareness capabilities bilaterally, but also through the Quad. And one of the major initiatives that came out of one of the President's Quad summits over the last year has been the launching of the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative through which the Quad partners are working together to provide partners throughout South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands with high grade commercial satellite imagery that allows them to have much more visibility into their littorals and that program continues to develop and be rolled out, but I think it's exactly the kind of thing we need to be doing with our allies and partners including in coordination with Southeast Asian partners.

**Moderator:** Tony Capaccio, Bloomberg.

**DWG:** I liked your parlor game quote, by the way.

The invasion of Taiwan. So Chairman Brown in his first press conference a couple of weeks ago in Japan which got no publicity said I do think Xi doesn't actually want to take Taiwan by

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force. He will try to use other ways to do this.

What's your take on that? Is that something you share, that invasion is less likely than other means like blockade that you've studied? Is Brown's view common throughout your policy world?

**ASD Ratner:** My response to that question would be that when I look at the challenge that you're describing, number one, leaders in Beijing have been crystal clear about their ambitions toward Taiwan.

Number two, they have already been engaged in an intensive pressure campaign and coercive campaign that includes economic, political, military pressure against Taiwan. And they have yet to announce the use of force. So they are working across the spectrum and I see my job as in part ensuring that the United States is prepared for all of those without somehow determining that one is more likely than the other.

We have said, you have heard department leaders say repeatedly over the last year, that we do not believe that invasion of Taiwan is either imminent or inevitable. We believe deterrence is real and strong and it's our job to keep it that way. That's going to take real focus, real energy, real resources and real urgency in the years and decades ahead. So we have to deal with questions of deterrence against invasion, and we have to deal with potential contingencies below the threshold of conflict. You described a blockade.

That's an issue I had a chance to discuss with the House Armed Services Committee when I was asked for testimony. So you heard my response there which is there are significant risks associated for the PRC in trying to execute and implement a blockade of Taiwan. There are ways through which Taiwan could continue the provision of necessary materials and supplies, and the escalation potential is extremely high. And as I've said, publicly a number of times, Beijing would likely be finding

itself in the position of whether it wanted to start shooting at commercial vessels. So I don't see that as a low risk option, in fact it's a very high risk option and I think all of -- as you look at the spectrum as we think about deterrence, there is very high risk for Beijing associated with any of those.

**DWG:** A tactical question. Back in April I guess in the Camp David agreements, there was going to be a shared air defense construct set up by the end of the year between Japan, South Korea and the US. Where does that stand, and what will that look like?

**ASD Ratner:** Again, during the trilateral meeting that Secretary Austin held with Minister Shin. Minister Kihara was calling in virtually from Tokyo, just to be clear on that. But the Ministers held a secure trilateral discussion while Secretary Austin was in Seoul. They checked in on this particular initiative and the nature of the initiative is for the US, Japan and the United States to be sharing early warning missile data trilaterally, and the goal was to get that operational before the end of the calendar year, and we will meet that goal.

**DWG:** What will that look like though? Will Northern Command have feeds from South Korean radar and Japanese Aegis radar --

**ASD Ratner:** In order to be perfectly precise about that let me take that for the record and I'll ask my team to provide you with the sort of more technical nature of that.

But what I will say is there were two major announcements. So that's one. We're on track, and that goal will be met, and that is extremely significant for these three countries from an operational perspective and also a political perspective to be sharing data.

The other major announcement that came out of Camp David related to the US-ROK-Japan trilateral relationship was an agreement to develop a multi-year exercise plan between the three countries.

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We have had episodic trilateral military cooperation at times in response to DPRK provocations and activities. The goal here is to regularize those and institutionalize them, and we're on track for that as well.

So these are -- I should just say that again for folks who maybe don't live and breathe the Indo-Pacific. This is an historic evolution in how we think about maintaining security in the region in terms of the cooperation between Japan and Korea, and then trilaterally with the United States and really huge credit to leaders in Tokyo and Seoul for making that happen.

**DWG:** -- the echoes of World War II. It doesn't sound like it's still resonating between -- it's off Korea and Japan in terms of comfort, reparations issues, and the atrocity issues that the Koreans had associated with Japan over the decades. I don't get that sense that it's still a pacing factor.

**ASD Ratner:** Hopefully. These are still highly resonant issues and in that context the leaders have agreed to deepen this cooperation.

**DWG:** Got it.

**ASD Ratner:** This has been again, bold leadership by both Tokyo and Seoul.

**Moderator:** [Shaniki Akiyama] of Mainichi Newspapers.

**DWG:** Thank you for the opportunity.

Let me -- NDAA required the establishment of [inaudible]. And what is the current discussion about this? What this quota was like, where will be the location? What will be the role?

**ASD Ratner:** Nothing to share on that this morning I will say. But I will say -- which outlet did you say you were from?

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**DWG:** Mainichi Newspapers.

**ASD Ratner:** Okay, we are certainly cognizant that the SDF is setting up its own new joint headquarters in Japan. That's a significant evolution for the Japanese military and we, the Ukrainian are thinking about the United States the best way to integrate with that. So it's sort of tangential your question, but it's an important part of our work with Japan right now is thinking about, as Japan is setting up its new joint operational headquarters what's the best mechanism for the United States to work alliance issues through there.

**Moderator:** We have a lot more questioners but we're almost at the hour mark and I will save a couple of minutes for the Secretary.

The last question goes to Mike Brest of the Washington Examiner.

**DWG:** To go back to the APEC conversation, is this post-meeting playing out the way DoD envisioned it, in relation to setting up that [inaudible]?

And then can you point to any specific or tangible aspect that DoD has seen since the meeting was related to China's Military Behavior?

**ASD Ratner:** Demetri asked a version of that earlier. On the former, I would just say a similar answer which is that we are in the process of working with, talking with PRC counterparts about what the sequencing and calendar of events is going to look like, and we're working toward that.

So again, nothing to announce this morning but folks are hard at work trying to deliver on what our leaders have agreed to.

**DWG:** Is this sort of what you guys expected this process would



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look like?

**ASD Ratner:** I don't that I had particular expectations, but yes, it is working through very traditional channels in terms of who's communicating with whom and the manner in which we are proposing particular engagements.

**DWG:** Can I just ask, you said you're in the process of talking. So does that mean that we're in conversation? I think we're just trying to find out like has there been any initial conversations even at very low levels?

**ASD Ratner:** Working level discussions, if it's whether between our defense attaché in Beijing with his counterparts or our defense relations team here in Washington, have been ongoing prior to APEC. And they are currently engaged in discussions about what the sequencing of events might look like. So it's less mysterious than it sounds.

**DWG:** I think there's a lot of talk that there's been no movement on this since APEC. I think that's why a lot of people are interested in it. But there's been no movement at all.

**ASD Ratner:** That would be a mischaracterization, that there has been no movement. I think both sides are working to fill the commitments of our leaders and again, from the perspective of the Pentagon, we're looking to deliver on what President Biden agreed to. And we're in the process of doing that right now. And we'll look forward to sharing specifics when we have them.

**Moderator:** Thank you, sir, for your time. For sharing your wisdom. Thanks to your staff for your support. Any final comments? The floor is yours.

**ASD Ratner:** Maybe just one thing that we haven't talked about yet. We've talked about it in bits and pieces, but I think to me it is one of the most important trends in the region which is the increasingly, again, sometimes folks use the word

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minilateral, but the emergence of really significant groupings and networking among US allies and partners. And we've seen this in a couple of different ways. Again, we talked a little bit in-depth about the US-Japan-Korea relationship. These are some of our closest allies, most advanced militaries, most advanced economies technologically and are now cooperating militarily like never before. And I expect 2024 to be a big year in that regard.

We have also seen obviously AUKUS making huge strides both as it relates to what is sometimes described as pillar one, the effort -- the submarine part of the effort for Australia, as well as the advanced capabilities effort, pillar two, and the readout from the Secretary's meeting over the weekend, trilateral meeting, provides detail about some of the efforts there.

We have also seen significant development in the trilateral relationship between the United States, Japan and Australia. Those two countries themselves over the last year have signed a reciprocal access agreement, meaning their militaries can access each other's facilities. And over the last several months, Japanese F-35s have visited Australia and Australian F-35s have visited Japan. And we have agreed trilaterally for Japanese forces to integrate into US force posture initiatives in northern Australia. These are profoundly significant developments in the region in terms of the degree to which allies and partners are working together and with one another in different constellations.

We have seen with the Philippines increasing its cooperation with Australia, increasing its cooperation with Japan, and looking forward more minilateral, multilateral cooperation there in Japan including with the United States. Of course we have the Quad, not a defense-focused initiative, but has been working on issues like maritime domain awareness and others.

To mem, these are the pieces that are building the future of security architecture in the Indo-Pacific and are ultimately

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going to answer the question of how we are going to maintain peace and stability into the future. It is not, not, I will underscore, it is not an Asia-NAO, it is not a singular anti-China or counterbalancing coalition, it is something different. It is something that is tailored to the security requirements of the Indo-Pacific and we are now in the, I think beyond nascency of this initiative, of this trend into something that's becoming real.

I talked about force posture last year. I think I won't make any predictions, but I would say for 2024, watch this space, because this is I think the most exciting, interesting and strategically important trend in the Indo-Pacific and it's real in a way that it's never been real before.

I'll stop there.

**Moderator:** Thank you for a very thought-provoking hour. And on that exact point I'll put in an early invitation now for you to come back in a year and give us your AAR for 2024.

**ASD Ratner:** I would love to do that, and thank you for your time and attention.

**Moderator:** Thank you everybody.

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