**Senator Jack Reed**

**Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee**

**Defense Writers Group**

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**Moderator:** Welcome to this Defense Writers Group with Senator Jack Reed. Senator Reed as everyone knows is Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. As I told him before we logged on, this is one of our largest gatherings of the year which shows the intense interest in what you have to say.

The ground rules as always. It’s on the record. You can record for accuracy and quotes, but there’s no rebroadcast of audio or video.

The first question is mine, power of the chair, and then I’ll go around the room. Almost 20 of you emailed in advance to get on the list. We’ll get to as many as we can, and we save the last five minutes for Senator Reed’s closing comments.

Senator, thank you for joining us. It’s good to have you here.

You recently returned from a very important trip to Ukraine. Given your military experience, what you know as Chairman now, can you share your battlefield assessment? How are things going there on the ground? What is your sense for coming weeks and months? And also if you can comment on the other battleground, sir, the one in Congress over funding.

**Senator Reed:** We had a great opportunity to first link up with our team lead by Ambassador Brink. I also preceded my entry into Ukraine by visiting our Army posts and Air Force posts in Germany -- Stuttgart, Wiesbaden, Grafenwoehr, et cetera. I wanted to get a sense of what we’re learning from the Ukrainians and what we’re teaching the Ukrainians and have a better perspective as I entered.

We went to Lviv, we sat down with President Zelenskyy and his staff. We were I think impressed with the determination, the will. They are not going to surrender. They are fiercely committed to the fight. But tactically, I think what happened was last year, 2023, we were hoping they could continue their momentum with an attack, a sense of attacking, come closer to Crimea, closer to the border along the Donbas. What happened is they had three axis of advance. Unlike most doctrine, as I learned at West Point is, instead of picking the most favorable axis and then reinforcing, they continued to press along these three axis. So they did not make the progress that they intended.

In the meantime the Russians shifted to a type of warfare they’re much more adept at which is fixed positions, bunkers, heavily mined positions. Their troops are [inaudible] simply be in a bunker and fire than to fire and maneuver. As a result the Russians stabilized the line. Now they’re putting pressure on the Ukrainians.

The last battle they were able to push them out of -- and my Ukrainian’s terrible so I’ll avoid the name of the town -- [Avdiivka] I think.

But that was a situation where our lack of support became evident. They were low on ammunition, artillery shells particularly, and this has become really a ground-based almost WWI battle because the effect of the air defense systems prevent a lot of close air support, and what is critical is artillery and ground-to-ground missile systems. Also we’ve seen drones playing an increasing role.

So now they have stabilized the line they are fighting, but they have to be resupplied by us immediately. We have to pass the supplemental legislation. We have to give them literally the weapons, the artillery, ammunition to do the job.

And they have to do things themselves. I must commend President Zelenskyy. He took a very tough decision. He essentially fired his military commander and put General Syrskyi in charge. I’m getting good reports from military personnel that Syrskyi is a very professional -- He doesn’t have political ambitions or interests. He just wants to put together the plans and the capacity to win the battle. That’s, I think, encouraging to us.

It was a very difficult decision for President Zelenskyy.

Finally, they have to deal with their issue of men and women in uniform. Their average age for a soldier is 43 years old. You’re not the most nimble at 43. Also they have a draft that begins at the age of 27, which is unusual. And they are trying through their parliament to lower the draft age, to bring more people into the fight, and that’s something they’re going to have to do. We remind them of that, but they’re committed to trying to do it.

So the first thing, most critical thing we can do and what they need is to get the supplemental passed, get the ammunition and equipment flowing again. Then I think they will spend the rest of this year pushing back slowly, not dramatically, on the Russians and then next year, 2025, has to be, again, another offensive operation which hopefully gets them to the point where they really fully cover Crimea with fires. That would make the position of the Russians very difficult and hopefully force them to the table.

**Moderator:** Thank you for that very thorough tour of the battle space.

The first question from the floor is Tony Bertuca of Inside Defense.

**DWG:** Thank you so much for being with us, Senator.

I wanted to turn your attention to the FY25 budget request that you and your staff have received. What you’ve got there, I’m wondering if, first, is there anything that came over that you oppose or that you’re alarmed by or anything that you think right away is kind of a non-starter you’re going to have to get into? But also, more importantly, given some of the statements of your GOP colleagues that the amount is too low. Even though many of them voted for the FRA that didn’t pass. I’m wondering, do you perceive a willingness to [break] that deal? Or do you think we just stick to the caps during this debate and it is what it is?

**Senator Reed:** I think you’ve made the most important point which is that this is directly a result of the Fiscal Responsibility Act for 2023 where our Republican colleagues, particularly in the House, held us up literally. We couldn’t get a debt ceiling increase unless we agreed to the numbers that they were talking about, and now under that legislation we’re locked into this number.

But as you know, every budget is a work in progress. We’re going to look very carefully at what the services need. We’re particularly waiting for their unfunded priority lists so we can take a look at them. And then we’re going to make judgments. Some of them independent of the [inaudible], but generally I believe the legislation or the proposal sent up was thoughtful. It emphasized to me innovation. It put pressure on the Congress to retire some systems that are no longer as functional as necessary and we have to take our responsibility too.

So I think we’re in a good position to begin this debate and get it done hopefully this year, not next year.

**DWG:** A very quick follow then. You’ve got the PPBE Commission coming in and I know Chairmen sometimes have reform agendas when they approach the NDAA. Are you thinking of any changes that you’d like to see happen in trying to put them into the NDAA that would be as a result of some of these PPBE recommendations?

**Senator Reed:** We are thinking, Tony, very seriously about that. The PPBE panel was extremely well done, the report was excellent. We’re having a hearing next week, bringing some of the panelists before us. And frankly, we have been trying to reform the acquisition and budget system of the Department of Defense since I got here, and we make incremental progress. We’re recognizing now that time is really not on our side, that we have to move much more aggressively, we have to be more responsive and flexible. So we’re taking, and I think you’ll see a much keener interest in trying to streamline how the DoD develops and acquires equipment, how they deal with these new emerging technologies which are changing so quickly. So we’re really interested in moving forward with significant reforms.

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

**DWG:** Good morning, Senator. Thanks for doing this.

Two questions. One, last week as you know Senator Schumer gave a speech on the floor quite critical of Prime Minister Netanyahu and the way forward in the war right now. I’m wondering, do you agree with Senator Schumer? And do you think the Prime Minister’s decision over the weekend to order the offensive against Rafah is a wise one? And I have a follow-up question.

**Senator Reed:** I think Senator Schumer made a very courageous speech. Very few times in my experience in the Senate has someone stood up and really based on principle called out individual entities that needed to be identified. And it wasn’t just Netanyahu. Chuck started with obviously Hamas. It’s a brutal, diabolical regime that has to be destroyed. Then he pointed to the right win elements in the Israeli government that have rejected a two-state solution, that would like to have no tolerance, if you will, for the Palestinians. And then Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, also was criticized. And then Prime Minister Netanyahu.

I think his [inaudible] was probably [inaudible] telling because no one has done more for the state of Israel and Israeli-United States relations than Chuck Schumer. He was born months after the founding of Israel and he’s devoted his whole life to making sure the alliance between the United States and Israel is strong, vibrant, et cetera. But he felt compelled to point out that, and I agree, that Prime Minister Netanyahu is in a very compromised position.

There are indications that he tolerated, indeed, Hamas as a way to disrupt the Palestinian Authority. Certainly there wasn’t the kind of intelligence tension that should have been placed on it. Their buildup, their ability to conduct that operation which was horrendous. It was designed to be a barbaric attack.

And then he knows that if there’s an election he’ll lose. He also is fearful that unless the courts are reformed, quote/unquote, he could very well be put in jail.

So he’s operating not as someone whose sole interest, I believe, is the state of Israel. He has so many competing personal agendas on that I think Chuck’s advice is well taken and meaningful.

**DWG:** What about the Rafah operation?

**Senator Reed:** The Rafah operation is one that has to be done precisely. I think the criticism of the idea is not that they have been going on the offensive, it’s that they have not done so with the kind of precision and the kind of respect which is required under international law considering the population.

We had many similar operations like this in Iraq. It took us a while to learn how to do it, and in Afghanistan. But Mosul was an operation. I was there on several occasions visiting the brigade of the 82nd there with the Iraq forces, and we took very deliberate steps to minimize casualties. Of course we were assisted by indigenous forces, the Iraqi Army, and that’s a difference I will admit. But it’s not so much the offensive operations, it’s the way that they conduct it. So if they can develop a more precise way, and also more importantly or as importantly, they have to deal with the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. They have to allow food to come in. And I don’t think it would detract from their operation against Hamas, but if they don’t it will continue to spread the humanitarian crisis.

**DWG:** A quick follow-up on that point. The US, of course, has announced they’re going to be building a floating pier to unload humanitarian aid from the sea. Obviously this hasn’t been done at this scale in this kind of active combat zone. Do you have concerns about the security for US forces? Both in the region as well as at sea as they come in on this?

**Senator Reed:** I’ve been briefed on the overall concept of the operation and I can tell you the number one concern of any American military leader is the safety and security of the forces under that leader. So we’re going to take every step, both technological and otherwise, to protect our forces.

The concept that I’ve heard is that we will basically the last mile -- it’s not a mile -- generally beyond the Israeli control and security. They are quite capable and they’ve demonstrated [inaudible] security. The important thing, I think, is to start moving these supplies in on a largescale basis, and this port will accomplish that.

But again, we are terribly concerned about the welfare of our troops.

**Moderator:** Next question is Caroline Coudriet of CQ Roll Call.

**DWG:** Hi, Senator Reed. Thank you for doing this.

I wanted to ask a bit more about your plans for NDAA, especially if they don’t pass a supplemental bill. If you have started drafting that legislation [inaudible]. And considering that [inaudible] will be roughly $10 [million] out for weapons without that supplemental. How does that change your thinking in terms of how to approach NDAA?

**Senator Reed:** It would be significant because it would impact on the operations of the DoD. In fact one of the things about the supplemental is that the vast majority of the money is going to American companies to produce American equipment that will go to our military. The newest possible equipment to replace that equipment that has been transferred to the Ukrainians. So the supplemental, if we don’t pass it, it’s not only going to disadvantage our military forces, it’s going to disadvantage our military industrial base. That’s why we’ve got to get it done.

And we’re looking at accumulating costs that have been carried by our military and DoD. TRANSCOM has spent a lot of resources on getting equipment into Ukraine and getting it to our forces in the region. We have to take consideration of that. The last increment of funds, I think the department was very clear, trying to get it over there. The supplemental will help sort of rebalance the budget.

So we’re in a situation where we’ve got to get the supplemental done. It’s for our benefit as much as the Ukrainians’ in several dimensions. One, they’re fighting our fight. Two, the supplemental is reinforcing our military with new equipment, better equipment. And those reasons should be compelling.

**DWG:** Just to follow up on [inaudible] question. If the supplemental does not get done would that prompt you to maybe consider not sticking to the FRA agreement in terms of the top line?

**Senator Reed:** I think without a supplemental we’re in sort of in unknown country because keeping our Defense Department operating efficiently and effectively would be potentially jeopardized. So yes, I think we have to [inaudible].

**Moderator:** Next question is Demetri Sevastopulo with Financial Times.

**DWG:** Thank you. Good morning, Senator.

I’ve got a question on the Indo-Pacific. Japan is creating a Joint Operation Center as it tries to make its forces more joint, [inaudible] to try and counter China over time. What do you think the US military needs to do to give its commanders more authority in Japan and to allow them to work in a more closer way with the Japanese Joint Operation Center after it’s stood up?

**Senator Reed:** I think the key is what they are doing which is more and more international exercises. Having our forces work with the Japanese forces. And integrating the new operation center into those tactical operations, that is the key.

I think we’re also trying to see if we can broaden our industrial base to countries that are our staunch allies so that we can essentially improve dramatically and quickly our industrial base. But the key is really operating jointly together so that if something happens it’s not the first time we’ve had a chance to work with our Japanese or any of our colleagues.

**DWG:** Do you plan to have a four-star US general or admiral in Japan?

**Senator Reed:** I think our Indo-PACOM commander, Admiral Aquilino, has done a superb job and I think his contacts with the Japanese, his contact with all our allies in the Pacific have been I think really well done. And I think that’s adequate at this time.

I think again, maybe in the future, but right now I think we have the command structure in place to carry out an effective response.

**Moderator:** Next question is Tony Capaccio.

**DWG:** Hi, Senator. Good morning to you. Thanks for doing this.

I have a question a little closer to home here in terms of oversight priorities this year for your committee. Specifically, where do the Virginia-class submarine deliveries fit into your oversight priority? For example, the USS Idaho to great pomp and circumstance was christened Saturday, but the thing is well behind schedule. So I wanted to get your sense of where deliveries fit. And is that deliveries of the [inaudible] or are those emblematic of the program’s issues?

**Senator Reed:** I think we are constantly involved and engaged for both reasons. Proximity to me, but also to security of the nation. Everyone can see that the submarines are probably the most important platform that we have because of its ability to go undetected and to deliver fires. So this is a system that we must develop.

What we’ve seen is the contractors after getting up to two per year with help obviously from Congress, now we have fallen behind. Some of it was the pandemic. There was a huge impact of the pandemic on the industrial base but particularly our naval industrial base. A lot of premature retirements, where very knowledgeable people decided they weren’t coming back. There was a long-term attempt to recruit. They were having problems bringing in labor.

Now I’m sensing [inaudible] that they’re really getting a response to their efforts to bring in new employees, welders, pipefitters, et cetera. So that’s part of it. But we’re still not satisfied and we can’t be satisfied because at this point submarine production, the attack submarines about 1.2 a year instead of the two. And also I do realize we have to get additional capacity because we’re eventually going to be building submarines with and for Australia. So we have to do much more.

What we’ve done has been really riding herd as hard as we can on the contractors to do better, do more, to get their personnel situation straightened out, to go ahead and help their subcontractors.

In 2017 we took the first step, Congress did -- not the Defense Department, but Congress -- to invest in the submarine industrial base. Now that is a DoD program and it’s really the example, the model for all of our other industrial base issues in terms of investing both in training subcontractors and providing cyber education, making sure that the system works and that we have a consistent set of supplies.

So we’re not going to stop because this is critical to our national security. This year, the administration I think recognizing that we are still trying to get to that two submarines a year, has decided to make even more significant investments in the industrial base. About $3.9, I believe, billion in the budget, was designed for suppliers, subcontractors, to keep the demand signal strong that we need these parts, we need this equipment, we need these skills for the long term and we’re going to follow up.

**DWG:** Do you agree with the Virginia-class, the decision to cut one Virginia-class given the program is already behind schedule?

**Senator Reed:** We’re going to look at it very closely. Ordering a second boat, would that get us back on schedule? Or making other moves, would that get us back on schedule? That’s what we really want to do. We want to be back on schedule, and we also have to recognize at the same time now, we’re building the Columbia-class.

At one point the attack submarine was the only submarine we were building -- both at Ingalls and Norfolk and [inaudible]. Now we have a brand new system, very complicated, et cetera, so we can’t let that fall behind, nor can we let that system sort of take away from the attack submarines.

So this is not moving away from two ships a year. To me, the AUKUS demand is [inaudible] you have to go beyond to. This is trying to get our house in order I think.

We’re going to not make any conclusion until we look closely at what the industry is doing, what DoD suggests they want to do. We have to get this right.

**Moderator:** Next question is Courtney Kube of NBC.

**DWG:** Thanks Senator.

I want to ask two quick ones. What’s going on in Niger? Is the military being kicked out? And if so, when?

And then on Rafah, sorry to do a regional shirt there, but on Rafah, I mean I wonder if you believe some of the recent reporting that’s been out there about a ground invasion of Rafah really leading to a shift in policy by the Biden administration. Do you think that’s really going to happen? And I wonder if you -- what do you think the administration should do if in fact Netanyahu goes through with a big ground invasion as he’s vowed to do?

**Senator Reed:** First with respect to Niger. It is a very important issue that doesn’t get some of the attention that it should.

What has happened is that they’ve had changes in their government. We had a position where we had roughly a thousand military personnel in Niger to counter extremist groups all close to [Shadil]. We were working originally in close collaboration in the area with the French but they’ve been pushed out too. I think part of this is Russia’s attempt to insinuate themselves in the region dramatically and to cause us problems. One of Putin’s strategies is cause us problems everywhere they can.

The government of Niger indicated that they weren’t ordering our forces out. That was presumably [inaudible] armed forces will leave. But then we will have to counter that and I think Africa Command will, by repositioning forces and capability so we can still have observation and influence in that area of the Shahel.

That’s your first question.

Rafah, so much depends upon how these operations are conducted. If you look at some of the previous operations, you look at pictures of Gaza cities before October 7th and after, then they‘ve been literally leveled. The Army, of course, is -- Hamas is underground. So you're going to have to go in very precisely in a very orderly and very cautious way to protect IDF forces and also civilians, and root out these terrorists from very, very difficult positions. An all-out [inaudible] attack with widespread aerial bombardment, things like that, is not the way to conduct the operation. I think we’ve been telling them that since the very beginning.

I think the character of what they do is just as important as what they do.

**Moderator:** Next question is Connor O’Brien of Politico.

**DWG:** Thanks for doing this, Senator.

You mentioned DoD getting creative to free up some money for Ukraine earlier, and I think you talked about the recent couple hundred million that they found was savings for -- You know, the final defense appropriations bill when it comes out this week, that’s probably going to have a few hundred million in the Ukraine security assistance initiative. Obviously that’s a far cry from $60 billion in the Senate supplemental. But we’ve seen them scratch out a little bit here and there.

Could whatever is in this appropriations package this week at least be in your view a temporary lifeline for Ukraine until a supplemental passes? Could that tide them over, or are these pots of money too distinct? How do you look at that potentially?

**Senator Reed:** One is that it would provide some relief but not sufficient. Also the Ukrainians have to have the confidence that they’re going to have a fairly consistent financial and military support so they can design a strategy. It’s one thing to be talking about holding a line and making offensive operations, but the question is will we have any ammunition to do that? That defeats a lot of your planning.

So this is necessary for the future conduct of the war, as well as for getting them really back in the fight.

The other aspect of this is the industrial base. The creation of producing artillery rounds, we discovered, is something that we’ve sort of let lie fallow, not just ourselves but our European allies, et cetera. The concept of the ‘90s, et cetera, was [inaudible] land warfare, which is a quick fight -- you know, Desert Storm was maybe a week. The invasion of Iraq was not a long time. It doesn’t require a lot of artillery. And we got into sort of the notion of well, we don’t need that. Now we are, for one example, a significant artillery battle. So we also have to send signals not just to the Ukrainians but to the industrial base worldwide.

I think yes, any resources will help but we’ve got to get the supplemental done.

**DWG:** A quick follow-up. Donald Trump has said this money, the supplemental, it [should] be a loan to Ukraine. A couple of other folks have subscribed to that. Linsey Graham. I saw this weekend Ben Cardin said essentially if everything else fails, that’s the only way to get them the help they need. You know, maybe that’s a possibility.

I’m wondering, do you think that is at all a feasible idea, given as you explained where this money goes to. Is converting an appropriation to a loan at all a workable idea in your opinion? If all else fails.

**Senator Reed:** I don’t think it’s [inaudible]. I think it’s more of kind of a political two-step. We’ll give them the money but we’ll call it a loan now. We’ll call it a loan they have to repay, not a transfer of goods. And as I pointed out and you pointed out, this loan is going directly to American contractors. And then Ukraine pays for it.

Again, we have to get this done. If we have to resort to sort of calling something something else, well, we might have to do that. But let’s be serious. We need to support the Ukrainians now with resources, and then we have to think about how do we help them when they succeed -- and we all pray they do -- how do we help them rebuild their country? It’s been devastated. Is that another series of loans?

I think this is more political hype than anything else.

**Moderator:** Next question is Oren Libermann of CNN.

Are you there? If not, we’ll move on.

Mike Brest, Washington Examiner. Nope?

Josh Keating, Vox.

**DWG:** Thank you so much, Senator. I appreciate it.

Just to follow up again, I’m sorry to keep coming back to this, but in response to Courtney’s question, what is your thinking right now in terms of conditioning military aid to Israel? And is there a point in this conflict or some kind of way the Rafah operation could be conducted that might change your thinking about whether that’s something we should be pursuing? Thanks.

**Senator Reed:** I think we are committed to helping the state of Israel beat back Hamas and ultimately degrade them and hopefully destroy them. That’s going to be, I hope, an unwavering commitment.

We’re at a point now, though, that we have to have not only a commitment to defeat Hamas, but we also have to look at how the operation is conducted and also long term, what is the solution? This has been bedeviling every government from 1948 until today. And we’re looking hopefully towards a solution that allows Israel peace and security, but also provides a secure place for the Palestinians. So we’re wrestling with all those problems.

Will the conditions change? I hope not. I hope the messaging we’re doing, particularly Senator Schumer’s message, really has an effect that the operations become precise, that the target is not the Palestinian people, the target is Hamas. I hope that’s the case.

**Moderator:** Rebecca Kheel of Military.Com.

**DWG:** The House has said its NDAA this year is really going to focus on quality of life issues. Obviously they had a whole dedicated [inaudible]. Those recommendations haven’t come out yet. But one of the things they have indicated they’re looking at is doing something to address issues with junior enlisted pay beyond just the annual pay raise.

Do you think your panel might also do something to get at these junior enlisted pay issues besides the annual raise?

**Senator Reed:** I think definitely. I think we’re, first as you know, the budget contains an increase in pay for military personnel which is appropriate. They do a remarkable job. But [inaudible] I think we’re looking at not only incentive pay but the idea of whether all of our pay increases have to be uniform across every rank, basically. Is there a better model? We’ll be looking at that to determine if there is a better model. As far as also with quality of life, there’s a significant amount of money dedicated to barracks overhaul. Many of these barracks have been neglected, for many years, and I think that is going to be a great thing for the troops. And frankly, I think it will help retention and also recruiting.

So we’re going to be seriously engaged with the department in terms of how do we compensate our forces and how do we make sure their quality of life is attractive.

**DWG:** You mentioned the barracks money. And then of course, you read [inaudible] costs a lot of money. But as we’ve already discussed, there are these FRA limits and you have a lot of people calling for more submarines, more planes, things like that. Are those type of things going to bog down quality of life funding if you have to live within these [inaudible]?

**Senator Reed:** I think the Department of Defense [inaudible] has made it very clear that they believe these quality of life initiatives -- the barracks and others -- are central to the force. They’re part of what makes a very effective force. Not just training but coming back to some place where you feel comfortable. Also being compensated in a way that you can feel financially secure and on the path even more security if you stay in. That’s the retention issue.

So I think the military is going to make a strong case this year.

Now there’s always [inaudible] pressures, as I said. There are proposals in the budget to retire platforms. Those always are somewhat controversial, but again, I think we have to do our job too. We have to make tough decisions.

**Moderator:** Next question is Nick Schrifin of PBS NewsHour.

**DWG:** It’s good to see you. Thanks for doing this.

I’ve got to do it again, though, I’m sorry about Israel and conditioned aid, and then I’ve got a Haiti one.

Very explicitly, you just said that you hope the message from Schumer and others get through. If the message does not, or if there is a Rafah operation that is deemed not up to standard, do you believe that the US should condition aid, condition weapons, whether the future sale or use of weapons to Israel? If you don’t mind just trying to tackle that question.

**Senator Reed:** This is not the time I think, to talk about conditioning. This is the time that we made it very clear, and again I commend Senator Schumer, of what our expectations are, and the expectations of many in Israel that these operations are conducted very carefully without giving up the goal which is essential of destroying Hamas. And also understanding that these operations take time. I think that’s what we’re trying to do right now. We are Israel’s ally, they are our ally. We have a relationship that stretches across the history of Israel and also a long time in the United States. My lifetime. And we can’t walk away from that unconditionally.

**DWG:** Got it. I appreciate that.

On Haiti, what do you believe the level of concern is within your committee, with the Department of Defense, about needing to increase military presence in Haiti? I’m asking that pretty broadly. Whether that’s at the embassy or of course whether that does involve some kind of evacuation.

**Senator Reed:** As you know, we’ve already had a partial evacuation conducted with American personnel, and they did a remarkable job. The non-combat evacuation operation is one of the most difficult in the military and they did it very well. We’re still positioned if we have to do more.

I think the key is getting Kenyan forces into the country as quickly as possible and we’ve been working very closely with the government of Kenya, so that they can move their forces in, so that there is a credible outside force which can be stabilizing and also be a way to, as a catalyst for political change which is necessary. That I think is the imperative.

**Moderator:** Next question is Meredith Roaten of Janes.

**DWG:** Hi, Senator. Thank you for doing this.

I wanted to ask you about the funding that the Army was able to put together for a Ukraine package last week from weapon savings that were negotiated through contracts with the different weapons manufacturers. Are you at all worried that this sends the wrong message to lawmakers that the supplemental is not actually needed for Ukraine? And can you say more about your thoughts on the significance of that package last week?

**Senator Reed:** The supplemental is vital. It’s essential. You can’t overstate the importance. We are at a critical moment. The Ukrainians are still fighting with tremendous courage, they’re still sacrificing, but when you run out of ammunition it’s hard to fight and they’re getting closer to that point than we want to contemplate. So we have to get the supplemental through.

I think what last week demonstrated was the ingenuity, creativity which only lasts so long, of DoD to come together with some resources so that they could continue to help., but not at the necessary scale, continue to help the Ukrainians. And also to signal that we’re not walking away.

But we have to get the supplemental.

**DWG:** Can I also just ask another question about, there are some reports about China working on next generation mobile ICBMs from last week. I was wondering if you could comment on that and any concerns that you have on that.

**Senator Reed:** I assume that China is working on every type of weapon system that could be used to engage the United States. As you know, the Russians have mobile systems, other countries have mobile systems, so I’m not surprised that they’re working on it. What it does, it further complicates our deterrence.

We’re now in a world we’ve never been in before. We have three major nuclear powers -- Russia, China and the United States. [Inaudible] was a bilateral situation which both the theory and the deterrence was worked out between two players. That’s why we were able throughout the Cold War to get many arms control agreements. We could operate in that two-person situation. Now we have to start working on arms control from a different perspective as one other aspect of this.

But any time the Chinese increase their capabilities, it adds to concerns, and that’s why we have to provide our military with the resources to deter them. Again, this is about deterrence and that’s what we have to keep central to our mind.

**Moderator:** Next up is Jeff Seldin of Voice of America.

**DWG:** Thanks very much for doing this Senator. Really appreciate it.

A couple of questions. One on Niger. Last August the Commander of the US Forces Europe and US Air Forces Africa, spoke to the Defense Writers Group and said at that point that planning had been underway for possible alternative bases for US air assets should they have to leave Niger. Where does that process stand right now? Are there any viable alternatives for basing US forces in the region to counter ISIS and al-Qaeda?

**Senator Reed:** There are places. One of the things about our military is that they are always trying to look over the next hill. Even months ago we were getting signals from Niger that they were becoming more and more comfortable; the political situation was getting more and more convoluted; and very pragmatically AFRICOM started looking at alternative bases.

The issues that arise though, how much time does it take to get from that base into points of conflict or contest? That’s a factor. We have to get the cooperation of the local government. That’s a factor. But we have not and AFRICOM has not just been sitting back and saying well, this is something and we just leave. We have to have a presence in Africa.

One thing we also have to have is we have to have a diplomatic presence. So we have to get more of our ambassadors confirmed quicky without the built-in delay we’ve seen lately, and get then into the field. Because many times they can be as effective as any type of military force.

**DWG:** One more question. There’s been a lot of talk about TikTok and how the Chinese government can use it as part of influence operations in the US. I’m wondering to what extent are you seeing signs that TikTok’s algorithm right now is being used to shape public debates whether it’s on Ukraine aid, US policy to Israel or even the upcoming election?

**Senator Reed:** We’re getting some indication, and I must say I’m not a frequent user of TikTok. I think this is a generational issue here. But the concerns about China having a device that is wildly popular, particularly for young people, and having the ability at some time to start putting comment that is designed to be disinformation and upsetting to our political process, our social processes. So we have to think about this.

But if we’re talking about transferring control of TikTok, we just simply don’t want to pass [inaudible] another group of people whose idea and goal is to control information in the United States.

So I would think we’d have to start looking seriously at what conditions and what ruled we place on TikTok if it was to [inaudible] Chinese to another party.

**Moderator:** Next is Matt Beinart of Defense Daily.

**DWG:** Thanks for doing this.

I had a couple of quick NDAA related questions. First, the Senate still needs to complete work on final FY24 appropriations including defense and the supplemental is still waiting out there. But do you have a projected date in mind when you would like to complete the FY25 NDAA markup?

And just to confirm, should we expect to see specific provisions proposed to the NDAA related to the PPBE Commission’s recommendation for implementing this new defense resources system in that legislation?

**Senator Reed:** Sorry, can you repeat the last question? I didn’t get it.

**DWG:** The PPBE Commission --

**Senator Reed:** Yes.

**DWG:** -- defense resourcing [inaudible] specific proposals related to that?

**Senator Reed:** I hope we can after [inaudible] program review that just was undertaken by the Commission because I think everyone recognizes that what we have now is really sort of some changes to residual or 1960s, Robert MacNamara and Detroit manufacturing planning which worked well then but it’s not that good today in the age of AI and so many other innovative aspects. So I hope we can get some recommendations.

We have been proceeding on schedule with our hearings. We have coming up next Indo-PACOM, the other commands. We’ll get the Secretary of Defense in April along with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and we should be ready, I hope, by May to begin seriously thinking about the legislation. Getting it onto the floor is a very difficult challenge always because that’s in competition with other important legislative initiatives. But at this point we’re still on target.

**DWG:** And a quick follow-up on [inaudible]. The Army’s FY25 budget submission reflected their kind of recent major aviation changes including the FARA cancellation. Anything within that that has particularly piqued your interest or that you would hope to kind of find out more information about their decision-making process, about this $4.5 billion restructure that they’ve put together with aviation?

**Senator Reed:** We’re going to look closely at the aviation restructure, but they, as you indicated, have canceled the Future Attack Reconnaissance Aircraft, but they’re investing heavily in Black Hawks and Chinooks so that the aviation and helicopter industry I think will see a very strong demand signal. And also these are systems that are still extremely valuable and extremely capable.

Again, we’ll review everything. We won’t take it just as they deliver it. We’ll look at the details. But I think their aviation proposals are sensible at this point.

**Moderator:** We’re at the ten minute mark. We’ll try to squeeze in one or two more questions before your closing comments.

Next is John Harper of Defense Scoop.

**DWG:** Thanks for doing this, Senator.

With regard to the FRA budget caps, what kind of political appetite is there on the Hill for lifting those caps? Do you think that’s politically feasible or do you think we’re going to be stuck with those?

**Senator Reed:** Once again, we’re stuck with them right now. It was really the quid pro quo for saving the country from economic collapse if we hadn’t increased the deficit. Now it’s somewhat ironic that many of the folks that were insisting on that are now saying that’s terrible.

So that put aside, I think what could drive an increase is recognizing that our national security is not simply the DoD budget, that there are other aspects. Our research and sciences, our education activities, our healthcare activities. One of the recruiting problems we’ve had in the military is because some young people would like to serve but their education is such they can’t pass a very straightforward test to get in. That’s a reflection of our education system, not the military. We have a problem with obesity in the country. That reflects on our public healthcare system. But if we had more fit young people, we’d have more recruits. So this is all one effort.

One of the biggest issues politically home wise is the border. That’s Department of Homeland Security. We have to provide resources -- in fact that’s what I believe is hanging up the overall deal at the moment where the administration has asked for more resources to get on the border and they’re having some pushback.

Again, if there is a breakthrough I think we’d have to recognize both sides of the agenda. Both the defense and also domestic.

**DWG:** And with regard to the NDAA for FY25, what are your top policy priorities at this point? Provisions you’d like to see included in that.

**Senator Reed:** I’d like to see, as we’ve discussed throughout, some of our recommendations from the program planning commission to see if we could, as we’ve been trying to streamline the acquisition process to eliminate the valley of death for acquisitions and get us to a point where we’re really able to move quickly.

My trip over to Ukraine, as I said, I stopped in Grafenwoehr and saw some of the things the Ukrainians are doing which are very, very creative, adaptive, using civilian technologies in some respects, converting them to military use. And we have to have the same type of resiliency. So that’s one thing we want.

We have to maintain, obviously the number one system both strategically and tactically, operationally, and that’s the submarine. We have to get that base, the industrial balance build up so that we can go at least to a year, perhaps more than that in terms of attack submarines. We’ve got to get Columbia out on time and on budget.

So those are the two biggest things I think.

**Moderator:** Leo Shane of Military Times. If you can ask a quick one we’ll get you in.

**DWG:** Thanks to you both. Just a real quick one.

Senator, following up on Rebecca’s question earlier about the military pay raises, the targeted pay raises and everything. You said you’re going to look at that, but is that something you can fit in with those caps? Or is that going to be more of a multi-year process to pull people in?

**Senator Reed:** I hope we can do it. Again, it provides real incentives and it will in some respects help respond to the issue of retention and recruitment we’re seeing. Not alone. As I pointed out, we have to have healthy and bright young people who want to volunteer, but I hope we can do that. It reflects the respect and regard we have for our forces. We can praise them, as we do, but it helps to pay them also.

**Moderator:** Senator, as promised, I wanted to save the last couple of minutes for you. Before I do, thanks so much for spending this hour with us this morning. This was a thorough and thought-provoking 360 degree tour of national security threats, and we appreciate your time, sir. The last thoughts are over to you.

**Senator Reed:** Thanks very much.

I think really we have to step back and look at national security, and when we do, one of the first issues is the political context of the United States today, the volatility, the fragmentation. As Shakespeare said, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.” We have to look, and that’s an issue that we have to be concerned about. It’s generally not brought up in the context of the national security discussion but it is quite a key feature.

Again, I think we have to recognize technology is just changing very quickly, everything we’re doing. How we fight, how we deal with adversaries, and more importantly, how we can deter combat or conflict.

I think we have to look at these technologies. As we’ve said many times, we have to get them integrated into our system faster. And we also have to recognize I think that we’re in a world that is rapidly coalescing around autocracy and democracy.

I think President Biden’s done a remarkable job in first alerting Ukraine, and second in rallying NATO, and increasing the size of NATO. Ten years ago if you’d told me Sweden and Finland would be part of NATO I’d say right. They are. And what we’re seeing is this group of democratic nations including AUKUS, including Japan, South Korea, beginning to come together to provide an offset of autocratic movements that we’re seeing throughout the world -- Russia, obviously, China, et cetera. And that I think is critical and that’s part of the architecture we have to look at as we go forward.

We have to return to the roots of, you know, politics stops at the water’s edge. I think unfortunately that’s not the case today but it should be the case. And then we have to look at the amalgamation of democratic nations so they can deter the very bad effects of authoritarianism.

A couple of thoughts. Thank you.

**Moderator:** Thank you, Senator, and thank you for being our only guest to always quote Shakespeare whenever you’re with us.

**Senator Reed:** Thank you very much. Not very well, but --

**Moderator:** Again, as I mentioned to you before, now that I’m no longer a working journalist I get to have opinions for a change, and I just want to thank you so much for everything you do for our nation and for joining us today.

And thanks to everyone on the call. Have a great day.

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