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IMPLEMENTING THE 2022 NATIONAL DEFENSE STRATEGY: A CONVERSATION WITH MARA KARLIN

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OPENING REMARKS:

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DISCUSSION:

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Performing the Duties of Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy
U.S. Department of Defense

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MALONEY: Good afternoon to everyone who's joining us here in the Falk Auditorium at the Brookings Institution, and hello to all those of you who are joining us virtually from around the world. I'm Suzanne Maloney, vice president and director of Foreign Policy here at the Brookings Institution, and it's my pleasure to welcome you to today's event. We're joined by Dr. Mara Karlin, performing the duties of deputy undersecretary of defense for policy at the Department of Defense, and my colleagues, Melanie Sisson and Caitlin Talmadge, who will become moderating today's event. As we reach the first anniversary of the Biden administration's release of its 2022 National Defense Strategy, we're here to discuss implementation efforts around the strategy, as well as challenges faced over the past year. The NDS provides a roadmap for how the United States will advance its interests and meet the challenges of this decisive decade. The NDS directs the department to sustain and strengthen integrated deterrence, with Russia identified as the acute threat, and China as the pacing challenge and the only strategic competitor with the intent and capabilities to systematically challenge U.S. vital national interests.

Let me take a moment to acknowledge what is likely in the forefront of many minds today: the shocking Hamas assault on Israel on October 7th and the devastating and dangerous crisis that has ensued. There were 1,400 Israelis killed on that terrible day, the greatest loss of Jewish life since the Holocaust, and more than 200 hostages still held in Gaza. Thousands of Palestinians have been killed in the ensuing bombardment by Israel. Millions are displaced both in Gaza and within Israel itself. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin just returned from a trip to Israel, along with Dr. Karlin, who is here with us on stage. Although the Israel-Gaza war is not the focus of today's conversation, it's important to recognize that the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and the threat of escalation have prompted significant changes to the U.S. defense posture in the region, intensifying the challenge facing the Biden administration in maintaining focus on Russia and China, while remaining vigilant toward a range of other persistent challenges.

Before I turn it over to our experts, allow me to offer brief introductions. Dr. Mara Karlin is performing the duties of the deputy undersecretary of defense for policy at the Department of Defense. Dr. Karlin is also a former nonresident senior fellow here with the Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology here at the Brookings Institution. And most importantly for today's conversation, she is one of the primary authors of the 2022 National Defense Strategy. Dr. Melanie Sisson is a fellow in the Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology here in the Foreign Policy program. She specializes in research on the use of the armed forces in international politics, U.S. national security strategy, and military applications of emerging technologies. Dr. Caitlin Talmadge is a nonresident senior fellow at the Talbott Center as well. She is also an associate professor of political science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a fellow

at the Woodrow Wilson Center here in Washington. Her work examines nuclear deterrence and escalation, military strategy, and defense policy.

Before we begin, let me just take a moment to note that we are live and on the record. For those in the auditorium, microphones will be passed around during the question-and-answer period that follows the introductory conversation. For those of us who are joining virtually, please submit your questions to events@brookings.edu or on social media using the hashtag NDS. Thank you very much, and over to you, Caitlin.

TALMADGE: Thank you very much, Suzanne, for kicking us off. And let me also extend my thanks to Dr. Karlin for joining us for this important discussion at what I can only imagine is an incredibly busy time, even by Pentagon standards. I remember that when we planned this event, it was prior to October 7th, and we envisioned it as a stocktaking exercise of where we are with the NDSs, kind of above the fray of the crises and conflicts of the day to day. And in some ways, what's happened since October 7th makes that stocktaking, I think, as important or even more important as it would have been. But before we get into that, and we will be doing that, I do want to take your pulse on what's going on in the region, in the Middle East, and if you could perhaps, having just recently returned, tell us a little bit about what the department is doing, the biggest challenges that you see coming out of the current crisis?

KARLIN: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Dr. Talmadge. It is a real treat to be back at Brookings and with such tremendous and capable human beings. So ever since the truly horrific events on October 7th, the Department of Defense has been really focused on a few things in line with some very clear guidance from President Biden. We have been focused on surging security assistance to Israel as quickly as possible. The Israelis first engaged us the day of the horrific attacks on October 7th, on that Saturday. And by Tuesday, we were actually already delivering material that they had requested, which is pretty remarkable for our, for our system. So that's been one big piece.

Another big piece, of course, has been working with them on on hostage recovery. Another important piece has been doing what we can by increasing our military posture in the region to send a very clear deterrence signal. You've heard President Biden and Secretary Austin say this extremely bluntly. If there are other groups who think they might want to jump on this terrible bandwagon and get involved, they absolutely should not do so. And so you've seen Secret-- excuse me, Secretary Austin, in particular, has surged, not one, but actually two carrier strike groups to-- toward the Middle East to really be able to to to signal our, our serious. You know, Secretary Austin led the coalition to defeat ISIS a number of years ago, so he actually has a really intimate understanding of what it means to tackle a group like Hamas. And, and so I think his very regular engagements with Israeli counterparts have been especially helpful in that regard.

But, Caitlin, if you don't mind, I'd like to step back for a moment and talk about this trip that we just did. I accompanied Secretary Austin to Brussels and then to Israel. And I have to say it was a remarkable example of American leadership. So not this week, the week before, on Wednesday, Secretary Austin hosted the Ukraine Defense Contact Group. So, that means what he does every month, he brings together 50 plus allies and partners, ministers of defense, chiefs of defense, and all of them come together and say, "What is Ukraine's military need right now?" And then they all start pulling it together and delivering it, and you see the effects on the battlefield. So that's Wednesday. Thursday, Secretary Austin's at the NATO Defense Ministerial. Of course, NATO has one new member; we're hoping it'll get another new member sooner rather than later. And you can imagine the real serious focus there on deterrence and defense and the tremendous progress there NATO has made. And then on Friday, he flew to Israel, and he flew there to be able to sit down with his counterparts in Israel, to sit down with the leadership there to express his condolences, and to be able to talk through what the Israelis needed and how we could be most helpful, to share some of his insights from leading that coalition to defeat ISIS, including the importance of protecting civilians and facilitating humanitarian aid. And then just before he left Israel, we actually met one of the airplanes that was landing filled with ammunition that Israel's military had requested from the United States. So it really is kind of this microcosm of how the United States needs to be able to walk and chew gum.

TALMADGE: Thank you. Thank you for that really sobering explanation of what the United States has been doing during this very difficult period in the region. It was interesting in your answer, you know, we're talking about the Middle East, but you quickly pivoted to discussing Ukraine. Also, you know, the mention of the carriers. And it raises, I think, a question of, you know, where what's going on today fits into our larger strategy. And I think that does relate back to questions of implementing the NDS. As Suzanne mentioned in her introduction, one of the distinctive features of this strategy document is its emphasis on the fact that the United States has to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time, and that was before the last month, right? So-- and not counting a bunch of other things that have come up since since that time. So, you know, China as a pacing threat, Russia as an acute threat.

Even before we got into the discussion of the Middle East or recent events there, I had been wanting to ask you how you see that regional prioritization one year on. The war in Ukraine has lasted longer perhaps than we would have hoped it would at the time that the NDS was written. So how do we think about that tradeoff or that prioritization that was in the original document, but also, you know, how do we think about it now in light of everything that's happening in the Middle East? Iran, if I recall, is described as something we have to manage and be vigilant against. It seems like we're moving past that with with current events. So how do you think about those challenges?

KARLIN: Absolutely. You know, we built this National Defense Strategy. It's pretty punchy, it's pretty pithy, and it's really clear on prioritization. That was deliberate, right? That's what a good, good strategy document achieves. And it was really thanks to Secretary Austin's leadership throughout the building of it, and then also its implementation over the last year that I think we were able to do it. While we recognize the need to focus on the People's Republic of China, right, there's no other country with the will and increasing the capability to fundamentally reshape that global security order, we also know that Russia's an acute threat. We have watched that manifest, unfortunately, in a, you know, quite terrible way of, of course, in, in Ukraine.

And then we knew, exactly as you said, Caitlin, that we've got these other threats that are persistent and that we've got to be vigilant about, right? Because if you're not vigilant about them, frankly, they're just going to take you totally off of your strategy when events happen because events are going to happen. You've got to make sure that you are monitoring those and being ready to respond as, as appropriate. So you're constantly weighing all of this. And really, as you are assessing, we're trying to figure out, are we doing what we need? Are we focusing the ways we need? And I would actually say when you look at the posture increases from the last two weeks, in my mind, it's a perfect manifestation of what that National Defense Strategy has said. You have got to be able to dynamically employ the U.S. military, right? Right now, we are sitting with the most capable U.S. military in our history, the most experienced U.S. military in our history, and we've got to be able to move it dynamically. We've got to be able to ensure it can go anywhere at any time, particularly for this reason, right? If a crisis does erupt, this is why we want to be able to actually achieve those ends. So we need to do that. And hopefully, you know, we are working really hard to be able to contain the conflict, as I noted, to be able to encourage de-escalation, and to be able to deter any country or any violent nonstate actor that thinks it might one might want to get involved, that it shouldn't.

We're also simultaneously still working really hard to support Ukraine, right? We have put out, I think, something like 49 presidential drawdown packages to support Ukraine, which has got to be a historic number. We've done that. But as I noted, so have 50 plus other allies and partners. And then, of course, the People's Republic of China. We've been able to do a lot that I can get into more detail if you all are interested, to really enhance our combat credible force, to be able to enhance our posture across the Indo-Pacific, and to work much more closely with our allies and partners there as well.

TALMADGE: Thank you for that. That overview. That is super helpful. I'm gonna give you one or two more questions before I turn it back over to turn it over to Melanie. But, you know, in your discussion of posture, it does raise kind of more nitty gritty questions about implementation. And that's, that's what I really want to ask you about next is-- you know, you've, you've described, okay, the theory of the NDS, the theory

has held up, now we've got to execute it. I'm curious, looking back on the last year just in general, are there aspects of implementation that have been easier than you expected, harder than you expected? And I guess more specifically, where do you think there have been the most important areas of departmental change to align with the strategy? You mentioned posture, and that may be something you want to talk more about. And where are the areas where there's still room for progress, let's say, in terms of aligning resources and budgets and people with the goals that are outlined in the strategy?

KARLIN: Thanks, Dr. Talmadge. I have to say, I really appreciate how wonky this question is, because look, when when you look back, you'll see examples where a really smart strategy comes out and then it sits on a shelf, right? Or you see a really smart strategy come out and maybe folks are just supposed to kind of implement it on their own, and maybe they do, maybe they don't. You've seen all of these examples. Frankly, I've lived a number of these as well. And I'm really pleased, sitting here one year later, to say that's actually not what's happened over this last year. Indeed, Secretary Austin often talks about the NDS as being our north star, and you can always see that it is in his brain and in the brain of senior leaders as they are wrestling with some very, very difficult decisions.

So what has been developed is what I like to think of as a wraparound approach to implementation. So what do I mean by that? You know, there are a couple of really key priorities within the National Defense Strategy that Secretary Austin is personally ensuring the implementation of and regularly bringing together the most senior leaders to look at them and say, "Hey, are we doing the things we need to?" That's one piece. The next piece of the wraparound strategy is that every senior leader in the department has the homework assignment of regularly updating on a consistent kind of battle rhythm, regularly updating Secretary Austin of how they are changing their own plans, processes, strategies to ensure that the National Defense Strategy gets realized. And then the third piece of the wraparound approach is the very long concrete to do list, right? And making sure, and using some digital tools, in particular, making sure that we are knocking through all of those concrete tasks. So all of that taken together, I think, has been really helpful in realizing the thrust of the National Defense Strategy, of ensuring, frankly, that it's the oxygen in which the department is operating.

So in terms of areas that, that I think have gone particularly well, I'll just give you one example and it is Indo-Pacific posture and just the real progress that we have seen on that front. You know, when you look at our posture, say, from a few years ago, frankly, it's based on our history, right? So it's really focused on East Asia for understandable reasons. And yet what we've needed to do is make it more distributed and more resilient across that entire region. And so we have been able to make some important changes on that front. In particular, I would point to some big agreements of late that we've put together with Australia, the

Philippines, Japan, Papua New Guinea, that's making it easier for our military to both collaborate with those militaries and also to be able to move dynamically across across the region. So that would be just one case study.

You also asked the hard question of what's not going as well as one might want. And I'll tell you, you know, the Department of Defense is a behemoth, as we all know. Now, the fact that this strategy was developed in a really inclusive way, Secretary Austin consistently made sure that the whole department — every part of it, the military departments, combatant commands, all across the office of the secretary of defense, you name it — everyone was tracking where we were and had the opportunity to offer their thoughts throughout there-- that development. It meant that everyone knew, once it came out, kind of what their job was, right, what they needed to do, how to ensure that this became a reality. So I've been really pleased by that part. Frankly, it's just an issue of time. We need to make generational change and we are steering the Department of Defense in line with that. And so I think all of the right pieces are in place. We are making a lot of progress. We just need to make sure that we can continue to do that in a serious and rigorous way.

TALMADGE: Got it. Thank you. And I see Dr. Sisson gearing up for a bunch of questions based on what you just said, so let me just let me just squeeze one more in here. You made reference to how the NDS. or as it used to be for those of us who have been around long enough, the QDR, the Quadrennial Defense Review process, sometimes goes. You know, you issue these long documents that take a long time to write, and then they kind of go into the ether. And I'm, I'm curious, what value you see in the process of doing these things, having experienced a few of them now, as you mentioned, because we do hear critiques of the very idea of doing these things, right? That they, they take up a lot of energy, they sort of represent a bureaucratic log roll, and they don't change the budget. That's sort of like the harsh version of the critique. So, so just to throw a softball in there, what do you say to that? I mean, as someone who's seen some of these, what is, what is the value in the process and in producing this sort of document? I think you getting at it.

KARLIN: Absolutely. Look, it is incumbent on all of us to step back every now and then and say, "What's happening and how are we doing," right? Now, Congress gives us the homework assignment. Congress says you have to do a National Defense Strategy every four years, and so obviously we do it because it is required. But frankly, I think that's just the epitome of leadership. To be able to say, hat's happening, right? What's changed in that security environment? What did we expect? What didn't we expect? What, you know, what does that all look like? And then how are we doing? What do we need to do differently? And having watched the implementation of this strategy over the last year, and watched how it

has informed the building of our budget, I think that's also really important. It is incumbent on us to be able to say to the American public as well, "Here's how we're using your tax dollars in a responsible, thoughtful, rigorous, strategically aligned way." So it seems to me that, that I can't imagine an organization, let alone an organization as massive as the Department of Defense with such a crucial mandate, not taking the time to step back and do something like that.

TALMADGE: Fair enough. I remember one thing Michèle Flournoy used to always say, "It's not the plans, it's the planning." So, you know, even, even though your plans always meet reality, the planning process itself often, you know, gives you benefits.

KARLIN: Absolutely, can I just add?

TALMADGE: Violent agreement?

KARLIN: violent agreement. But look, as you all probably recall, we put out a classified National Defense Strategy a couple months before we put out the unclassified one. And in that, you know, during that whole period of time, of course, Russia had invaded Ukraine, and it had gotten, you know, this kind of terrible aggression went on for months and months, and we are still, of course, watching it. I think being able to have on paper kind of clarity across the department of what our plan is, how and in what ways we understand the threat posed by Russia, and what we are trying to do to tackle it. So one of the best examples is allies and partners are a center of gravity in this strategy. And when you look at what we have done to rally allies and partners, the entire U.S. government has done to rally allies and partners to support Ukraine in a number of different ways, in a, you know, I think a real validation of why we had to kind of think to ourselves how we understand what's happening, understand the changes that were occurring, and then be able to affect that strategy.

TALMADGE: Let me turn it over to my colleague, Dr. Sisson, now.

SISSON: Thanks very much. And Dr. Karlin, if you'll allow me just a brief moment to join Suzanne and Caitlin in expressing our appreciation that you're here today to have this conversation with us, especially given the other demands on your time and energy. It really is evidence of your commitment, of your team's commitment, of the department's commitment to keeping the public well informed about this NDS and about its importance to the security of the nation. So thank you again for being here. This NDS, of course, is very much associated with the concept of integrated deterrence. And at the time of the strategy's release, there was some debate about whether or not integrated deterrence should actually be central to the work of the Department of Defense given its interagency implications. How has the department taken on that challenge and evolved its approach to inter-agency coordination over the last year?

KARLIN: Yeah, thank you so much for that, Dr. Sisson. You know, integrated deterrence has been a really useful frame, I think, for us over the last year, year and a half in particular. The idea behind it, as you know well, is everyone should kind of do what they're best at, right? So inside the Department of Defense, we've got to focus on building a combat credible force that can operate across theaters and across the spectrum of conflict. We want our interagency colleagues to really focus on their competitive and comparative advantages, and then our allies and partners as well. It's a reminder you're on a team. Everyone kind of has a discrete role to play in that team. And we've got to be pretty rigorous in how and in what ways we are trying to deter various actors, because the ways in which you might say deter, you know, aggression from one actor is going to look really different, perhaps from others.

So I think it's been a useful frame in just a number of of different ways. And just taking one key example, is this real emphasis on looking across domains, right? And so when I look at Russia's terrible invasion of Ukraine of what we have all watched over the last, gosh, 20 months or so, it's a reminder that we can't just think about those domains that we're comfortable with, right? Like the air domain, for example, we all kind of understand it. That doesn't make sense, right? We've also seen the impact of Starlink in Ukraine, for instance. And so it's been really healthy, I think, to remind ourselves that aggressors are going to look across domains. So we better as well, especially as we're thinking about escalation challenges too. And so your really good question then, on like, what does this mean for the inter-agency? I think we've seen this knit together, of course, very well in the interagency response on Ukraine. Whether you see this from the sanctions, or the act of diplomacy, the efforts, of course, to work with our allies and partners as well. And so I think we've really we've seen that manifestation in a successful way. But it's also, I might just underscore, inside the department, been important for us to really kind of hone in and focus, what's our value added, what effect are we having?

SISSON: One of the other important introductions or really reintroductions in this NDS was the concept of campaigning and specifically the connection between campaigning and deterrence. So, a similar question, what is the current state the department's thinking about and work on really developing and operationalizing that relationship?

KARLIN: Absolutely. So this notion of campaigning, put very simply, is-- the Department of Defense does a whole lot of stuff every day. So let's try to link it in a logical way and sequence it so that we are closing warfighting vulnerabilities and building warfighting advantage, right? And then let's get a loop on that. Let's try to understand, are we doing things in line with the real focused way, and what effect is that ha-- what effect is that, is that having? So let me just jump in with a case study — and it's probably anim-- animated by the fact that I am testifying tomorrow on this topic — but we were talking a little bit about the

Indo-Pacific. And when I think about our focus on the Indo-Pacific, I can summarize it in kind of three key ways. We've been focused on being more capable, more forward, and more together. So more capable means making sure we have the most combat credible military with the advanced concepts that it needs to be able to ensure security and stability. More forward, I talk to you a little bit with Dr. Talmadge about what we've done with our posture. And then, of course, more together means really knitting together with our allies and partners. And we have a great case study, of course, in the Indo-Pacific, bridging together our close ally Australia, and our close ally, the United Kingdom, in really this historic endeavor known as AUKUS. And one of the key elements of of AUKUS is getting all three countries to have sophisticated undersea capabilities, right? And being able to work together in an advanced technology environment to be able to ensure Indo-Pacific security and stability. That seems like a great manifestation of really building on your warfighting advantages.

SISSON: Thanks for the specificity on that. Based on all of those activities, those kinds of processes in the region, and as you're thinking about campaigning there, are those things contributing to our understanding of how our adversaries perceive and interpret our defense and deterrence behaviors?

KARLIN: Oh, absolutely. Look, we have seen some actors who aren't terribly excited about AUKUS and who have tried to sow kind of disinformation in the information environment about what it is or try to divide us with our allies and partners. Now, I'm delighted to see that that hasn't been successful, and that actually we've gotten widespread support. So I think those have all been been, been quite, quite clearly understood by by our various allies and adversaries. And I would use another example, just when we look at European security. Obviously, you know, we are watching the, the the largest conflict in Europe in almost all of our lifetimes right now. The fact that NATO is the strongest that it has ever been as an alliance, that it is growing as an alliance, that you see it increasing its posture, increasing its capabilities, more and more countries really hitting 2% in terms of investments, but also increasingly seeing that as a floor and not a ceiling. I think that sends a very strong signal.

SISSON: Given that you raised the topic of AUKUS, I'm going to take advantage and ask you about your thinking, in particular, about the distribution of investment between, for example, crewed submarines and autonomous or other AI-enabled kinds of vehicles that can be used under sea, in particular in this case, but in other domains as well.

KARLIN: Yeah, absolutely. So we've really got to make sure, as we're building our budget and as we are thinking about what that future force looks like, that it is tied to how we understand the security environment, not just today, but one going forward. And I think we have seen a number of examples in which uncrewed capabilities have some serious potential. I suspect you are quite familiar, Dr. Sisson, with an effort

announced by our deputy secretary pretty recently, known as the replicator initiative. And part of what our Deputy Secretary Hicks was trying to do with this replicator initiative was to help the department really, kind of at scale, be able to kind of push out a whole bunch of technology, and to be able to do it— when we think of things like swarming technology, for example —So in line, I think with where you're starting to get really, really making sure that we as a department can kind of knock down any of the bureaucratic obstacles that might occur when we are trying to build and then to amass capabilities that maybe aren't exactly what we have been investing in in the past as well. And so this is an area where I would say, kind of watch this space, see how and in what ways over the next few months, over the next year, year and a half, the department is able really to increase its investments in exactly the sorts of things you're highlighting.

SISSON: There have been reports about different parts of the services at the service level starting to work with some of those technologies. And from your perspective and vantage, what you can see, what are you seeing in terms of new operational concepts as the services are going about either incorporating those new technologies or even more broadly, implementing the NDS?

KARLIN: Yeah, absolutely. So I think we've seen some real progress both within certain services and also more broadly across the joint force. The good example for the latter, of course, is the joint warfighting concept, which has gone through multiple iterations, and I would say is very much grounded in how we see the future security environment in the National Defense Strategy. You've also seen some bespoke efforts by the military services as well. I would point you to the Marine Corps as a fantastic case study. You all are probably familiar with Force Design 2030. This really ambitious effort started by the previous commandant of the Marine Corps and continued, of course, by General Smith, the current commandant as well, to really transform the Marine Corps in terms of its combat, you know, having credible combat capabilities, but also making sure that it's really able to hone in on the Indo-Pacific while also managing its crisis, you know, it's kind of a traditional crisis response role.

SISSON: So another-- the department has long been committed to modernization and done a lot of work in that direction, and it is, of course, a feature of this NDS as well. As, as you noted, in terms of referencing Replicator, Deputy Secretary Hicks really has focused, I think, on some of the department's digital proficiencies, and in particular, on making its data assets a priority. What progress have you seen in those efforts, whether it's from supporting military operations or in the department's business management processes, or from your perspective as a decision maker receiving information?

KARLIN: Absolutely. She has pushed really hard on this and I'm incredibly grateful for it. Really, you know, a key element of digitization is transparency. It is astonishing how much time one can spend just trying to make sure that I have the information, that you have the information, that that's the same information, and

then we can actually have one conversation, right? You spend, you spend so much time just trying to, to baseline. And to the extent you can digitize, we've just erased all that time. And now we actually get to focus on our competitive advantage, which is probably not sifting through through that material. So I've seen some real progress on, on that front, and real efforts to be able to kind of pull together in a transparent way data for key decision makers, and frankly, to just widen our aperture, right? To be, to be able to have a richer, more textured understanding of what is where, for example, and why that is the case. The-- you're probably familiar with our CDAO shop, our Chief Digital and Artificial Intelligence Office shop, that's run by a super smart fellow named Craig Martell. They have been just gems working with us on a number of issues in the policy space, as we have-- you know, look, we're people who are often thinking in words more than numbers as policy folks can want to do. And they have been really helpful with us in terms of getting the data that's relevant, and really helping us apply that data in a worthwhile way as well.

SISSON: So you mentioned team as a key element of a departmental philosophy for-- so to speak and noted a number of the really sharp people working inside of the building on implementation of NDS. You're a person who cares very much about the humans and the human talent that are resident in the department, and so how does that talent base look to you today, both in terms of, you know, the civilian staff working, whether it's on the digital side of the house or generally occupying offices and providing their service, and also especially in terms of recruitment and retention in the military services?

KARLIN: Yeah, absolutely. Look, I will say for folks who are trying to think about what their next job should be, there is nowhere more extraordinary than the Department of Defense. Every single person you are sitting next to feels the sense of mission. It is like pumped into the oxygen there, right? Because you are trying to do good for the United States of America, who is leading much of the world, right? Look at the various crises that have happened and how often folks are looking to American leadership. And to be a part of this tremendously capable Department of Defense, to try to support the world's most capable U.S. military, is just, it's an extraordinary experience, an extraordinary honor. I have been in and out of the department now for a couple of decades, it turns out, and, and I have to say, every day I walk into that Pentagon, it's still pretty, pretty darn inspiring, even as the issues get harder and harder. And so there are a number of ways in which one can serve. One can be a civilian there, one can be a uniform uniform there. But, but it really is an unparalleled place if you want to, to try to do good. You, no doubt, are familiar with some of the recruitment challenges that our military has had recently. What is intriguing to me is that it's actually not the same story on the retention piece, right? In fact, retention has been incredibly strong. And I think that's, that's notable, right? That that's a sign that as, as folks start to serve, they realize just how meaningful that experience can be and just how much they can contribute.

SISSON: Well, as you know, we very much value our Brookings audience, and so we are fortunate to have people who are engaged and send us questions ahead of time. I will ask you one or two that we've received ahead of time before turning it over to the audience here so that they get their, their chance. So that's your head's up that it's time to formulate your really hard hitting, pointed questions for Dr. Karlin before we turn it over. So you've touched on this theme a bit, but perhaps you can elaborate. In the NDS, Russia is described more as an acute threat. Has or how has DOD's mind changed, if at all, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine is certainly going to last years?

KARLIN: We have learned a lot over the last 20 months, right? I mean, rewind all of our brains back to February 2022, and our expectations of what that horrific conflict would look like. And in particular, I think a lot of us had the expectations that Russia would be much more successful early on in a conventional way than it was. So that's intriguing. Now, of course, forces learn in conflict, and we have seen the Russian forces learn as well. And so that's been important to monitor. The Ukrainian forces have learned in tremendous ways as well. So what we have learned is that in some ways, Russia's military did not, particularly for that first year of the conflict, have the conventional capabilities or training then one-- that one might have thought. Look, we have learned a lot about escalation dynamics. I think in particular, that first year of the war, we, you know, I think you all no doubt saw, saw this as well. We had to think exceptionally hard about escalation because we were looking across the entire spectrum of conflict and the Russians were as well. So that, I think, was an important piece. And so it's reminded us that, look, your adversaries are going to have a bunch of tools in their toolkit, and so you've got to keep your eyes open on that front.

And then I guess the last thing I would say that we have learned, and we've really honed some good processes on that front, we have learned how to come together I'll just speak inside the Department of Defense. We've learned how to come together across the Department of Defense and get a really rigorous and textured understanding of what we are doing each day vis-à-vis the Russians. And that's been important because you are sending signals amidst the noise, right? But if you don't know exactly what it is your entire department is doing — what sort of tests are happening of weapons, what sort of exercises are happening, or activities — if you don't know all of that, then you don't quite realize what signals you're sending to allies, to partners, to adversaries. And I would say, we have developed a really, really worthwhile way to get after that, and that has delivered in spades over these last 20 months and also been relevant for other challenges as well.

SISSON: And as part of that learning process, has it been an intentional development of a feedback loop of sorts, or is it something that you've learned and evolved with more organically over time?

KARLIN: Yes, I think, is probably the best answer to that. Look, it-- you know, and part of this, of course, is that we knew for months before it actually occurred, that Russia was going to be invading Ukraine. So that really gave us the opportunity to understand, kind of to diagnose the situation, to get our own house in order, to work across the U.S. government, to work with our allies and partners. And so I recognize that we were all a little bit spoiled by having that that time. And that's probably not replicable in the in the future. So it probably developed organically, but since then, it has resulted in some very deep collaboration, of course, with our intelligence community as well as we have tried to understand kind of how and in what ways the different phases of the conflict are manifesting. And in particular, what is it that we — and when I say we, I mean the United States plus 50 plus allies and partners — need to do to best support Ukraine in its fight.

SISSON: One more question from me, and then we'll hand over to our able audience here. And here again, you've touched on a number of the activities of daily living of the U.S. military, which is an incredibly flexible instrument. And so, this question tries to access some of those sort of modalities and ways in which the department can contribute to national security, even — as the question asks — short of warfare, what roles do you see the military taking in the next five to 10 years?

KARLIN: Well, look. The U.S. military's kind of the scene of of the U.S. military, is to protect the American people and to protect our vital national security interests. And so probably my response would think about how and in what ways are those threats changing and what is it that our military needs to be able to do to ensure that it can fulfill its mandate most effectively? Some of that's probably understanding how the security environment has shifted, so transboundary, transboundary threats, for example, like pandemics or climate change, and the effect that those have on the security environment would be a piece of it as well. Obviously, the technological environment, as you know better than just about anyone, has gotten a whole lot more complex. So how and in what ways do we need to incorporate technology or artificial intelligence in a responsible and ethical way? But it's really making sure that the U.S. military is dynamically prepared to be able to best fulfill that mandate.

SISSON: Okay. So for our audience, we will have microphones coming through the aisles. Please raise your hand and introduce yourself to Dr. Karlin. You'll have 45 seconds to form your question and deliver it. And I will, I will hold you to that, okay? So who's up next? We have a person over here in a plaid, Christmasy colored shirt.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My name is just Sangmin Lee. I'm a reporter from Radio Free Asia. I have a question about North Korea. In terms of the dealing North Korea threats, how do you assess '22 NDS how to deal with North Korea threats? What is progress? What is the challenge that needed to be overcome?

KARLIN: Absolutely. So we had bucketed North Korea in that kind of 'be vigilant section,' right? We've got these persistent threats that exist and that are probably going to worsen. And so, we've got to really understand how to monitor and respond to those threats, and to do so in a way that really involves working closely with allies and partners. And so when I look back on what we've done over the last year, I think we have very much followed that. And I would just offer one kind of key case study, which has been the tremendous collaboration that we have had with our colleagues in South Korea, and the tremendous collaboration between our — excuse me — among our colleagues in South Korea, in Japan, and in the United States, really ensuring that extended deterrence commitments are real and that we are having a robust and collaborative dialog of how in what way that threat is changing and what we need to do together to be able to tackle it. So I feel pretty comfortable with kind of the state of that collaboration. Look, we continue to condemn the, the efforts by North Korea in this regard. We will continue to do that with allies and partners. And we see those actions as irresponsible and not helpful for global security.

SISSON: We have another person here in a gray jacket and glasses.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, my name is Kai Suherwan from AEI. Firstly, I'd just like to say thank you for your great panel that you have today, and as well as your words about the department being very inspiring as someone who hopes to go there. My question is on AUKUS. The recent budget supplemental request of about \$3 billion dollars, do you see that as enough to rebuild our submarine industrial base for both our allies and ourselves, or do you think that we need more? And in what way can we get that money so that we are able to provide for ourselves and our allies? Thank you.

KARLIN: Great. Thank you so much. So I can start my answer by anchoring with the NDS, in fact, which is that we talk about how important are undersea capabilities are, right? That is a comparative advantage of the U.S. military. And you've seen this recognized both by this administration and by the Congress in the last few years where there has been robust bipartisan support for investing in our submarine industrial base. Now, if we go back into history, part of the challenge with our submarine industrial base actually comes from the peace dividend of the 1990s, right? Where, where effectively, we did not invest in it in the same way. And so, as you know, you can't immediately surge industry. You actually need to build that up. You got to build up the facilities. You've got to build up the the workforce, make sure they've got the expertise and the capabilities that that they need. That, that all takes some time. And so in the-- in fact, in the last president's budget, I think we put something like \$4.6 billion dollars or so in the request for investing in the submarine industrial base, both in terms of production production and in terms of maintenance.

And I just want to spend a moment in terms of maintenance, because I know sometimes folks really want to focus on the number of, "I have X number of submarines" or "Y number." Here's the thing. If too

many of them are sitting in maintenance and I can't use them, they're not going to be as valuable. And so, in fact, the Navy has done some tremendous work, thanks to the generosity of Congress in these investments in the submarine industrial base of late, to actually make that picture look a lot better in terms of maintenance and in terms of readiness. So as you saw in the supplemental that just came-- that was just put out a couple of days or so ago, there is a request for just over 3 billion or so to add to the submarine industrial base. We want to make sure that that industrial base is as capable as possible. I would note, since you had hitched your question to AUKUS, that actually the Australians are also investing in our submarine industrial base, which I think is probably pretty, pretty historic. And of course, as we all know, an industrial base is good because it gives us the material we need. It's also very good for America, right? This is coming together in terms of American jobs. This is good for our economy as well. So investing in undersea capabilities is a priority for us. It will continue to be a priority for us. You saw that in our last president's budget request. You saw that in the supplemental. And I would say going forward, this is a key area to watch.

SISSON: I'm going to actually impose another question here, because you brought up a constellation that I can't resist, which is Congress counting things and underseas capabilities, because in part, the motivation for much of that has to do with the military balance over Taiwan. And so, I hope you'll indulge a question on your current perception, take, assessment of the state of deterrence around the island, and the U.S. overriding interest in maintaining peace and stability over the Taiwan Strait.

KARLIN: Yeah, absolutely. So let me start with just a broader strategic answer here, which is that we do not see conflict as imminent. We do not see conflict as inevitable between the United States and the People's Republic of China. I just want to really underscore that. We think deterrence is real and deterrence is strong. A year ago, the National Defense Strategy said our top priority is to sustain and strengthen deterrence, and we think that we have continued along that path. I do want to note then, if I can dive into just kind of an operational case study, the we have seen some really problematic operational efforts by the PRC's military. And in fact, if you all might have seen last week, the Department of Defense released the China military power report, and it talks about some of the investments that China's military has made. But in particular, one of the things we've talked about has been kind of irresponsible kind of operations that we have seen by the people-- People's Republic of China's military around the Indo-Pacific. I think the number is something like there have been more than 250 or so incidents since 2021 in which we have seen kind of coercive or unsafe behavior by, by PRC military assets. That's really dangerous, right? That is not, not the way to operate. And so I would just underscore some real concern on that front. Now, thank goodness we and many of our allies have very professional forces who are going to try to operate exactly as they should in

the air and, and on on the seas. But I would just note that as a, as a case study in which you could see something inadvertently occur that that no one really wants.

SISSON: Thank you, and thanks to the audience for, for that little interlude. Another question? We have actually a person here in a black jacket and white button-down shirt.

KARLIN: Yes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you. Hi, thank you so, so much for this potent conversation. My name is Angela Zhang. I am the national security reporter for the Medill News Service. And my question concerns a little bit about the danger that Dr. Karlin, you posed. What does the conversation look like between the DOD's defense policy more on the ground and on executive efforts to send humanitarian aid? I guess we can look pointedly to Israel-Gaza. And how do you foresee that we can ensure that this sort of on the ground implementation efforts does not have spill-- spillover effects on the more citizen base? Thank you.

KARLIN: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for for asking that. Look, we, as I briefly noted, happen to have a bit of a unique individual in Secretary Austin because he has, at a strategic level and at an operational level, lived the campaign to to defeat ISIS. And, and part of the reason that that was so successful was the real focus on things like protecting civilians and on humanitarian corridors. And so I think that, that probably is a frame that informs a lot of his very regular kind of near-daily engagements with, with Israeli counterparts. Looking across the entire U.S. government, this has been a very important point. And, of course, Israel has a professional military, and we have underscored the importance of following the the law of armed conflict. It is worth us remembering exactly why we are where we are. And that was because we saw Hamas deliberately targeting civilians in the horrific attacks of October 7th. We saw that with ISIS years ago as as well. And a professional military force, like we see in the Israeli military, we see thinking hard about how to operate in a manner that is effective. And frankly, it is going to be more effective strategically if one is able to really look hard at protecting civilians and at humanitarian assistance.

SISSON: We'll do another. This time I will-- here in the back. Thanks.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Great, thanks. Alex Noyes here from RAND and formerly of OSD Policy. Dr. Karlin, awesome to see you. As a fellow security cooperation nerd. I thought I would ask a quick one on that, pulling on the Ukraine lessons learned story. What are some of the factors behind what I think is a is an all too rare security cooperation success story in Ukraine? And can we scale those up to the enterprise writ large. Thanks so much.

KARLIN: Yeah. Thanks, thanks, Alex, it's wonderful to see you. Look, I think if we had called our previous selves a couple of years ago and said that the Department of Defense would be able to surge tens of billions of dollars in security assistance over 20 months or so, have it-- you know, making it clear "Here's

what the country needs," finding it, and then racing it to the battlefield, and then seeing the effects on our televisions in such a rapid order, our previous selves would never have believed it. I can at least say that confidently for myself. I just wouldn't have believed it. That's not how our system usually works. And so — but we've been able to do that, right? Since the start of this administration, in fact, we've been able to commit \$44 billion dollars of security assistance to Ukraine, much of which has been delivered. And again, you see the effects on the battlefield. And I noted we've got 50 plus allies and partners that have also done that with tens of billions of assistance, tens of billions of dollars in assistance. Now, part of it, I think, is that we had been working closely with Ukraine's military for a number of years before it became clear that Russia was going to start this, this terrible war. And so we-- and I think Ukraine's military had kind of a rough idea of what was needed, so that helped.

I also think you had the most senior leader folks understanding just how important this was, and being able to say let's look hard at any roadblocks as they pop up. And to your good question of, "So can we replicate it?" Right. We're living this this kind of historic case study in security cooperation. Can we do it again? I will say that the we have learned lessons from that experience. And I am watching those lessons actually manifest in how we are surging our support to Israel as well. You know, I had briefly noted that the Israelis first asked us for security assistance as the horrific events of October 7th were occurring. And within three days you started to see material landing in Israel. A lot of that is because we have built processes. We've built kind of the muscles to figure out when we need to move really fast, how long, in what ways can we do. So what we need to figure out is how do we make sure that we are really internalizing all those lessons learned, even for those case studies where we're not in the throes of some terrible crisis or contingency, but want to ensure with rigorous assessment, monitoring and evaluation, of course, that we are delivering what we need to to our allies and partners to make sure that their militaries are as capable as they need to for the threats that we all face.

SISSON: Let's do one last question here, please. We have a person in the middle in the white shirt.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi.

SISSON: Well, on behalf of the Brookings Institution, our thanks, as always, to our very engaged and informed audience here and virtually. And if you all would please here in the auditorium, do me the favor of staying in your seats while we express our appreciation to Dr. Karlin for joining us as she has another appointment that she needs to get to. So, Dr. Karlin, thank you so much for being here and take good care of you and your team.

