
Thursday, October 27, 2022 at 4:00 p.m. ET

CSIS EXPERTS

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Welcome, and thank you for joining us. We’re here to discuss the recently released National Defense Strategy by the U.S. Department of Defense, in particular focusing on the implications for the Indo-Pacific, including countries like China and North Korea.

My name is Seth Jones. I’m the senior vice president and director of the International Security Program. I have with me an all-star cast. I have to my right, Dr. Victor Cha, who is senior vice president for Asia and Korea Chair and a prolific author and former U.S. government official. I have Kari Bingen to my left, who is the director of the Aerospace Security Project and senior fellow in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. And then I have Christopher Johnstone, who’s senior adviser and Japan Chair and recently left the National Security Council of the Biden administration. Thanks to all of you for joining us here today.

Well, Chris, let me start with you. For any American that is wondering about the focus of the National Defense Strategy, it’s pretty straightforward. The most significant threat, the pacing challenge, as the document calls it, is China.

So can you start us off with your view of what the threat looks like from China? Why should Americans care about the threat from China? And then, I’ll go to Kari after that.

Sure. I mean, what’s welcome about the NDS picking up the National Security Strategy, which was released a couple of weeks ago, is this clear articulation of China as the pacing threat, the thing that the national security establishment needs to focus on and orient our resources and strategy around.

Why is China a threat? I’d say a few things. First of all, it’s a physical threat, potentially, to some of our closest friends and partners in Asia. Obviously to Taiwan it has territorial claims that threaten our good friend Japan, territorial claims that threaten partners in Southeast Asia, the Philippines, potentially ambitions that even extend onto the Korean Peninsula. So there’s a physical dimension of this that affects our friends and affects Americans that live in that region.

And then, there’s the economic dimension of China. This is clearly a country that seeks to revise the rules of trade in a way that favors its own countries and industries, seeks to control critical technologies that are central to the wellbeing of Americans and to the future of the United States, and to up-end the rules-based order to enable them to control those technologies.

And they have not been shy about seeking to undermine democratic institutions and values around the world where they see countries taking
positions that are at odds with their interests. Our good friend and ally Australia experienced this directly, where there was very clear efforts on the part of China to influence politics – influence politics there. So this is a comprehensive challenge. The NDS obviously is focused on the military dimension of it. But given what we see of China’s behavior worldwide it’s an appropriate focus.

Dr. Jones: Yeah. Thanks, Chris.

Kari, your last government job was as the deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence and security. So you certainly have a perspective based on Chinese activities, space, intelligence, cyber activities. What’s your sense of the threat?

Kari A. Bingen: Yeah. Thanks. You know, I thought it was important that there was continuity in this document. And I think the focus on this China threat is very good. If I think about it in military terms, we never want to send our young men and young women onto a battlefield in a fair fight. Why the heck would we? (Laughs.) So that – our military advantage on the battlefield has long come from our technological advantage.

But what we’re seeing the Chinese do in so many different dimensions is they are going after our advanced technology, stealing it from our technology sector, our phenomenal industrial base, and then they have plowed significant resource into advancing their own advanced weapons systems. They have no less than 10, what I’ll call, megaprojects, which would be the equivalent of – each one along would be the equivalent of our Manhattan-era projects.

Artificial intelligence, space, quantum computing. They clearly want to have that technological advantage that – whereas before we had the advantage, now we may see a comparable if not better adversary on the battlefield. And that’s deeply concerning to me. Plus, the economic piece. They are incredibly focused on that economic advantage that they get from these technology areas. And then the social piece. Artificial intelligence. You see what they’re doing in terms of surveilling their own people with that technology, the social scorecards that they have. So I think there’s all different facets of this Chinese threat that we need to pay attention to.

Dr. Jones: Victor, I want to turn to you, if you want to add anything on the China threat. Otherwise, can you talk a little bit about – there are obviously other threats in the region, including North Korea. So how do you place the North Korean threat in the context of China? And how do you see the North Korean threat
represented in the three documents that have come out – that is, the National Defense Strategy, the Nuclear Posture Review, and then the Missile Defense Review?

Victor Cha: Sure, thanks. Thanks, Seth.

And, first, let me say – in regard to what was said about the China threat that both Kari and Chris talked about – that, you know, there is the military threat. There is the economic threat in terms of technology and other things. But there’s also the economic coercion threat, right? I mean, China is out there, you know, for over a decade targeting at least a dozen, if not more, countries, over 150 companies, with basically economic bullying, right? And the economic bullying, it’s certainly not WTO-compliant. And it – and it has to do with the use of sort of these economic tools to leverage countries and actors to the way they see things with regard to Taiwan, human rights, a variety of other things.

And they’ve weaponized interdependence – economic interdependence in a way that we have not seen before. Now, they are not the only country that weaponizes interdependence. The United States has done so with regard to financial sanctions on Iran, North Korea, Russia. But when we’re doing it, we’re doing it because there’s illicit behavior taking place in the international system – everything from financing proliferation to attacking another country. This is – these are actions by China that are not targeting illicit behavior. They just don’t like what other countries and companies and people are doing. And so they use this economic coercion.

That is actually something that’s talked about in the NDS. It’s not as explicit, but when they talk about the scope of the China threat, they talk about the military. But they also talk about coercive aspects of the threat that have to do with economics. And I think it’s an important point to make, that’s in the NDS. It’s not highlighted as much, but it’s a very big part of the threat. And it’s very important in terms of how other countries respond to the U.S. efforts to bring countries together, right? Whether it’s bringing allies together with regard to semiconductors or supply chains – their willingness to work with the United States on these issues is, in part, a function of their concern about Chinese economic bullying, right? So I think that’s an important point to make.

On North Korea, I think, you know, the three documents do talk about the North Korean threat. I found it interesting that the NDS really focuses on it in terms of a persistent threat, suggesting that it’s kind of level. Persistent gives you the sense that it’s kind of level.

What you see in the NPR and the MDR is talking about it as a growing danger, so the notion that it is advancing, which, I think, more accurately
reflects reality, that this is a threat that is growing by leaps and bounds, leapfrogging, certainly, technology in terms of their longer-range ballistic missiles.

So I think it was – it’s important that the NPR and the MDR really focus on this notion of a growing threat and then talking about the different ways in which that threat would be managed.

Mr. Johnstone: Just to jump in on that, if I could, because I think – on the question of extended deterrence, I think it will be reassuring to both the ROK and Japan that the declaratory policy of the United States continues to reject this concept of no first use and sole purpose. So I think the clear statement of that will be welcome.

I do think we’re in a period where the United States needs to think about how to strengthen the extended deterrence commitments in northeast Asia, in particular. This is, certainly, an issue that came up repeatedly in the president’s meetings in May when I was with him, and this document doesn’t really talk about how we do that.

There’s some reference to sort of bringing together the extended deterrence dialogues that we have separately with Japan and South Korea. My own view is that we need to go a step further and consider things like establishing nuclear planning groups or some things that take our partners a little bit deeper into how we manage the nuclear arsenal.

But I think this was an important theme that came out today as well.

Dr. Cha: Can I –

Dr. Jones: Yeah.

Dr. Cha: So just – I agree. I entirely agree with Chris that I think it’s important that the document – it recognized that there’s a problem, right. It didn’t say problem but it recognized that there is this need to bolster extended deterrence with allies and partners.

So I thought that was important to recognize. It very – focused very much on sort of high-level, right – high-level interaction on this. This is not a working level issue. This is a high-level issue.

There was some language on including allies more in sort of decision making on sort of – on our nuclear plans, which I took to mean, you know, more on nuclear planning, though it wasn’t explicit, and what I did like also was that it is – for me and Chris this is our hobbyhorse lately, trilateral – U.S.-Japan-
Korea. But they also talked about trilateral and Australia, like, what we refer to on the Asia floor as the good Quad, right – the U.S., Japan, Australia, and South Korea.

Dr. Jones: As opposed to the bad Quad?

Dr. Cha: Well, no, I didn’t say bad Quad but just the good Quad. So I thought that was useful. But I entirely agree that there’s still a lot more meat that needs to be put on the bones of this particular issue.

Dr. Jones: Well, one follow-up question for Chris and then I want to turn to Kari for a different region, is what is your sense about how this is likely to be received in the Indo-Pacific? That’s the first question.

And then second, as part of that, what does this mean for institutions? So there’s a lot on allies and partners. The Indo-Pacific is a much more complicated environment than Europe in some ways because we don’t have an alliance the way we have with NATO.

So how is it likely to be received and what does this mean for our various alliances and partnerships?

Mr. Johnstone: Yeah. A few things on that.

Look, I think, in general, it will be well received, the emphasis on alliances and partnerships. I will say there are terms in the document, things like modernizing alliances, that have been in DOD discussions related to allies for at least a decade.

I remember writing them on a slide in 2012. So there is – to Kari’s point, there is continuity here. But I think what is interesting about what we see in the regions are there is an evolution of new constellations of actors coming together. AUKUS, of course, is the best example of this, bringing the U.K. in to the partnership with the United States and Australia on nuclear submarines – the Asia Pacific leaders, four of them, participating in the NATO summit in June, drawing more explicit connections to our – between our two – between these two regions. The Quad itself, of course, with India and taking steps to provide maritime domain awareness capabilities across the region.

But none of this is, of course, a substitute or can ever replicate the structures that we have in Europe. So it is, by necessity, a piecemeal approach, but it’s encouraging to see that there’s strong support for it.

The one thing I will say is, you know, as we think about our alliance in Japan in particular, which is going through a real transformation – the Japanese are on the cusp of some big increases in spending, investments in new
capabilities like long-range strike – it does raise, I think, a larger question about whether DOD is organized effectively in Asia to support the development of these relationships. Certainly in the Japan context, it calls into question whether our existing command structure in Japan will continue to make sense as Japan takes on new roles and missions. And I think that’s probably true more broadly in the region as well.

Dr. Jones:

Thanks.

I want to shift gears and shift regions in going to Kari. And if we can pull up the map of Russia and Ukraine for a moment. I think for Kari, you know, how are the Europeans likely to take the predominant focus on the Indo-Pacific and on China? Because the reality – here is a map of the war in Ukraine. It’s still a significant war. We’ve got most of the U.S.’s allies and partners in Europe providing various weapons systems. I think certainly concern in Finland, the Baltic states, Poland, and some of the borderline states in NATO’s eastern flank to Ukraine; very concerned about the Russian invasion and Russian aggression. More recently we’ve seen President Vladimir Putin talking about escalation to the use of nuclear weapons on the battlefield.

So how are the U.S.’s European allies and partners likely to take this document? Chris just walked us through, you know, happiness in the Indo-Pacific region. We already got a sense of that with the reaction to the National Security Strategy. But what is your sense about European capitals here?

Ms. Bingen:

Yeah. You know, I guess I’d start by saying I think across successive administrations there has been a concerted effort to work with our European allies, first of all, to understand the China threat and what it means to them economically, militarily, socially, et cetera. So I commend administrations for particularly some of the intel sharing that they’ve done.

I think, you know, the department can do more than one thing. Much of the capabilities that we’re seeing investment in are not only – and the technologies are just as relevant to a European theater as they are to a Pacific, although in a European theater, obviously, you’ll have a much more predominant army and land forces role; so things like the long-range strike that Chris mentioned, cyber, some of the space activities, the whole sensor-to-shooter kill chain really that we’re seeing play out in Ukraine right now. Those will be, I think, just as significant in the European theater.

The document does continue to emphasize that ironclad commitment to NATO that we have. And I didn’t see any decreasing emphasis there. But you do have an incredibly capable NATO. You have partners committing to increased defense spending. So there’s –
Dr. Jones: Some partners.

Ms. Bingen: Some partners. Some partners committing. And I'll say committing. We'll see if there's the full follow-through. But there clearly is potential there for them to step up and do more. I do think there's an open question, though, for our policymakers in terms of what is that right posture in Europe going forward, given these commitments across the globe. And I know you've been looking at that in particular.

Dr. Jones: Yeah, I've been looking at that certainly along these lines. There's another issue that comes out of this too with a follow-up question, Kari. And I'll – let me just preface this by saying one of the challenges of the war in Ukraine for the U.S. and the Europeans which translates into the Indo-Pacific is the National Defense Strategy does focus on China as the major threat, followed by the Russians.

When you see the strain that the U.S. industrial base has come under in providing some of the weapons systems that it has provided – so if we look at the significant strain on the supply of Javelins or Stingers or 155-millimeter ammunition or Howitzers or, you know, several other different kinds of weapons and weapons systems – and then when you look at some of the wargames and analyses in the Indo-Pacific where the U.S. runs out of long-range precision munitions like JASSMs or LRASMs, within a few days of a conflict, it does raise questions about whether the U.S. defense industrial base is sufficiently prepared for what the administration is now talking about. So we're talking a big game about China as a threat. I think there is a question about whether there's been sufficient preparation for actually executing the strategy.

Ms. Bingen: Well, I want to make a couple comments, but then I actually would love to flip it back to you, Seth. But in a couple of the wargames that I've participated in, you're absolutely right. We run out of munitions pretty quickly, and when you think about that, combined with a logistics and supply network that is transiting vast distances, that is going to be under tremendous strain from basically a Chinese anti-access/area denial strategy, that becomes incredibly, incredibly stressing.

Just the other piece, though, I want to mention in some of the games and activities that I participated in is just how significant space plays in any of these forward-projection scenarios. We oftentimes see, I'll say, space white-carded in these games, but it is that backbone – communication across ships, across disparate maneuver forces, the navigation, the intelligence that you'd collect, the missile warning, warning activities – all of that is provided by space and we know that the Chinese are targeting that.
The last point that I would make is we need to think more in terms of not just the cross domain that’s discussed here but really the cross-service. So how does the Air Force support and – support sea or maritime operations, and vice versa? I think that’s something that’s come out in the wargame as well. It’s not just air looking at land targets or sea looking at sea targets; it’s how do you create that greater cross-pollinization across the forces?

Dr. Jones: The jointness that’s there.

Ms. Bingen: Jointness, yeah. (Laughs.)

Dr. Jones: So one question for you, Victor, along these lines is a force posture one, and Chris may want to weigh in on this as well. There’s a lot of talk of allies and partners. The U.S. already has a force posture in the region. Do you see an ability to change much of that in the next couple of years? Can we expand the U.S. force posture in the region? What do you expect this – how this might change posture?

Dr. Cha: So I’ll talk about Korea, and I don’t know if Chris wants to talk about Japan. You know, it’s an interesting question and it’s a bit of a Rubik’s Cube, if you ask me, because, on the one hand, there are things that you can – there are things you can do with force posture on the peninsula, and in particular, given, you know, the growing potential for an air and naval hub on the peninsula. There are things you can do with force posture on the Korean Peninsula that would facilitate a more potential global use of forces in Korea. On the other hand, when we talk about the extended deterrence credibility of commitment, you know, we can talk about things like nuclear planning, even nuclear sharing, which I don’t personally believe, but it’s something that you hear about. You could talk about all these things.

But in the end, the piece that’s so important is the ground troop presence, right? The 27,500 is what we’ve described in some of our work as the community of fate that ties Koreans and Americans together in such a way that the U.S. – that Koreans will know, both North Koreans and South Koreans and Chinese, that the U.S. commitment will always be there. So there is that element of the – there is that element of the force posture on the peninsula that serves a conventional deterrence purpose but it also serves an extended deterrence commitment.

In terms of the stretch that you’re talking about, in terms of U.S. capabilities with, you know, a Europe contingency and potentially an Asia contingency, like, we’ve played these games, right? All of us have been involved in these games. And it’s not a pretty picture, as you say. We run out of stuff pretty quickly. And there, I mean, I think one thing that I noticed in the Nuclear Posture Review is it wasn’t so much about these two contingencies, but there was a section on opportunistic aggression, right, where there was a clear...
signal that with – in a case of opportunistic aggression, whether it’s a Taiwan scenario and something else happening or a Europe scenario, a Taiwan scenario and something else happening, that there is a reference to, you know, our nuclear capabilities, right?

And so I think that’s something that – that’s not necessarily the answer. That’s not a replacement for a defense industrial base. And we should ask you to speak about that. But it is something that – it’s clearly a marker laid down in the sand with regard to that.

Dr. Jones: So on the industrial base issue – and then I’ve got a follow up for Chris about deterrence and a possible seventh test to you. But on the industrial base, I mean, the challenge right now is if you look at the – let’s say, the munitions problem with the industrial base, particularly for long-range, precision strike, one of the things that clearly comes out of the war in Ukraine is that, unlike this period during the 20 years after 9/11 when we were – we needed a certain type of capability to conduct attacks against terrorist organizations overseas, these kinds of wars that we’re now seeing, state on state, interstate wars, really are industrial-scale wars. And they can be very taxing on the industrial base because either you run out of stuff, munitions, or systems and platforms break down, you need spare parts, and they need to be replaced.

And I think the challenge right now is the timelines for doing it can be quite long. For some of the precision-guided munitions there’s a – there’s at least a two-year time lag between when money is delivered to a prime to produce a certain type of missile, and the first deliveries of the inventory. So a two-year time lag. It can be even longer for some kinds of very complicated weapons systems. In addition, if you’re asking the industrial base to ramp up, let’s say to expand its production capabilities, and it has to expand the infrastructure involved, brick and mortar investments you’re talking about, now longer timelines. And I think, just so people understand, if you’re talking about munitions, the final assembly plants, you actually – they are required to be at certain distances from the local population. You actually have to buy more property. I mean, all this takes years, in some cases.

So the reality here is with this problem I think that all of us have just highlighted, we have a potential timeline issue. And I think – I want to go back to Kari at some point on the urgency in this document – but we have a war going on in Europe. We’ve got significant concern in the Indo-Pacific, even with a Taiwan Strait crisis, about shrinking timeline. And then we’ve got an industrial base that is clearly not capable right now of supporting any kind of a protracted war, and a long time lag to fix it. So I think it highlights a problem. I think why this becomes important is the National Defense
Strategy, as a strategic document, highlights strategy. But when it comes to executing, there’s going to be some huge challenges in implementing it.

Mr. Johnstone: Could I just jump on that quickly, Seth? And I think it’s fair to say that our allies in the Indo-Pacific have noticed this issue as well. And therefore, you hear more and more a recurring theme – Australia, Japan, others – desire to have defense production capacity at home. Certainly, this is a big theme in Japan, as they think about strike systems and whatnot. Part of their criteria is going to be, what can we make at home? Because of precisely the problem you identified. So thinking through how our – how we can leverage allies and partners with forward production opportunities I think is sort of an issue of the future that –

Dr. Jones: I was in Australia last week. Heard this directly from Australian government officials. I think the PrSM system is made – now, co-produced by the Australians or will be co-produced by the Australians. The HIMARS now is – there’s a coproduction facility in Poland. So with some allies and partners, there’s been a willingness to recognize that they have similar problems and to start thinking about collaboration that cuts across along these lines.

Ms. Bingen: Well, can I – you know, there’s an urgency to this. And you mentioned the speed and time. And I’d say, the challenge we have is time is not on our side. And we’ve had previous INDOPACOM commanders talk about 2027. I mean, just last week President Xi publicly said he wants to be militarily ready by 2027. The challenge that poses to, I think, our force and force development is – it’s the timeline. So if you think about munitions, we’re already seeing the department put together its 2024 budget now. So those munitions decisions, the timelines it takes to get facilities capacitized to increase production, those decisions need to be made now, if not yesterday.

The other stress that it puts on the force is there are a lot of, I’ll say, new – there are newer weapons systems in the pipeline, but they’re not going to be available until well after 2027. So we need to be thinking also about how do you fight with the toolkit you have? And for me, a lot of that goes back to how do you better integrate the censors, the shooters that you have in inventory today? Maybe we’ll touch on integrated deterrence. I know that’s a big theme, but –

Dr. Jones: I’m coming to Victor next about that.

Ms. Bingen: – but integration and – you know, part of the challenge here is – I’ll put my bureaucrat hat on – but who funds integration in the Department of Defense? A service is going to want to fund the things that directly align to the service mission. The Defense Agency will do the same.
So who’s responsibility is it for making sure that that integration and the connectivity between weapons systems, between censors is actually happening on timelines that we need them to happen.

Dr. Jones: So Kari brought up integrated deterrence, Victor. This is going to be an unfair question for you.

It is all over the National Defense Strategy. It’s over the Nuclear Posture Review and Missile Defense. I mean, what is your sense about – what does it roughly mean for the viewers, and what is your general reaction to deterrence – to integrated deterrence?

And then, after that, really probably the more important question, as we get down into areas like the Korean Peninsula, we’ve got the North Korean government likely to conduct another test at some point. So how do we think about deterrence when it comes to North Koreans?

Dr. Cha: Yeah, so – so on integrated deterrence, I mean I would agree with what Kari just said. I mean, I think that as a concept it makes a lot of sense.

It’s tried to make more efficient across all of these different capabilities and services and domains, a way to make more efficient how we can do – what we can do in terms of sending incredible signals with regard to deterrence with limited resources.

In the case of North Korea, you know, I think – so in the case of North Korea, I certainly understand the argument that whether it’s – we’re talking about conventional deterrence or nuclear deterrence, there is a lot of logic to the argument that even dictators don’t want to commit suicide, and it’s very clear in the NPR that – and I think there are three sentences devoted to it that clearly state that North Korea will no longer exist if it uses a nuclear weapon.

So I think there’s – that is about a direct a statement as you can make. Deterrence at least conventionally is held since the Korean War. There’s a lot of logic to that. At the same time, though, we’ve seen that after North Korea – I think after they fired a missile over Japan – a ballistic missile over Japan for the first time in quite some time. There were some folks that were saying we should just accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state and just rely on deterrence to keep them at bay.

While I strongly believe in deterrence, I really don’t think that’s the answer because even – you know, rationally, deterrence can work sometimes, but it may not work all the time, and especially when we see, you know, just across the ocean in Europe a nuclear state threatening the use of nuclear weapons
against nonnuclear states, that – you know, that is applying to Russia today, but who says it won’t apply to North Korea in the future.

So, yes, I do believe in deterrence, and I think integrated deterrence is very important in that respect. But we can’t simply rely on that on its own to be our answer for North Korea because it can lead you in one of two directions.

It can lead you to say, let’s just put this problem on the shelf and not deal with it anymore, right. Or it can actually lead you in the other direction to say, let’s carry out a limited military strike on North Korea because we know that they will be rationally deterred.

And so I think – so my point is that it’s important, but it’s – we can’t simply rest all of our – put all of our eggs in this one basket to manage the North Korea problem.

Dr. Jones: I want to come to one issue – if we can put up the map of China’s broader Belt and Road Initiative. The National Defense Strategy focuses predominantly on China in the Indo-Pacific.

Now, as you look at the Belt and Road Initiative, this was in part – this is a map produced by CSIS – what you see is a lot of Chinese activity in in other regions – Victor mentioned this earlier – including investments, but investments that may come with it political pressure and then even military power projection. So we see activity across Africa, the Middle East, parts of Europe, certainly other areas of Asia, including South Asia. CSIS has also done extensive work on Chinese activity, including in the space realm, in Latin America and Chinese trade.

So Chris, how much of – when we talk about China, how much of this, from your perspective, is predominantly in Indo-Pacific, and how much should we be thinking about China in terms of kind of its global reach and global ambitions? And part of the reason I say that is because we’ve seen over the last few years continuing developments of the Chinese base in Djibouti. I’ve seen it with my own eyes. There were a number of indications that the Chinese were interested in expanding in the United Arab Emirates. We’ve seen Chinese interest and expansion in the west coast of Africa now.

So much of this is largely Indo-Pacific? How much of this is global in nature?

Mr. Johnstone: Yeah, my view is that China is principally an Indo-Pacific challenge. And that’s really what ground zero of the competition is. But there’s no question that there are global dimensions to it. And China, as you said, is seeking global presence, including global military presence, in Latin America, the Horn of Africa, the Indian Ocean region more broadly, certainly in the Pacific.
And I think, you know, for the United States, you know, China is a large country. We probably can’t prevent the expansion of its influence everywhere. But it’s important to focus on where our interests are most critical. And that’s why I – that’s where I think, you know, the recent effort, for example, in the Solomon Islands was so important, because there was this sense that China was expanding influence in what was really the American and Australian backyard. There was an urgency that went with that.

Now, the response to that is –

Dr. Jones: Where U.S. Marines fought in World War II.

Mr. Johnstone: Right. Right. And now the response to that is not all military. I mean, a critical part of the engagement in the Pacific that has been stepped up over the last several months is about, you know, meeting the needs of the people who live in that region, whether it’s through combating illegal fishing, addressing the impact of climate change, other support for economic development. But there’s no question that being vigilant in parts of the world that are particularly critical to U.S. interests is important because China has ambitions that extend well beyond their immediate neighborhood.

Dr. Jones: Yeah, what I would add to that is that – I mean, when you show that map, and it shows all the areas that China is operating in, you know, some of this clearly is couched in terms of investment in infrastructure, in all sorts of different areas. And fine, if China can be a source of capital for – that complements the work that’s being done by other international financial institutions, that’s all well and good, because there is a deficit, right. There is a global deficit in terms of infrastructure and development assistance.

The problem is when they condition these things, as you described, or when they use them as, as I mentioned earlier, potential sources of leverage, economic coercion. You know, that becomes a whole different story.

And so I think, you know, where the NDS, I think, is good is in terms of highlighting this. But I think they put this in a category of sort of gray-zone coercion where I think it isn’t gray-zone coercion. This is blatant, outright coercion, which, again, as I’ve said, in the past decade they’ve used it with over a dozen countries, both in the Indo-Pacific and in Europe.

You see the European response in terms – the EU response in terms of things like the anti-coercion law. So it’s a recognized problem. And it matters deeply to our national-security strategy and our economic-security strategy because our ability to get countries to join us, whether it’s the Mineral Securities Partnership or the Chips 4 or any of these other things, is in great
part a function of whether these countries are worried that China is eventually going to find some way to use another form of economic coercion against any one of these countries.

And so I think that, yes, the map of what China is doing is growing into areas that are traditionally U.S. backyards, and some of it may be for a purpose that is useful in closing the gap in terms of development assistance. But if it’s – if it continues to be part of an economic coercion strategy or if we don’t have an anti-economic coercion strategy, then this really is something that becomes a national security issue, not just an economic issue.

Ms. Bingen: Well, and absolutely agree on the economic interest and economic coercion front.

There’s a military significance to this as well, which is the question of do we care as we see the Chinese operate ports, railways, telecom, 5G networks in these countries across the globe, and we’ve seen how they’ve done that in other areas in the South China Sea is once they operate something they shut down the port, they put their own air defenses in, and when you think about the unpredictability or sometimes the threats and where we or our allies and partners may be called on to respond across the world, we or they will need access to some of these places.

So there’s a military significance to it as well.

Dr. Jones: So a follow-up on this, Kari, and for any others that want to weigh in. The National Defense Strategy focuses a lot on the concept of integrated deterrence. Now, deterrence, really, at its core is to prevent a country or an actor from not doing something that it, ideally, otherwise would and that can be done through punishment, so raising the costs of doing it, or it can be, essentially, preventing them from doing it through denial.

But there are a range of activities below the threshold of war – of conventional war – that you’re just never going to be able to deter a country from doing. So there are a whole range of them. Victor’s outlined some of the economic coercive activities. There are, obviously, significant amounts of espionage. There are a range of cyber operations, including offensive cyber operations, that the Chinese have been involved in.

There’s the activity that we’ve seen the Chinese do in places like the South China Sea where they use dredgers to turn atolls into reefs, into what are now military bases. So these kinds of issues – some of these issues are very hard to deter.
Now, in the past during the Cold War, the U.S. conducted offensive operations against the Soviets in areas outside of the Department of Defense. Public diplomacy, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were, essentially, offensive information campaigns to try to undermine Polish, Soviet, Czechoslovak control of information in their respective countries.

And so my question to you is how do we think about issues that we can’t deter? How do we compete in these areas? Because there are a range of things that we’re simply not going to be able to deter. We have to compete. And there’s not a lot of specifics in the National Defense Strategy on what the Department of Defense should be doing here.

This is maybe in the realm of Special Operations Forces. This may be in the realm of the Department of Defense’s activities in information operations or what’s historically been called psychological operations. There may be components of cyber and space, both within the Department of Defense.

So it’s not just the State Department or USAID or the intelligence community. There is a component of this, I think, that should be within the department’s purview.

Ms. Bingen: I agree, and I’m not sure that I have a great answer for you. I guess what I’d go back and talk about a bit here is, you know, integrated deterrence – as a concept it makes sense. But you need to put some meat on the bones, and I would be concerned that it’s everything to everybody and that the way to really make it real is to be focused and identify for what purpose, and then you start bringing in the tools and how – for me, how it will be real is what we see in the budget.

It’s mapping, mapping it to resources. It’s ensuring that there’s sufficient guidance given to the services, to the defense agencies, on specifically what they should be investing in, whether it’s some of those hard power capabilities or some of the soft power or maybe below the surface capabilities.

So, for me, seeing what’s in this ’24 budget request coming up next winter will be really key in terms of how they’re implementing integrated deterrence.

Mr. Johnstone: I’d say, yeah, two things, because I think you’re right, Seth.

I mean, there are certain behaviors, actions, that we’re just not going to be able to deter. Certainly, can’t deter them with military power.

I think a couple of things are important. One is the information piece that you – that you identified, which is spotlighting bad behavior when we see it,
and helping our allies and partners to spotlight bad behavior when they see it. And that's where these efforts, for example to proliferate maritime domain awareness capabilities across the theater, to use unclassified means like the Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative here, so that the world is aware of what's happening. That's, I think, step one in building a coalition, right?

And then the second piece is just – is the capacity building, helping our partners to defend their own sovereignty, however they choose to define it. And so that's where the security assistance, the Section 333 parts of the Department of Defense's toolkit become very important, to help our partners, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, have more tools at their disposal to push back against the coercion they see close to home.

Dr. Cha: Yeah. And I would say it's also helping our partners to build – help them build capacity for partners in the region. So it's not just us doing it, but it's also they're doing it. Like, you know, Japan has done some of this. Korea has done some of this quietly with the Philippines. But I think that's a big piece of it.

The awareness part I think is very important. Like, it's a counterfactual that we could never answer, but, you know, if China had done this sort of militarization of the South China Sea campaign today, like they had started it today, would the response be different in the region? I think the answer is yes, just because there's much more awareness that this is not just something that's in the minds of some security experts at CSIS or in Washington, D.C. This is a real thing that's happening. And so that's an important part of it.

On the BRI stuff and the economic coercion stuff, this is not – this wouldn't be a DOD task. But, you know, we've seen some of the things that have been helpful, where the United States and partners are helping these countries evaluate these deals that the Chinese are coming with – coming to them with, and the potential debt traps that they can fall into. And so I think that's also a very important part of that. I mean, during the Trump administration, they had this concept of the Blue Dot Network, right? Which was to try to evaluate this development assistance that was happening around the world, and which of these sort of met sort of international norms and standards and which of them didn't.

And so that's a very important piece of this. And, again, I mean, the one issue here I would take issue with the NDS is that they talk about this as sort of gray zone coercion. But this is not gray zone. This is very explicit, very direct, and very purposeful coercion. And we should treat it that way.
Dr. Jones: And it can have a significant impact, as we’ve seen. I mean –

Dr. Cha: Very significant.

Dr. Jones: Anybody who’s tracked the – China’s three warfares, for example, they can have significant influence. And I think this is an important part that really needs to be addressed, probably more effectively, and was a huge subject of my most recent trip to Australia. I mean, a country that has really been on the front end of this – or the tip of the spear on this issue.

Dr. Cha: Yeah. And I think – you know, I think that’s very – that’s a very important point, because I think many of us allies and partners can learn from the Australia example. I think many of them can learn from the Australia example. And you’re right, this is – it’s not just the coercion. It’s sort of what it’s intended to do. And the results of China’s success in this coercion are often things that we don’t see, right? So things that allies won’t do. Things that allies won’t say, right? In response to the Hong Kong national security law, right? In response to what’s happening in Xinjiang, right? So they’re not always things that you can point to directly, but they are clearly evidence of, you know, Chinese power and influence.

Ms. Bingen: And then to enable more of this information flow, more of this transparency, the department will have to take a hard look at its information sharing policies, its classification policies, et cetera.

Dr. Jones: Foreign military sales, ITAR –

Ms. Bingen: It’s all of those things, exactly.

Dr. Jones: Yeah. Well, thank you all. Victor, Kari, Chris. We’ve spent the last nearly an hour talking about it. I’m sure we could go on for a much longer period, but I really appreciate all of you taking some time to talk about the National Defense Strategy, but really to dig into where next? What are some of the challenges the U.S. is going to face, I think, in moving from a strategy to an implementation of it? So thanks to all of you, and thanks to all of you for joining us.

(END)