Center for Strategic and International Studies

“A Discussion on National Security with DIA Director Robert Ashley”

Featuring:
Lieutenant General Robert P. Ashley, Jr.,
Director,
Defense Intelligence Agency

Moderated by:
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KATHLEEN H. HICKS: (In progress) – here at CSIS. And I am not responsible for the heat in this room, but I apologize in advance for those who are here with us live. It is warm.

Just really quickly a safety announcement. If there’s an emergency, which we don’t expect to have, please follow the instructions given by Dr. Seth Jones, who I will identify momentarily, and just notice that there are experts behind you and behind me.

Our event this afternoon features Lieutenant General Robert Ashley. Lieutenant General Ashley became the 21st director of the Defense Intelligence Agency on October 3rd, 2017. He formerly – excuse me – served as the Army deputy chief of staff, G2, where he was the senior advisor to the secretary of the Army and the Army chief of staff for all aspects of intelligence, counterintelligence, and security. He has commanded at the company, battalion, squadron, and brigade levels, with combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan as a squadron, brigade commander, and J2.

Our discussion also features two of CSIS’s finest moderators. The first is Dr. Seth Jones, who is also your safety officer. Dr. Jones holds the Harold Brown Chair, he is the director of Transnational Threats Project, and is senior adviser to the International Security Program. Prior to joining CSIS, Dr. Jones was the director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation.

Also we have with us today Juan Zarate, who’s a senior adviser here at CSIS, chairman and cofounder of the Financial Integrity Network, and a visiting lecturer in law at the Harvard Law School.

Really quick announcement on Q&A. On your seats should be on every seat a notecard. If you have any questions that you would like asked during the moderated session, please write it on the notecard. Toward the end of the discussion our interns will be collecting them and passing them to Seth and Juan to ask some of your questions.

So, without further ado, please join me in welcoming General Ashley. (Applause.)

LIEUTENANT GENERAL ROBERT P. ASHLEY, JR.: So my aide told me that I should just get up here and say great-power competition, AI, drop the mic, and walk off. (Laughter.) So, Robbie (sp), I’ve done it.

MR. : Thank you, sir.

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: You’re welcome. I’ll put that on your support form. (Laughter.) Good counsel for my subordinates.

So thanks so much for allowing me this opportunity to speak to you today. I look forward to the questions. I just had a couple of things that I wanted to share with you before we get started in the Q&A to talk a little bit about my last year, which is my experience with DIA. But it’s not really the last year because DIA’s been part of my kind of growing up in the intelligence community.

So, as we talked about in the bio, the 21st director. On 3 October it will be one year in the job. And somebody says, well, how’s that going? It’s going pretty awesome because of the people that I work with. It is a phenomenal group of professionals that work at the Defense Intelligence Agency. So I consider myself very fortunate. They say you want to surround yourself with people that are a lot
smarter than you, and I get a chance to do that every day that I go to work. But I am a work in progress in terms of learning about the organization, and that will be continuing through the three years that I am fortunate enough to be part of the Defense Intelligence Agency.

By way of a little bit of mission and background, the agency really has as a genesis in the bomber gap, as the historians educated me when I came onboard, to understand some of the context in which DIA was born, under the time that Secretary McNamara was the secretary of defense. Started off with probably about 25 individuals and a small office in the Pentagon. And it was a time which is I think very different than where we are today, where the services were taking a very parochial approach. There was concern about a bomber gap, thinking it was somewhere in the range of about 2,500 when in fact it was about 20. And so Secretary McNamara said I need something that’s a little more objective, I need something inside the Beltway that I can – to lean on and provide intelligence for me as it relates to foreign militaries in the operational environment.

So, there you go, you have the birth of DIA back in the early ’60s. And it has only grown since then, from those 25 people that were sequestered in a small office to about 16,500 employees. We have additional contractors and we are global. We are absolutely global. We are in every combatant command and we are in every country team because the attaches that are in all those country teams are part of the Defense Intelligence Agency.

So let me tell you what’s my core mission. Well, my core mission is to make sure that the secretary of defense is never surprised. But let me expand that a little bit. So my customer base – I actually work for the undersecretary of defense for intelligence, for retired Vice Admiral Kernan. That’s kind of my chain of command. It’s the undersecretary of defense for intelligence and it is the SecDef. But I got a lot of bosses, and if you go out to the combatant commands I consider them all my bosses because we work for the warfighter. That is the core and heart of what we do as the Defense Intelligence Agency, but at the same time we also provide advice and information and support to policymakers, both inside OSD and on the Hill.

So a pretty good history of things that we’ve done. That core mission set is – as I said before, it’s foundational intelligence on foreign militaries in the operational environment. That’s kind of where we got our start. But that has expanded over time and it’s expanded in complexity as well. When I think about some of the core things that we do, I’d give you seven kind of perennial things that we focus on in addition to when we talk about that core. And this is all nested within those core functions.

We work – we work a targeting database. So we work targets.

We work intel mission data. So if you are in an F-35 and you’re looking for all the data that goes inside, that feeds that from an electronic warfare standpoint, we provide the bases for that.

We get involved in acquisition. So we track acquisition closely.

Strategic warning. Like I said, the last thing we ever want to happen is the secretary of defense to be surprised. So strategic warning in the context of what is happening with nations, what is happening with technology development, so that the secretary nor the warfighter or the nation, for that matter, are ever surprised.
Collection management. We are deeply involved in the assets – the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets – that we work with.

We also have a heavy piece in science and technology. We actually have engineers that work for us.

So when you think about DIA as an all-source intelligence organization, you may think, OK, well, that’s the analyst that sits down, reads traffic, and tells you, hey, here’s my assessment of what’s going on. But it’s actually very holistic in terms of the organization itself. I mean, we have engineers, we have physicists, we have all-source analysts, we have logisticians, admin, human services. So it is a very holistic organization that covers about 10 different major career fields.

And then the last one, which gets into the core, is the foundational piece. And we’ll talk a little bit about that in more detail hopefully in some of the questions and answers that you’ll ask. So, if somebody’s putting together a target and they’re going to go after a particular location, that foundational intelligence is what we hold. And so they come to that for us. And you pick – you can go back to the chemical sites from several months ago in Syria; that is DIA’s holdings that the command authority comes back, the warfighter, and says what can you tell me about these facilities. That’s the information that we have. And for us, that’s one of the most critical things that we have to prepare the warfighter to understand not only what’s happening in the operational environment, but the militaries themselves.

The other thing I would tell you is context. It’s one thing to say that, well, so tell me about a foreign military; well, they’ve got 10 of these, 12 of those, this is what’s in the air force, this is what’s on the ground. But the context is, so what are they going to do with that? How are they going to fight it? And you’re probably tracking right now – and we don’t really have the feedback yet – that the Russians have a major exercise going on that the Chinese were invited into, Vostok. And that is concluding here over the next 24 to 48 hours. And so for me to be able to provide that – insights that the chairman, the secretary, and the warfighter’s looking for, it’s not that I saw six of these, 20 of those; it’s, how did they fight it? How did they mobilize? What is it that I can pull out of that that tells our key leaders this is the strategy you need to think about of how you counter it? So, for me, that’s the context.

And the context for us, where the great depth is, obviously, is in the M of the DIME. That’s where our depth is. But you can’t ignore the rest of the DIME. So I was quoted about a month or so ago saying that if the Joint Staff J2 were to walk in to talk to the chairman, he’s going to tell him more than just, sir, here’s what’s going on in the military, because I don’t pay attention to the economic, information, or the diplomatic piece, because that military exists within the context of that entire DIME. So that is something, even though that’s not our – that’s not our deepest area that we go into, that is an area that we have to understand because it touches the military. It touches strategy. It touches what we may see some of those foreign entities do. It touches acquisition. It touches technology. So this – the sense that it’s strictly the military piece is a bit of a misnomer. That is our level of expertise, but there are other areas that we have to look at in the context of what’s happening in the operational environment.

So I kind of opened and said you got to talk about great-power competition. So I think everybody in here probably more than once has read the National Defense Strategy, and there probably isn’t anybody that gets in front of the Hill or any senior leaders that talk about what is happening in the
operational environment that they don’t start with great-power competition and what has changed over the course of the last decade.

So, for me, as I look at the National Defense Strategy, for us there’s three major lines of effort, and you’ve seen these. The first one is lethality. The second one is partners and allies. And then the last one is business practice, which all of you as taxpayers would want to make sure that every dime that we spend is absolutely optimized.

But let me kind of go back through the first two. So lethality. So when I think about lethality, it’s not just dropping ordnance on a target; it’s a well-trained analyst, it’s a physicist that has a chance to get access to foreign material to work exploitation. So for everything that we do to be good at what we do, to be good at our core, to be good at the seven things that I laid out for you, that’s our lethality, because what we do is we enable those kinds of kinetic strikes. We enable understanding. We enable strategic context. We enable the decision-makers. And so, for me, that is our lethality, and how I interpret that and then how we become sentinels for the secretary of defense and the execution of our mission.

The other part is partners and allies, and that cannot be more important in any time in history than it is today. And one of the stories I really like to talk about is one of the little-known Army generals back from the World War I to World War II era, a guy named Fox Conner. And Major General Conner, who retired after World War I, has the dubious role of having mentored three key individuals. And even though no one knows who Fox Conner is, the individuals that he mentored were George Marshall, George Patton, and David Eisenhower. But we don’t know who he is. But that’s OK, because the legacy that he’s given us are those three individuals.

And he had advice, which Secretary Gates shared in one of his speeches at AUSA a couple years ago, that he would give to heads of state. And the advice that he gave to heads of states: If you’re going to go to war, it should be the last thing you do. If you’re going to fight, don’t fight for long. And if you’re going to fight, never fight alone. And that’s pretty good counsel. And so that’s why you see that in the National Defense Strategy that one of the major lines of effort that the secretary has outlined for us is partners and allies.

And where the warfighter has really pressed us is on intelligence sharing. You know, we really have to push the envelope with regards to intelligence sharing and how we think about the problems we have to solve. And we have traditional allies that are closer than others. I think that’s a given. But the way that we have to look at these problems is not, OK, which nation do I have a sharing relationship with. The way you really need to think about this is, what’s the problem I’m trying to solve. Define the problem that you’re trying to solve, and from there make a determination who should be under the tent, who should be part of solving that problem. And obviously, in the intel business, you know, we share more with certain partners than we do with others, but the critical piece of that is understanding the problem you’re trying to solve and figuring out who has insights, who has placement and access, and who has capacity that can help us getting after really what are collective problems that we all face. And so I think that’s really one of the key things when we think about partners.

And kind of close to tell you right now that the agency, which is your Defense Intelligence Agency, is better than ever in terms of the level of expertise and the folks that we bring onboard. And you would be thoroughly impressed if you had the opportunity to come and see us and see what we do on a daily basis, because what they do is they get up every morning and the rock they put in their rucksack is your hopes and dreams. It is your way of life. And they raise their right hand and say, I got
it. I’m part of something that’s bigger than myself and I defend the nation. And that’s a pretty good motivation to get them up in the morning.

And so it’s a great group of professionals that I get a chance to work with every single day. I’m proud to be up here, and I’m proud I have a chance to take your questions, and I look forward to those. And thank you very much. (Applause.)

SETH G. JONES: Couple of quick comments before we begin. One is a reminder that for any emergencies you’ll look to me for movement. We generally will move over to the National Geographic Society next door, which is the – the museum, which has got quite a good café if you haven’t been there.

Second is, as Kath mentioned at the beginning, if you have questions, please write them down on the notecards on the seats that you’re sitting on, and then we have a number of people that are going to be collecting them. So I think Clayton (sp) over here and Danica (sp) and others will collect them. So if you have questions, please write them down and they’ll get them to Juan and I up here.

And then third is we’ll hit a range of different subjects over the course of this, so everything from the current state of DIA to current situation in a – in a range of locations overseas. And Juan and I will go back and forth, and then we’ll open it up to Q&A.

Thank you, again, for taking the time.

JUAN C. ZARATE: Thank you, General.

MR. JONES: Let me just start with some of the news we’ve been keeping an eye on today, which is the meetings that – I think they’ve probably ended right now – between Putin and Erdogan on Syria right now, and Idlib. One of the things we’ve been keeping an eye on is the potential for major air/ground operations in the Idlib area. A number of U.S. officials have made comments about concerns about humanitarian catastrophe, potential use of chemical weapons, and a range of other issues including population displacement.

So the first question, it’s a two-parter. It’s what concerns do you have in this – in Syria right now as we see the potential for major operations in and around Idlib?

And the second part of that is, obviously, there’s a lot of interest from your agency in some of the groups, including some of the al-Qaida-affiliated groups in those areas. How do you expect them to respond to the – to a major operation if it occurs?

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: Yeah, so I think you lay out – you laid out some of the – you know, the major concerns, which is the damage to the population that’s living in those regions, which is of great concern. It’s encouraging that we have the discussions that are ongoing, discussions between Erdogan and President Putin.

As far as you watch what’s taking place on the ground, as you – as you start to see the potential of this – and I think the discussions that they’re having lead us down the path of the potential that you’re going to get something that’s less kinetic, if they’re actually engaged in a level of dialogue. Depending on whether that is kinetic or less kinetic, I think you’re going to see a degree of exfiltration through some of these groups, whether it’s the al-Qaida-affiliated group or whether it’s ISIS-affiliated.
When you actually go into Idlib proper, it’s really a melting pot of probably 20 different factions/organizations that’s in that region. So, to the degree that the kinetic operations go off, it does no good for the long term of Syria because all that does is continue to add to the human suffering, which is not where we want to see this. We want to see the dialogue. We want to see the factions and the different parties come together to be able to look at a way we can start settling peace and start working to a sense of normalcy.

MR. ZARATE: General, good to see you, sir. Thank you for allowing me to be up here. Thank you to CSIS for inviting me to join this panel. And good afternoon to everybody. Good seeing you.

General, let me feed off of Seth’s question on Syria and maybe back the lens up, because you said something very important in your remarks about the way that you and the Department of Defense are looking at problem sets for purposes of thinking about partners and allies, but also understanding problems on the ground. And I think Syria in some ways is the – is the witch’s brew of problems from a variety of perspectives. So let me ask you two questions.

One is, when you look at the Syrian landscape, how do you map the landscape in terms of the various actors and the various interests at play? And in particular, how do you think about our allies on the ground?

I then want to ask you a question about how the state actors that are involved there, like Russia and Iran, are acting, and what that tells us about their methodologies and their activities not just in Syria, but in other parts of the world.

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: That was an easy one, thanks. (Laughter.)

Very complicated, as you’ve laid out, and there’s a lot of different organizations, different nations that are involved. Obviously, everybody gets in based on what their national interests are. And so in many cases, you know, what we want to see is stability in the region. You get into policy discussions, which is not my – not my forte, but everybody wants to see stability and responsible actors in the region.

With Russia coming in, with Iran, all of them are looking to posture themselves for not only helping get to resolution where the conflict is, just your value-added, but at some point to be positioned to leverage what a follow-on regime will be, whether it’s Assad, how that is aligned because the key terrain that the Levant and Syria has – always has been. So, for everybody that’s involved, then, it’s really about what’s the landscape going to look like after hostilities. You know, obviously, we get involved because of concerns on just the humanitarian suffering, because of the CT, the threat aspects which brought us in originally. But with Russia and Iran, all of them are looking how do they posture themselves for what post-conflict looks like.

For the Iranians, it potentially is a ground bridge with a favorable relationship with Assad that allows them to get in greater proximity to support Lebanese Hezbollah and issues that are related to Israel.

The Russians were not strangers in Syria before the conflict. But part of when we talked about that great-power competition, that is an opportunity for them to increase their presence in Syria,
whether it’s through airfields, ports, access on the Mediterranean. You saw a rather large exercise, you know, and a presence they’ve had with over 20-some-odd ships in the Mediterranean over the last couple of weeks.

MR. ZARATE: What does all of that tell us about not just their thinking in Syria, but more broadly? And part of what I’m probing is sort of the role of sub-state actors and even proxies in a conflict like Syria or even in other parts of the world, and we’ll talk about some of that.

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: Yeah. So you’ve always had that existence of various proxies, using sub-state actors that have played into that. It adds to the complexity, adds to the potential risk of miscalculation as well. And there are always going to be different relationships that exist with some of those and different arms that can be used through proxies and sub-state actors to be able to – to be the maneuver force on the ground, so to speak, which allows some of the principals to step away from some of the kinetic operations.

MR. ZARATE: How have we thought about the use of sub-state actors? Obviously, in the COIN context, we’ve thought about leveraging tribal leaders, credible voices. We’ve worked with sub-state actors, obviously, in the Syrian context. The displacement of ISIS has been reliant on Kurdish forces. How is – how is DIA thinking about the role of sub-state actors in a proactive way, from a U.S. policy perspective? I know you’re not a policymaker, but from just looking at the map of the world and the relevance of sub-state actors, what’s your – what’s your sense?

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: So part of that is just when you say about, you know, what’s the foundation and what’s the operational environment. So that is to be able to make sure that what are the interests/equities of the various players there in some of these regions are understood by our policymakers. So if you get into a policy discussion, what are the interests of and you pick your group, whether it’s a Kurdish organization, whether it’s someone that’s not even aligned, to understand the fabric. And as you alluded to on insurgencies, whether it’s an insurgency, whether it’s what’s taking place in Syria, you have to understand the demographic of everyone that’s there, what is in their – what is their interest, and then how do you appeal to that interest or where is there a convergence of interest that would allow you to do something operationally on the ground. But obviously, a lot of what you’ve seen – and goes back to the time when, you know, General Nagata was there – it really is by, with, and through other elements as opposed to always having to put U.S. forces on the ground.

MR. JONES: I wonder if I can take a step even further back, General Ashley, and go back to your comment earlier about great-power competition. Obviously, one of the major actors in Syria are the Russians. There’s been a growing discussion both in the U.S. and on the Russian side of what that competition looks like. Russians, many have pointed out, have been involved in election meddling in the United States. It’s obviously much bigger than that. We see them and we’ve seen testimony from social media companies on bots and trolls and advertising, getting involved in politically divisive issues here, not just elections but gun control, Black Lives Matter, a whole range of issues. What’s your sense about Russian strategy and operations against the United States right now? How would you characterize it?

And the second part of that is, looking forward, what are our options for responding? Some have characterized our reaction so far as being somewhat defensive, maybe even reactive, probably not quite like the way the Reagan administration went on an offensive campaign in the 1980s.
So first is how would you characterize the Russians? And, second, from your standpoint at DIA, what’s your sense of how the U.S. should be thinking about this moving forward?

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: Yeah. So when you think about great-power competition, even if you go back to the Cold War time, right, anyplace that Russia could change an alignment, change a relationship, align it to Russia, that would be something they would do to their favor, they would want to do that. I don’t think it’s qualitatively that much different now. So where they can – could get a foothold into a particular nation, develop a relationship/affinity to make sure that they – to work in some degree to distance that particular nation from the U.S.

The other part for Putin is, you know, part of being a great power is that he sits at the table with other great powers. And so that’s part of the intent behind what he wants to accomplish. So he wants to be welcomed to that great-power table alongside the U.S. to be a decision-maker. And so part of being a decision-maker as a forcing function is the ability to inject themselves and inject their presence. We see that in Libya. We see that in Syria, that they inject their presence, therefore he gets himself to the table in some way, shape or form to kind of – to make a decision.

As far as that level of influence, it’s interesting because you talk about elections and other things. I’ll leave that to FBI, Homeland Security, and some other organizations. But there’s nothing new about Russia or the Soviet Union wanting to have that degree of influence. Much as with China, with Russia I spend a lot of my time just trying to read as much background as I can to get an appreciation not only for what’s happening today, but to understand some of the context of the history that’s got us there. And one of the interesting articles that I read was about a concept called reflexive control. And the article that I read dates this back to the time of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. And so reflexive control is where you see information in such a way that you get not necessarily your adversary, maybe your competitor or someone, that you’re trying to influence them to make a decision in a certain way where they don’t realize you’ve done that, where the decision that you’ve made is exactly the outcome they desire but you’re unwitting that they seeded information in a certain way to draw you toward that decision. And so I thought reflexive control is a very interesting concept, but it’s not new.

So think about human operations, whether, you know, it’s dealing with individuals through diplomatic channels, whether it’s Voice of America from the U.S., whether it is Russian television, and the kind of audiences that you can reach now in a digital age. So, as I go from Lenin and the Bolsheviks, which was in the tens to hundreds of individuals trying to gain influence, to where you can simultaneously globally in a digital age look to seed ideas and shape opinions, reflexive control.

So I think the strategy itself is really nothing new. It’s just – and it gets into the discussions about, you know, the speed and emergence of technology and what that has meant to some of these kinds of opportunities. And the Russians are leveraging those.

Now, you talk about the other part, which is really more on the policy side. You know, what have we done? I don’t want to talk about, you know, vulnerabilities or weaknesses. I would say that this is really kind of something that is in Putin’s DNA as a former, you know, KGB agent. It is in his DNA to have these kinds of strategies in which he looks to push out this kind of disinformation.

The other part is think about the instruments of power in a democracy, and the branches of government we have, and the healthy debate that we have about things like this, which is good. It is our strength. But think about the ability and the speed of decision if those decisions and that strategy
and that direction can reside in one individual. So therein you have, you know, the challenge of the pace of operations when one individual can drive those kinds of things.

MR. JONES: One follow up to this. You mentioned earlier how, obviously, you get involved not just on the military side, but in assessments that get deeper into economic, political, and other issues. But how do you see Russia today? Clearly, during the Cold War, although we got – the U.S. got some assessments wrong on the strength of the Soviet Union even in the late 1980s – it was weaker than many thought it was – it was still a global actor. It was a – it was still a superpower in a bipolar system. Their economy is – you know, how would you – how would you assess their economy right now, their alliances? I mean, it seems to many that they are certainly not anywhere near the same place politically, economically, militarily that they were during the Cold War, that they are punching or trying to punch well above their weight.

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: Yeah, so it’s a – it’s a very asymmetric approach. So if you look at the size of the millions of what was the Soviet army, the Soviet military, much larger. And then as you alluded to, it was really the pressure, I think, over the buildup of the Reagan era that really caused those kinds of fissures on their economics.

What we’ve seen so far is Putin continues to invest in the military. He’s had to back off of that a little bit. There are some measures that he’s taking right now. You are watching that through some of the demonstrations that are taking place with regards to pensions and other things that he’s having to face. The economy will struggle, but we’ll see, because ultimately he’s got to make that decision of how much do the Russian people suffer and how much does the buildup of what he wants to do militarily suffer. And the Russian people have a history of being asked to go without and to suffer greatly through their history.

But really, you’ve got to think about it’s not about building the million-plus-man army. It’s about, how do you build some very discrete asymmetric kinds of capabilities that work as a deterrent and for the most part, really, a deterrent for Russia proper? And so you look at some of the investments they have. Obviously, nuclear and, you know, the nuclear weapons becomes a huge investment for them, looking at things like hyper sonics, looking at things like antisatellite capabilities, so it’s more of the asymmetric approach of things that they can do while they still continue to, you know, seek a global presence.

But the other part is the strength of those allies are a little precarious, I think, at best. And I think it’s one of the – one of the things about democracy is that it’s so much stronger when you think about NATO and you think about the allies that we have, those that are built on trust and a partnership that is much stronger than those that are built on any degree of coercion. So in that fashion, I think we’re in a much better position in the long run and we have been, and I think that’s our strength.

Coming out of World War II when you look at the alliances, when you think about what was put in place with NATO after World War II, it’s just a – it’s a different – it’s a different capacity and it’s a different presence globally that the U.S. has with its alliances that are built through a sense of trust and a common set of values in terms of what we hold dear in democratic nations.

MR. ZARATE: General, this is a very interesting discussion. I want to pivot to China in just a second. But this applies to the China-Russia, this question of the use of asymmetric capabilities, asymmetry of actors, asymmetry of means. And the asymmetry from a U.S. perspective goes two ways: one, the ability to use nonstate actors and means, and the ability of autocratic authoritarian states
to use full elements of their economy and nation for purposes of national security in a way that the U.S. can’t. So there’s—there’s kind of a duality to the asymmetry that you have to look at.

First, with respect to Russia, has Russia, sort of playing a weak hand very well through these asymmetries, has that forced us to rethink our own organization, either analytically or even how you posture against Russian military intelligence? The GRU has started to play a much more aggressive role based on press reporting, based on some of these attacks that are happening around the world, which seem to be driven by the GRU as opposed to the FSB, the more traditional intelligence arm of the Russian state. So have we had to and have you had to sort of realign how the DIA thinks about posturing against these great powers that are using asymmetric means?

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: Good question. So it gets back to my discussion about the DIME and what nobody brought up yet, so the Gerasimov doctrine or really nonlinear warfare, and using all those instruments of power and statecraft, you know, to seek a nation’s national interests. So while we still remain, you know, centrally focused on the military aspect of it, we also have to understand where those other instruments of power influence and where there—which overlap.

So what does the Venn diagram look like when our central core functions look at the military to understand that there are informational pieces of that? And then what are the elements that are involved in that? And sometimes it’s traditional military kinds of organizations or organizations like the GRU which we follow—right, follow the spies in this case. So we—we have to kind of expand the aperture of things that we look at.

I mean, the tradecraft from analytic standpoint is the same. I couldn’t give you all nine attributes, but there’s about nine attributes of tradecraft that analysts apply. So irrespective of the problem set, you still have very sound analytic tradecraft and I think that’s enduring of what’s taking place in the operational environment. For us, it’s to understand that it’s bigger than just the military piece of this monolithic, you know, military that sits on a garrison and then goes out and exercises. You have to watch it, so you have to understand where those investments are made.

What are the precursors to a Ukraine? What are the precursors to a Syria? How do you see those faint signals in traffic, whether it’s diplomatic or informational, or just the movement of things on the ground? Which gets into a bigger collection problem which, you know—when you start getting at, what’s publicly available? And what is knowable in terms of nontraditional collection? Because I think for us, the future and kind of a different topic is, so how do you think about publicly available information and how do you build that foundational intelligence? Because there is so much more available now to us in sheer volume that dwarfs the kind of information that we get in some of those really pristine classified kinds of means. And so it’s the integration of all of that that we have to think about.

The other part of that is just how we deal with the data itself. You know, I know you wouldn’t necessarily think about data scientists; now we have to think about data scientists. We actually have to think about, you know, data as a weapon. And then how do you deal with those large volumes of information? So in some cases, one of the projects we’re looking at is an analyst data team. So rather than the all-source analyst who will get whatever shows up traffic-wise, whether it’s DA reporting or what other collection system, you have to think about all the information and the data that’s out there and maybe I want to manipulate it, I want to see it in a different way. So what are the machine learning or the artificial intelligence tools that I need to be able to go after that?
And in some cases, where we’re starting right now is an analyst sitting beside a data engineer where he leans over to the data engineer or she does and says I really would like it if I could do the following or if I could sort it in this way or if I could look for a relationship. Because what we’ve done historically through, you know, the last couple of decades is you work with a contractor, you buy a set of software and it does certain things for you. Right? So I’ll say Microsoft Word, for example. Well, what if the 10 things that Word does aren’t the 10 things you need it to do?

And so part of that is having the data science go and let me break into the code, let me rewrite it and we’ll parse this in a way that’s helpful for you. So we’re really just on the cusp of getting into that kind of analytics, which is really going to define our success in the future of how we look at both open source and classified information and how we apply big-data analytics, AI, machine learning to be able to look for some of those things and very disparate information where – you know, I heard it described before as, what are the faint signals of conflict, faint signals of war? Well, faint signals that help you look at I&W because information is so disaggregated you might not see it. It doesn’t mean you take the human out of the loop.

There’s a great book called “Human Plus Machine” that I read about a month ago. And, you know, there is still that analyst, the human that applies good judgment. But more and more, we’re going to start bringing in those AI tools to deal with the sheer volume of things we have to look at.

MR. ZARATE: Fantastic. Let me – let me switch now to China, Seth, if that’s OK with you.

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: OK.

MR. JONES: No, it’s not all right. No, I’m just kidding. It’s fine.

MR. ZARATE: The general’s in charge.

MR. JONES: Yeah. (Chuckles.)

MR. ZARATE: Maybe a baseline question and for kind of our education about your view and DIA’s view of the Chinese military, its capabilities. It’s obviously developing more than just a regional approach. They have bases now in Djibouti, looking at other parts of the world, deep-water navy, technological capabilities that are running in parallel if not dovetailing with sort of the national interests to see China break out as the chief technology sort of country around the world on AI, on quantum computing, perhaps other types of technological systems.

What’s your diagnosis of where the Chinese military is and where they’re headed? And I think that may dovetail neatly for us on a question of how we think about technology and technological superiority.

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: So much like the Russians, the Chinese have watched us very intently since Desert Shield, Desert Storm, and I think they’ve watched us in a high degree of amazement of what we pulled off in 2003.

So if you go back and it’s – it gets back – a lot of times, I’ll always come back to that context, kind of point. So you think about, when is the last time the Chinese fought a war? Vietnam, 1979. So look at what they’ve done. They’ve watched us over the course of the last couple of decades as they’ve grown in capability. And in many ways, they’ve mirrored some of the things we’ve done. They’ve
taken their military districts and they made them joint headquarters. We have a thing called the National Training Center where we send units on the ground to do joint training. They’ve built several of them. So in many ways, they watch us closely, they learn and they’re trying to build like capabilities.

I think the ultimate of what that end state is – I wouldn’t be so bold as to say I know what that is. And like I said, if you delve into the academics that have looked at China and studied it through the decades, you can pick up a book that says “The Hundred-Year Marathon” and it says that this is global in intent and it’s looking to mirror the U.S. and it’s looking to put military bases and to have that huge presence. Or we can read another book, “The China Dilemma,” and it’s less nefarious. It’s about taking care of the Chinese people. So I’m digesting all of that and trying to get a sense of what we understand through, really, some of our collection.

But obviously, right now, you know, when they say, well, we’re going to go out into these series of islands, we’re going to reclaim about 3,200 square feet, there’s nothing military about this, we’ll accept the fact that we’re starting to put electronic warfare, anti-ship cruise missiles, air defense, so this we watch closely obviously as we do on behalf of the nation.

But it’s not a forgone conclusion that this is going to be a competitor that turns to an enemy. But I – but I do watch things like what’s taking place in Djibouti, you watch relationships that they have that are economic that may be, hey, I’d like to be able to lease a port for a hundred years. And picture a country, whether it’s Sri Lanka or whether it’s Pakistan, and then what takes place over time? Does that – does that lease become a constant visit of a naval presence? Does that naval presence turn into a base? Does that base turn into yet a presence, again, mirroring very much what the U.S. is able to do from a global standpoint?

So right now, I think the debate is, is it really a regional hegemon in the Pacific to ensure that they’re able to take care of the Pacific region in terms of Chinese interests? Or do they have interests that are more global in nature? And obviously, we watch all that closely.

We look very closely at the technology development. Obviously, there are some breakout things. We watch the AI side of the house, hyper sonics, counterspace, what they’re doing with regard to subs. If you’re following the maritime piece of that as well, they’re in the trials for their first carrier. They got an old one from the Russians, now they’re building their own. So this is a large military, but it’s – for a military to be capable, it’s more than just having a lot of things, it’s the ability to operationally employ those and fight them. And so that matters as well in terms of that level of experience. So the fact that they’ve not had a war since ’79 is not a small fact.

MR. JONES: Building on that comment, one of the things that I think many of us who have been in various aspects of the Department of Defense have kept an eye on is the desire for overmatch. And, you know, we’ve been fortunate enough in a number of conflicts to be facing enemies where we have overmatch in multiple domains.

The Chinese present a much more difficult situation, whether it’s a South China Sea or it’s a Taiwan Straits. Based on where the Chinese, including the PLA, are going, I mean, what’s your sense about challenges if this something turned into a conflict? I mean, how much could we expect overmatch now against the Chinese?
LT. GEN. ASHLEY: Yeah, so I’m not going to talk about vulnerabilities, but let me take out one of the generic contexts of domains and what you’re really familiar with. So what domains have been contested over the last 17 years? Really, the ground domain. So as you look at great power competition and near-peer competitors, all those domains – and it’s in the National Defense Strategy where they have laid out and the secretary has articulated this, as the chairman has as well – that all domains are contested.

Now, one of the central problems that’s laid out in the National Defense Strategy is ensuring that we’re able to keep that gap in terms of our advantage. So whether it’s maritime, space, terrestrial or air, all those domains are potentially contested to a degree. What I wouldn’t want to get into is any specifics on vulnerabilities, but the things that you saw, you know, in 2003, our ability to move into Iraq, you know, this is a different time period, this is a different set of capabilities, these are different enemies. And I’ll leave it at that.

MR. JONES: Good. I was going to read my first question.

MR. ZARATE: Go for it. I’m preparing mine, too. Some are quite neatly related to the ones we’ve asked, so that’s good. Yeah.

MR. JONES: These are – these are good.

You’ve touched on this a little bit, but given DIA’s role in developing targets and S&T advancement, how are you using autonomy, artificial intelligence, maybe open-source intelligence, to identify targets? So on the operational and tactical level.

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: Yeah. So kind of in a generic fashion, let me just talk about computer vision for example. So in any given day, whether it’s, you know, whatever you may collect, right, the challenge is the volume of information you go through. So how do you reduce the workload for the analyst? So when you think about targets – and targets aren’t necessarily just things. It’s kinetic. Part of it’s just understanding the operational environment. It may be understanding not only strike, but no strike. It may be wanting to understand hospitals, schools, other kinds of infrastructure.

So you look for patterns or the ability of algorithms that identify certain kinds of facilities or certain things on the ground that allow you to just exponentially understand what is in that infrastructure or what’s on the ground that allows you to look at things that are either potential targets or that would not be targets.

MR. JONES: OK.

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: So it’s really training algorithms to be able to look for things that are military in nature or certain kinds of facilities.

MR. ZARATE: General, before we get too far from the China question, I have got a couple here. So I’m going to – I’m going to mesh them. So apologies to the people asking the questions, I’m going to do this a bit more efficiently.

You addressed this a bit, but given that the PLA is getting stronger and engaging modernization, what’s your biggest concern with respect to the PLA? And how can the U.S. and allies
in the region work together to prevent the PLA from undermining stability, especially in the South China Sea?

And the addendum to this is, how do you assess China’s Belt and Road initiative in terms of a potential military threat to the Indo-Pac region and U.S. interests?

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: OK. A hard one to unpack.

MR. ZARATE: Sorry.

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: So I think the biggest part of that is to make sure that, as we work with the partners and allies, they have eyes wide open and that they understand the nature of those relationships when China comes in with a great offer funding for a project. And what does that really mean for them? And this has – this has been in open press when we talk about coercive economics, that what may look like a really great deal as part of the Belt and Road initiative or some other presence manifests itself into coercive pressure. And a lot of times, those deals aren’t necessarily manifesting themselves in – you pick your nation – they’re coming in, this is great, I’m going to get jobs, this is going to help my economy, when in fact what they do is they bring in workers and they actually supplant the host nation.

So I think the biggest part of this is – and there are good things that, obviously, the Chinese do, but it’s also to understand with eyes wide open what the nature of that relationship is. And we’ll have to look at their track record with the nations they do have close relationships with – and some of those are coming out – to have an appreciation for what coercive economics look like. And there’s a little bit of buyer’s remorse in that process, and so I think that’s integral as well.

And the other part is – there’s a great book that was written by Graham Allison called “Destined for War.” And the little subtitle is “Can China and the U.S. Avoid the Thucydides's Trap?” Right? My goal was to get Thucydides into this discussion. (Laughter.)

MR. ZARATE: You did it.

MR. JONES: There you go. (Laughter.)

MR. ZARATE: There is a question on reading recommendations. I think you’ve give us at least 10 so far.

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: I gave you a couple.

MR. ZARATE: I may not ask that question.

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: Yeah. So I had a chance to meet Graham and I read his book actually a couple of times and found myself highlighting and understanding it. Because as I said what I do as the director is a lifelong education. And you can take somebody that is – so this is the interesting part of the forum, right? You can take somebody that spends their entire life and does nothing but studies the PLA or studies China and they will still tell you they’re a work in progress.

So as you look at that, part of what Graham’s, you know, premise is is you’re not going to box them in, but I think there’s also a great quote in – actually, I actually have it written down here. This
was not by – not by purpose, but I just – let me – let me share this with you because you – because you bring up that point and it goes into Graham’s book and it talks about the relationship with China. And you get back to that Thucydides’s trap, that when you have a rising and a reigning power, not everything is destined to end in conflict.

And so Graham lays out about 16 different case studies. And really, the Thucydides’s trap based on a reigning Sparta and a rising Athens is that when you have that kind of a dynamic that you’re going to have a conflict. And Graham’s – I think Graham’s counsel to us is it’s not a predetermined outcome that you’re going to have a conflict.

And so what I thought was a great quote from the secretary – and I’ll read you the quote here because I think it brings in the context of, you know, what is the nature of the relationship with China? And this is Secretary Mattis and kind of the counsel that he gives. It says, “A generation from now, we will be judged on whether or not we successfully integrated rising powers while increasing economic prosperity, maintaining international cooperation based on agreed-upon rules and norms, protecting fundamental rights of our people and avoiding conflict.” Pretty insightful.

And so when you think about a rising China, part of what came out of World War II with, you know, with Bretton Woods, with NATO, with the IMF, the WTO, is this rules-based order which we can, whatever you want to call it, the current world order, the liberal world order, but it was bet on a set of rules and norms. And there were a couple of nations that weren’t there at Bretton Woods and didn’t sign on any of the documents. One was Russia and the other was China. And so they may tell you – not to speak for them – that those were not necessarily the norms that they signed up to.

But what Graham lays out in his book is that they’re not looking to break the current world order, they’re looking to bend it to their advantage. And some of the things you alluded to in terms of just how democracies operate, it allows them some maneuver space to be able to do that. And then Graham lays that out in some of the argument that he puts in the book I think very, very well.

MR. ZARATE: Maybe I can bring it back to DIA bureaucrats and budget with these two questions.

MR. JONES: Everybody is on the edge of their seats right now.

MR. ZARATE: Yeah, exactly. The first is, how will the big plus-up in the DOD budget affect you? Or how is it affecting you maybe?

The second is a more specific question, especially given your focus on partnerships and alliances, how is the DIA looking at any innovations in the defense attaché system?

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: Yeah, so it just – it allows us to sustain what we have and grow and, you know, grow a little bit in some of the areas. So we’re very fortunate, the budget being what it is, that we’re able to grow a little bit. Because obviously, the mission sets that we have, as you look at the 2+3, requires us to balance all of that.

And the second part was innovation as it relates to –

MR. ZARATE: The attaché system.
LT. GEN. ASHLEY: Yeah. So from the attaché system standpoint, I think part of it is, what can we do to help them from a – from a big analytic standpoint? Really, one of the great things that we have is that – is that presence in all these nations of all the defense attaches. So for all intents and purposes, both for our warfighters, combatant commanders, secretary of defense, kind of the eyes and ears of the chairman, of the secretary and for the warfighter.

And to the degree that we’re able to have an appreciation for technology, big data, analytics, to be able to help feed them and direct them and give them a little more fidelity – obviously a two-way relationship because they’re going to be doing the exact same thing for us – is how we’re going to empower and enable them. But the critical part of what we – what we have in our kit bag are the DAOs.

MR. JONES: I was going to stick with this DIA theme that Ron started and get into issues of hiring and retention.

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: OK.

MR. JONES: In the – in the age where we live in, we’ve got competition, including salaries from private sector firms. You’ve got, you know, some people politically who may be less willing to serve in the government or other variables like that, including, you know, people complain about the clearance processes sometimes.

What do you – what do you say both to current and future analysts to bring them in and keep them – keep them in? How do you – how do you think about hiring and retention when faced in the world we live in with some of the opportunities people may have elsewhere?

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: It’s something that goes back to something we had in the opening comment. I don’t know if I said it here because I had another speaking engagement before we came in. If not, let me repeat it.

So just imagine if every morning you got up, you know, what you got to do was ensure the hopes and dreams of 320 million Americans, if you got a chance to be part of something that’s bigger than yourself, if you had a chance to defend the Constitution – oh, by the way, whose 234th birthday is today. So I will never be able to pay you as much as, in many ways, industry can. But it’s that sense of service. It’s the sense of service to the nation that is what brings people in. And in many ways it’s because that was carried on from a previous generation.

When I was on the Army staff, our G1 used to like to tell, you know, 70-some – 75 percent of the soldiers that come in have a direct relative – a mom, a dad, a sibling, an aunt or an uncle – that wore the uniform. They may not have worn it for 20 years. They may have worn it for five years. But at some point in their life they raised their right hand and said I want to be part of something that’s bigger than me. I enjoy the liberties and the freedoms that I have every single day, and so I’m going to pay back. In some cases, even if that’s two years, what I would say is thanks. Thanks for being part of something bigger than yourself for two years.

I started off because I wanted to do this. I’ve got a brother who was an Air Force pilot, a dad who was a soldier in the Korean War; was a vet in Vietnam in the Air Force. So I got two of four services covered in my dad. And, you know, I joined the military at ’84 with the idea that I want to be part of something bigger than myself. And 34 years have screamed by. They have really flown by.
The other part is retention. Do we have industry hire people out from underneath us from time to time? Yes, we do, because sometimes they can double their pay. That is just a fact of life. But, you know, our retention rate is good. It’s not an area where I’m concerned. We’re going to occasionally lose talent. But I can tell you, we still get the best and brightest.

And one of the things – it’s not only the hopes and dreams of everybody in this room. It’s the fact that you get to work with incredible people who are very apolitical, who come to work with their nose down to the grindstone, looking at what they can do to take care of you. And they take care of my kids and my family.

And so I’m not concerned. We’re aggressive in going out, and we do the best we can to market, to say we have some very interesting problems; we’d like you to be part of helping us solve them. And in some cases, with the millennials, for as much as they may be maligned – and there are some in here; I won’t ask you to raise your hand – is I try to educate myself on that part of my job to be able to reach out and talk to them.

Part of what I see is a generation that says I want to do something. I want to be part of the solution and I want to help solve a problem. And that’s why they join, and that’s why they come to work at DIA. That’s why they work in the services. That’s why they put the uniform on.

And a lot of times that ability to be part of something that’s bigger than yourself is enough to keep you in, because we’ve had times before when senior leaders would come in and they’d look at us, and some of the senior leaders in the military, and they’d go, look, I know you could double or triple your income right now. And they’d just look at us and go thanks for what you do. So for everybody that’s part of that and anybody that’s watching, thanks.

MR. JONES: I think you just got a group of new recruits.

MR. ZARATE: Yeah, that’s a great recruiting speech.

GEN. ASHLEY: So I should have brought the – yeah, raise your right hand after this. I will give you the oath. (Laughter.)

MR. ZARATE: Form’s in the back.

GEN. ASHLEY: There you go. And we’ll take you back to DIA.

MR. ZARATE: General, could I ask you about opportunities, and in particular opportunities around partnerships?

GEN. ASHLEY: Yeah.

MR. ZARATE: That’s sort of embedded in some of these questions, but also woven throughout our conversation, and maybe ask you this question. Where do you see opportunities for the DIA to sort of broaden its relationships within the intelligence community, where you’re often supporting but also supported? Where do you see opportunities in particular with the private sector, which plays a more and more critical role as we look at the threat environment?
And then, finally, where are opportunities with nation-state allies? We often talk about challenges we have with Turkey and certainly with Russia. But where are there opportunities to create new forms of alliance or partnership that you are hopeful for?

GEN. ASHLEY: Yeah. So let me kind of conflate the first two when you look at, you know, where the new partners’ relationships, and kind of conflate a little bit of that with industry.

MR. ZARATE: Sure.

GEN. ASHLEY: One of the things that—and one of the projects we have is kind of building a new data environment, of which we’re heavily dependent on industry to help us out with. So we want to take to industry hard problems that, although there’s frustration with the acquisition process and we’re working to be more agile and faster, but we want to take some of these problems to industry where they look at it and they go, that is such a unique challenge; I want to be part of it. And so rather than thinking insular of I’m going to build this capability, I’m going to build this software, I’m going to build this tool, I’m going to build this system, we really want to go and kind of canvass the community. Here’s the problem I’m trying to solve. Who has an 80 percent solution? And if I get an 80 percent solution, which is cutting-edge industry, I spend the last 20 percent of that figuring out how do I integrate it to solve specifically my problem?

And so our outreach to industry is, I think, probably the most aggressive that it’s ever been. And it’s not just for DIA. It is really for all the Department of Defense. When you look at what you’ve heard out of the DepSecDef, Shanahan, what you’ve heard out of the secretary, and the team that has been built—and look where they came from; they came out of industry to build those bridges, to build those relationships that have been nontraditional in many ways, and to bring them in to solving some of our hard problems.

The other part you talked about is kind of the allies and partners. I think part of that is understanding what nations’ national interests are, trying to illuminate what are some of the regional challenges, what are some of the threats or some of the risks. And it gets back to my comment. You know, one of the most traditional relationships we have is our Five Eyes partners; you know, with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain. And from an intel-sharing point, that is one of our closest relationships, which is very well known.

But it goes back to my opening comments is what’s the problem or the issue that I have? Who has equities in it? And how do I build that team? And so, rather than starting with an existing relationship or an existing sharing relationship, what’s the problem I’m trying to solve? And then when I started thinking about, OK, who should be under the tent, when I started looking at who has equities, who has interest, and I think one of the things that we have to do from an intel community, you know, you always have to measure the risk versus the gain.

And for us, it’s we’ve got to kind of knock down the doors of what was some Cold War mentality with regards to risk-gain on traditional, nontraditional partners of who we share with. Obviously we’ve got to protect sources and methods. We’ve got to be very cognizant of counterintelligence threats on a whole host of levels. But I think there are more—and not talking any specifics with some of those partners are—is to understand first their national interest, problems that are relevant, and then how do we have a relationship with them?
And so you’ll see in some areas which have been traditionally no foreigners, and how we’d share information and how we worked in certain disciplines, that that aperture is opening – slowly, but it is opening. And it’s really kind of the charge that we’ve been given by combatant commanders, by the secretary of defense, as we look at nontraditional allies and partners, to strengthen existing relationships and to look at where do we forge new relationships where we have common interests against competitors that are of concern to us and that we can also be able to enable them. And it’s very much a two-way street where they can enable us.

It goes back to the Fox Conner quote. When you’ve got to go to war, never go by yourself. And, you know, the deployments I’ve had in Iraq and Afghanistan, multiple times downrange, I was never there in just U.S. formations. There were always partner nations with us.

MR. ZARATE: Just one quick follow-up, because I think it’s interesting, given the dynamics, and especially given the question of sort of Chinese leveraging of their own technology companies. Do you worry a little bit that there are sort of antibodies in the – sort of the U.S. private-sector industry and the tech world to cooperating with the military? You’ve seen a bit of this in the Google context, and especially in the post-Snowden era –

MR. JONES: We’ve seen it on the FBI side, yeah.

MR. ZARATE: Yeah – post-Snowden era. Are you worried that the level of cooperation that we may need with U.S. technology companies won’t be there if we need it or when we need it?

GEN. ASHLEY: I’m probably less than subjective on this topic, having been in uniform for 34 years, because of why I get up in the morning and come to work.

I think we have to make – we have to have that dialogue. That’s part of our strength as a democracy, that if they choose not to be part of that, they choose not to be part of it. The goal would be, where they have great technology and there are things they can do to help secure the nation, would help us get insights, that they would be a willing partner in that process. But every CEO and every board will make their decisions of where they want to make those kinds of investments.

You kind of alluded to do I have concerns with the Chinese? Huge concerns with regards to their ability to leverage their industry to have a hook into that, to come back to the Chinese communist party, to inform their senior leaders. And so that kind of gets back into that, you know, kind of eyes wide open with where you’re making investments in industry.

The CFIUS process, which is the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States – recently the Government Accounting Office went through a study. I think it was released probably about two months ago. There is interest on the Hill in CFIUS, that we have a little more strength behind that process in terms of how we deal with foreign partners and where they’re allowed to make investments, what they have to declare.

So there is risk in that. You look at just the sheer theft of intellectual property and the risk of doing business with some of these companies is definitely something that is of great concern to me; not only doing business with the companies, but just, you know, the theft from a cyber standpoint of intellectual property. And when you do business with any of these companies – and this was in my testimony from March – to give an example, let’s say you lay out a contract and I have a contract for
the industrial-control system at DIA. And so I do that contract with Jim, and Jim is an American company.

But Jim has a subcontract with Jake. Jake’s an American company. I’m going to put Josh in Kaspersky Labs. And then Jake does a subcontract for a certain part of industrial control systems, but he does it with Josh’s company, who happens to be getting their software or some piece of that from Kaspersky Labs. Is the contract language they have right now written in such a way that it would preclude me knowing that?

So that’s a concern, because when I come in to DIA, my bigger concern may not necessarily be what’s taking place on the battle space if I can’t turn the power on because there’s a trojan that Josh put in the back of the industrial-control systems to shut down the power to the building, because it was in place and I didn’t realize that it was a sub to a sub to a sub that happened to have a hook back into. It could be a Chinese company. It could be a Russian company.

So when you think of CFIUS, when you think of acquisition, when you think of everything that’s tied into that, we’ve got to be eyes wide open and understand those processes. There’s a thing called white labeling. And so white labeling is not classified. You can Google it and find it. And so you buy a device. You buy a phone, and it’s by Ashley Manufacturing and it’s a reputable company. But who made the guts of it? Because of white labeling, it wasn’t necessarily me. It could have been something else. And that is hidden to you.

And so we have to understand those kinds of things in terms of the development. When we went through the testimony – one of the senators asked a question; asked and said, OK, everybody – and this was when we had the FBI director, CIA, NSA, DNI, and NGA all sitting there – and he asked and said, OK, if you would buy a Huawei phone, raise your hand. Nobody raised their hands. If you would buy technology from ZTE or you own technology, raise your hand. Nobody raised their hands.

After testimony, my director of intelligence, who is an incredibly wise man, said, you know, the question you should have been asked was do you know what’s inside your phone? That was the right question.

MR. JONES: Well, we have – we’ve hit on a couple of the competitors.

GEN. ASHLEY: OK.

MR. JONES: We have questions now – I actually poured this for you if you want that.

GEN. ASHLEY: Should I trust him and drink it? (Laughter.)

MR. JONES: Yes, you can – I’m a partner. (Laughter.)

We have a – we have two questions on the Iranians. And the first one is your assessment of the risk of military confrontation with Iran after the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal. That might be either conventional or through proxies. Obviously they’re active – the Iranians are active in Yemen. They’re active in Syria, Iraq, a range of other places; Lebanon.
And then the second is, in terms of funds freed up by the JCPOA, how much, from your perspective, did Iran or has Iran spent on social, economic, and other needs, and how much on military and proxies from that force?

So the first is –

GEN. ASHLEY: Yeah, the first – the first I can’t answer.

MR. JONES: (Laughs.) OK.

GEN. ASHLEY: And I can only talk around a bit of the second one.

So part of what we do is we watch Rouhani and his investments. And so there are a lot of economic issues with Iran. I don’t know if this has come out before, but there’s a lot of things that he is working hard on to try to bolster the economy. I can’t speak to any details of anything that would have been siphoned off or that would have enabled them to put more money against Quds Force or other, you know, extreme nefarious acts based on JCPOA or anything along those lines. But, I mean, we do watch the investment. We do watch the dollars.

One thing I would kind of comment on is one of the things that I think Rouhani and the Iranian government did not see come to fruition was a greater investment under JCPOA during the kind of window that that was in place, that they didn’t really reap the benefits. And I think part of that is really just the concern of the nature of doing business with Iran as a country, irrespective of JCPOA, that did not bring nations in to try to take advantage of that. But I can’t really talk to, you know, those kind of vulnerabilities or details of where the money was moved.

MR. JONES: One broader question, though, is, you know, the Iranian conventional capabilities are not particularly strong; ground to air. They do have a reasonable missile program, and they’ve put a lot of investment, as we talked about on the Russian side, in the irregular or asymmetric category. They still have a close relationship with Hezbollah. They’ve got a range of sites in Syria. We’ve kept a close eye on the Israelis targeting both fixed and mobile sites, Iranian sites, in Syria; obviously have a relationship with the Houthis.

What’s your sense about where the Iranians are going in the Middle East more broadly? And second, historically they’ve also expanded out of some of these areas into Africa or even Latin America. Do you have any broader concerns about global Iranian activism?

GEN. ASHLEY: So let me kind of focus on the original piece. Obviously the Iranians – it goes back to the time of Darius and Xerxes – see themselves really as the preeminent power. They want to be the hegemon in the region. The challenge they have is being in the minority. And the nature of the allies and relationships that they have do not set them up to be able to do that. So you see this nefarious activity that takes place by way of the Quds Force, which has been ongoing, or by other proxies, such as LH.

So we’ve seen still obviously very active in terms of what the Quds Force does, what they’ve done in Syria, what they do to facilitate the Houthis in Yemen, what they do to facilitate Lebanese Hezbollah in the region. I wouldn’t want to get into any specifics outside of that particular area.
One thing I would say about the Houthis specifically is I don’t necessarily consider them an Iranian proxy. The Houthis kind of make decisions and drive where the Houthis want to go. They just happen to be aligned with where the Iranians are happy for them to be, which is against the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. So there you see that level of investment and support.

But the nefarious activity that you see from Iran is of great concern in the region as a destabilizing factor, especially what they do with regards to LH, and concerns about what the changing of the fabric of Iraq means under a new government, which is still struggling to kind of set itself in place, and the lack of really governed space. And you’ve seen that manifest in the Israeli actions, where you’ve got this kind of ground traffic where you’re moving weapon systems across Iraq into Syria, and the Israelis have taken action against that.

So that is kind of a larger concern as well is what’s really going to be the nature of the relationship between Iraq and Iran. How permissive does that environment remain as they still struggle how to work their way through, you know, the insurgency that ISIS is developing into? And what does that mean for kind of their presence in the region and that kind of ground gateway?

MR. ZARATE: General, a couple of questions related to the predictive capabilities of the intel community – often not great; lots of historical examples of where we’ve had blind spots. I know you mentioned in your remarks part of your principal duty is ensuring the secretary of defense is not surprised, avoiding strategic surprise.

So let me ask a two-parter again. First is, do you think we’re getting better or can get better in terms of our predictive capabilities by looking at both the exquisite data and the mass amounts of data, and then applying better analysis, better AI, better human training, et cetera, on top of it?

And, secondly, and perhaps more interestingly, what are the flashpoints? What are the issues that worry you, that keep you up at night, that you are keeping a close eye on and that you brief the secretary of defense on, to the extent you can let us know?

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: So, from indication and warning as it relates to AI, machine learning, I think that will be a huge enhancement for us. And then let me put it in the context of tradecraft.

So indications and warning, obviously, you have to understand the problems, and we have warning problems. You know, we look for indicators. The indicators are only going to be as good as you have a sensor to sense them and the information that’s coming in. And you want to make sure that you are able to design that and bring information in such a way that the cacophony of all the information that is out there that doesn’t just get lost in the noise floor. And I think AI is going to be able to help us do that.

Part of that – and it kind of goes back to an earlier question – we talk about analytic tradecraft and a degree of confidence. So, as an analyst sits in front of a senior leader, they will say, you know, based on reporting, based on the sources, based on what I’ve seen, I have a moderate, or if you see a national assessment it says I have a high degree of confidence, and it goes back to sourcing and analytic tradecraft. So part of what we’re doing now – you never want to be in a position where you say, well, the computer told me so, right? So part of the challenge we have now, and I think really the opportunity, is as we look at algorithms, as we look at machine learning and AI, is developing a degree of confidence within the AI, a degree of confidence within the algorithm, so that you kind of have to
test it against use cases to be able to prove that it can, in fact, come back with a high degree of confidence that the analysis that it’s doing is correct.

And so you kind of alluded to, you know, one of the conversations I had with one of our senior leaders is – he kind of asked the question – and this is a couple years ago – and it was almost an analogy back to August 1914. So what – and, you know, and the leadup to World War I. What are knowable? What could – had we had today’s technology, what was knowable? What would we have seen? And so when you see these faint, discreet things that sometimes fall below the noise floor, what was knowable? What could we have known going into World War I? And where was it available?

And so, as I think about that and I think about the tradecraft, part of what we want to try to bring in this data environment that we – that we bring analytics to is what you’re able to do on the World Wide Web, but with the intent of understanding indications and warning from an intelligence standpoint. And then I think really the strength in what the IC has is taking that information – and that’s kind of your Venn diagram – that information that is available on the World Wide Web, to be able to bring that in, and then the things that we get that are in the classified realm, and in that Venn diagram that overlay, or overlap, I think is kind of that insight. But again, it’s not the AI in a thing to itself. It’s to be able to sample more information, reduce the burden on the analyst, but at the end of the day there is a human in the loop that, based on training, understanding your tradecraft, studying the problem, makes a judgment. And that judgment has got to be one that we’ve got to get inside, you know, kind of the OODA loop to be able to warn or to let a key leader know that I see the following and I think here’s a potential couple of courses of action that may be evolving. And in some cases that warning may be nothing more than a snap exercise, and in some cases that warning may be they’re coming over the border.

One of the – one of the challenges you’ll always have is ultimately those kinds of levels of decisions reside in many cases in the head of a very small number of individuals. And so while we look at all those indicators on the ground, one of the things that I’ve learned over the years is an appreciation for the decision calculus of your opponent. And that goes from if you’re on opposite sides of the berm of a battalion, a brigade, an army, or if you’re trying to understand what is Putin’s decision calculus in this snap exercise and what would be his decision or what would drive him toward something that was operational as opposed to an exercise, or something that Xi Jinping may direct the PLA to do.

So a lot of that is the art and science of it, but a lot of times we also have to study the personalities. Not to sound trite, but if you’ve ever seen the old George Patton book with George C. Scott, you know, at one point he goes, Rommel, you know I read your book. That is not a – that is not a small point to understand what is driving a leader’s decision and what is – what is in their decision calculus. And you could – you could take that across the 2+3, and in some cases it’s more resonant in a single individual, whether it’s the supreme leader, whether it’s KJU, Putin, Xi Jinping, or in some cases it’s an assembly of experts or it’s a small group that advises. But that’s part of the insights that we have to be able to understand.

MR. JONES: We are almost at the end of our time here. One subject that has not come up yet, which I’ll ask right now, is on the Salafi jihadist landscape. I think there’s no question right now when you look at the percentage of territory the Islamic State has lost it’s been significant. They’ve lost virtually everything that they had once controlled, certainly during their peak levels in 2014, ’15, and even ’16. What’s your sense, though, of the evolving landscape? I mean, by our count we’ve got a CSIS report that comes out soon where we’ve calculated numbers of fighters and numbers of groups,
and there’s still pretty significant numbers from countries like Somalia and Yemen through into Libya, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and even into Southeast Asia. What’s your sense about how much we’ve won? Some people have used terms like defeated or crushed. How would you describe right now where the Islamic State and al-Qaida and other groups like that are? And how might they resurge if they were to – if they were to come back?

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: So it’s in transition, and let me just use Iraq as a – as kind of a – as a vignette. It is in transition. It’s probably where AQI was 12, 13 – you know, when we left in 2011 and we drew down in December. So you still have pockets. You still have ungoverned space I think we’ve seen a small uptick in the amount of attacks, kind of high-profile attacks in Baghdad and in Iraq.

So this becomes one of – it’s constant pressure. You will have to have constant pressure. We will have to continue to see an Iraqi security force that is viable and capable and continue to press. It’s got to be within their police force. So this threat is not going away; it is morphing and transitioning to something of an insurgency. There’s still a presence there.

I’ll read the CSIS numbers, see how close you are to my numbers that I can’t tell you camera. (Laughter.)

But as we look at that, it’s just – it transitions. It morphs. And so we’ve got to be cognizant of what that looks like. And I don’t think there is any illusions within the Department of Defense that that’s where this is going. And so you got to keep pressure on this, whether it’s pressure in Iraq, whether it’s pressure in Syria.

The challenges in Africa are ones that are just incredible when you look at the sheer size. What I would tell you to do is we think about the Sahel. You think about the five nations in the Sahel in Africa. Grab a map and then lay it on the U.S., because it’ll stretch from coast to coast. And so think about the nations in the Sahel with the modest infrastructure and the resources they have to cover that kind of ground.

So this is – and this is no surprise to anyone. This is a generation – generations challenge that we will continue to face because you’re fighting an ideology. So it goes to ground. The media is that it’s less capable than it was in the past, but there’s still the lone wolf. They’re still inspiring fighters or, you know, acts in the U.S. or in Europe. There’s still recruiting going on. And so this is one where you got to continue the due diligence, you got to continue the pressure. And as, you know, the phrase says, don’t take your – don’t take your foot off the neck of a snake.

MR. JONES: Last question?

MR. ZARATE: Sir, you’ve been in the job a year. You’re looking at your tenure. When you leave this position, what do you want your legacy to be? How do you want people to think about your term in this position?

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: So there’s a couple of things. I think one for me is we take this modern integrated database that we put all our foundational information in, is that we’ve been able to transition that into what we’re calling a machine-assisted analytic rapid repository system. Just think MARS. To get that data environment set will probably be one of the biggest things that we do for the Department of Defense. And so to make sure that that is well beyond IOC before my three years is up would be
kind of what I want to hand off to the next DIA director because what I want the next DIA director to be able to do is to mature and continue to improve it, as opposed to have to build it.

And this really started with Vince Stewart. So Vince started this process. We’re up to the point now where we’re really getting – looking at the sprints, the use cases. We define the lines of effort, reaching out to industry. And over the course of the next two years we want to have an IOC and a capability that will be beneficial to all those customers that I talked about – to the SecDef, to the chairman, to policymakers, to every warfighter – that gives them decision advantage and lets them move faster and understand what’s happening in the operational environment, with our goal always as to make sure that we don’t get surprised as a nation.

MR. ZARATE: Thank you, sir.

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: Thanks.

MR. ZARATE: Thank you, sir.

MR. JONES: Great And if everybody here could join me in a big round of applause, you made it an hour and a half. That’s incredible.

LT. GEN. ASHLEY: Thanks. (Applause.)

(END)