



REAGAN NATIONAL DEFENSE FORUM

PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH IN A TIME OF TRANSITION

Keynote Address by Secretary of Defense, Hon. Lloyd J. Austin III

Speaker:

Secretary Lloyd Austin III, U.S. Secretary of Defense

###

The Honorable Lloyd Austin :

Well, good afternoon everybody. Michael, thanks for those kind words. This makes four years in a row for me at the Reagan National Defense Forum, and it's great to receive this award alongside Leader McConnell who believes so deeply in President Reagan's legacy and who has done so much for a free Ukraine. The Department has once again sent a superb delegation here this year, including members of the joint chiefs, combatant commanders, and other senior leaders. So let's give these outstanding public servants a round of applause. It is also great to be joined here by ministers of defense, ambassadors, Members of Congress and other leaders. Now, I spent a brief 41 years wearing a U.S. Army uniform, and I spent a long time in combat including three lengthy tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. And I've now served for four years as Secretary of Defense. So I can say without reservation that America's military is the finest and most lethal fighting force on earth.

Our mission is blunt. The U.S. military exists to fight and win America's wars. Wise leaders will always try to deter conflict, but if we are forced to defend ourselves, we will fight and we will win. With help from Congress we have made major investments in America's military over the past four years. Today's U.S. military is an extraordinary gathering of volunteers, brave men and women of every race, color, and creed. America's greatest strategic asset has always been the talents of the American people, and we are stronger when we welcome every qualified patriot who is eager to serve. That's not just a matter of national principle, it's a matter of national security.

The U.S. military is about excellence and merit. Our promotion process is ruthless by necessity and by design. We do not lower our standards and those who want to join us must raise their game. You see, we take good people and we make them even better. It is our sacred duty to do right by our troops and by the families

who serve right alongside them. Now, American democracy is not a sprint, but a relay race and we are preparing to pass the baton yet again. And I am proud of the progress made by American leadership.

The state of America's defenses is strong. Four years ago, America faced a moment of great challenge. The world was reeling from COVID-19, the COVID-19 pandemic, and our allies and partners feared that America had lost its way and America's rivals and foes had hoped that it had. Yet President Biden followed in the bipartisan tradition of U.S. global leadership. America and our Department of Defense are far stronger and better postured for the challenges of the 21st century. We invested heavily in our military. We helped secure the capabilities that America will need over the long term, and we provided principled civilian leadership for an apolitical military. With bipartisan support from Congress, we are set to increase our defense spending in fiscal year 2025 by more than a \$100 billion compared to the 2021 projections and the most recent National Defense Authorization Act supports an historic \$841 billion in funding for the department.

And that helps to ensure that the U.S. military will remain the strongest fighting force in history. And ladies and gentlemen, we face major national security challenges. That includes coercion and bullying from the People's Republic of China, imperial aggression from Putin's Russia, malice from Iran, North Korea and terrorist groups and autocrats worldwide who believe that democracy is a thing of the past. But we have stood up to Putin, stood up to North Korea, stood up to Iran, stood up to Hamas and Hezbollah, and stood up to autocrats and thugs and bullies worldwide. We have stood up for American values and American leadership. So I'd like to talk today about what the Department has achieved in the past four years, and I'd like to focus on a few key areas, renewing our alliances and partnerships. Meeting the pacing challenge of the PRC, rallying the free world to stand up for what's right in Ukraine and supporting Israel's right to self-defense and preventing full scale war in the Middle East. Investing in our capabilities. Taking care of our people and defending our values.

First, we know that our unmatched network of alliances and partnerships is one of America's great strategic advantages. Our allies and partners magnify our strength. They project our power and they deepen our security. And of course, President Reagan understood that as he said in 1983, the starting point and cornerstone of our foreign policy is our alliance and partnership with our fellow democracies. So here is a stark military fact. Our allies and partners are huge force multipliers. In today's world, any policy of peace through strength depends by definition on alliances. American power projection depends by definition on our friends abroad.

And American security depends by definition on those who freely join us in common purpose. Our alliances and partnerships have always been rooted in shared interest and in shared values. Ultimately, America is weaker when it stands alone and America is smaller when it stands apart. And there is no such thing as a safe retreat from today's interwoven world. For our men and women in uniform, standing shoulder to shoulder with our allies and partners is just how

REAGAN NATIONAL DEFENSE FORUM 2024 - Keynote Address

Note: The following is the output of transcribing from an audio recording. Although the transcription is largely accurate; in some cases, it is incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription errors. It is posted as an aid to understanding the proceedings at the 2024 Reagan National Defense Forum but should not be treated as an authoritative record.

we operate. And during my decades in uniform, everywhere I went on the battlefield, our allies and partners stood alongside us, making us stronger and more effective.

And the more alone we are, the more danger our troops face. Now serving as secretary has only strengthened my belief in the power of partnership. NATO now brings together 32 countries in the Indo-Pacific, we have longstanding alliances with Australia and Japan, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea and Thailand. We have 14 other major non-NATO allies including Israel and Brazil. India and the UAE are outstanding major defense partners and they are joined by many steadfast friends and partners worldwide. We have access agreements with more than 40 countries. We have logistics agreements with more than 120, and that helps us project power with our partners where we need to, when we need to and how we need to.

Our rivals and foes look at that with envy. They see our alliances and they want to wreck 'em. Yes, autocrats may band together, but when Putin turns to North Korea for troops, it is not a sign of strength. It is an admission of weakness. Autocrats resort to partnerships of convenience. But America leads partnerships of conviction and the department's national defense strategy rightly calls the U.S. network of allies and partners, our greatest global strategic advantage. And that brings me to my second point, the profound progress that we've made with our friends in the Indo-Pacific. We've heard decades of warnings about the rise of an increasingly aggressive and bullying PRC.

It is still the only country on earth with both the desire and increasingly the capability to reshape the international order. And this administration has done more than any other to posture the department to meet that pacing challenge and to make the Indo-Pacific our priority theater of operations. I've made 12 trips to the Indo-Pacific as Secretary of Defense, and I'm leaving right after this speech four 13th this time to Japan. I've led four years of sustained defense diplomacy in the region, and that has sped up what I call the new convergence of our Indo-Pacific allies and partners around a shared vision of security.

That means historic upgrades to U.S. posture across the Indo-Pacific fortifying our position from Northeast Asia down to Australia and the Pacific Island. It means modernizing our command and control framework with Japan. It means forging a defense cooperation with agreement with Papua New Guinea. It means signing landmark defense industrial cooperation deals with India. It means major strides forward for trilateral security corporation among the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. And it means drawing on every tool that we have consistent with our longstanding policy to provide Taiwan with the self-defense capability it needs, just think about the changes in our bonds with the Philippines.

In just four years, we've expanded our enhanced defense cooperation agreement to allow us access to four more sites in the Philippines for a total of nine. I visited one of those sites on the island of Palawan just 18 days ago, and I was incredibly

REAGAN NATIONAL DEFENSE FORUM 2024 - Keynote Address

Note: The following is the output of transcribing from an audio recording. Although the transcription is largely accurate; in some cases, it is incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription errors. It is posted as an aid to understanding the proceedings at the 2024 Reagan National Defense Forum but should not be treated as an authoritative record.

impressed by the progress that we're making together. I just got back from Darwin Australia where we announced that Japan will begin to integrate into the rotation of U.S. Marines in Darwin. We're also deepening our historic trilateral AUKUS partnership. It will provide Australia with a conventionally armed nuclear powered submarine capability, and that's a generational capability. And meanwhile, AUKUS will bring even more cutting-edge tech to our war fighters. In the Indo-Pacific we produce steady progress driven by a strategic vision. But that hasn't stopped us from tackling other major challenges. In February, 2022, the world was jolted by Putin's all out invasion of Ukraine, but we understood the danger to American security and global order. And so we rallied some 50 countries to help Ukraine defend itself. And that's the most consequential global coalition since the time of President George HW Bush in Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. America and our friends have become the arsenal of Ukrainian democracy.

United States has delivered two patriot batteries, 24 HIMARS rocket systems, thousands of armored vehicles and millions of rounds of artillery ammunition. We've seen strong bipartisan support for Ukraine from leader McConnell and other leaders in both parties. And I'm proud to announce today the commitment of a new Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative package worth nearly \$1 billion. Now that package will provide Ukraine with more drones, more rockets for its HIMARS systems, and more support for crucial maintenance and sustainment. And that brings a total of U.S. security assistance committed to Ukraine since February, 2022 to more than \$62 billion. The engine of our efforts has been the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, which first met in April, 2022 at Ramstein Base Ramstein Airbase in Germany.

Now, the contact group has helped ensure that Ukraine has what it needs to defend itself and to forge a future force to deter more Russian aggression. And I have convened the contact group 24 times. Now its other members have committed more than \$57 billion in direct security support, security assistance to Ukraine. And as a percentage of GDP, more than a dozen contact group members now provide more security assistance to Ukraine than the United States does. And together we have helped Ukraine survive an all-out assault by the largest military in Europe. And meanwhile, Russia has paid a staggering price for Putin's folly. Russia has suffered at least 700,000 casualties since February 2022. It squandered more than \$200 billion. In recent months, Russia has taken as many, it's a thousand casualties a day. And Russia's losses in just the first year of Putin's war of choice seem to have been more than Moscow's losses in all of its conflict. Since World War II combined and under the specter of Putin's aggression, we have led a stronger, larger and more united NATO. We've avoided a nuclear confrontation with Russia. We've reinforced NATO's eastern flank, we've deterred further Russian aggression and we've underscored our solemn commitment to Article Five of the North Atlantic Treaty.

We've welcomed Sweden and Finland to the greatest defensive alliance in history. And we continue to be crystal clear that Putin's war was not the result of

REAGAN NATIONAL DEFENSE FORUM 2024 - Keynote Address

Note: The following is the output of transcribing from an audio recording. Although the transcription is largely accurate; in some cases, it is incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription errors. It is posted as an aid to understanding the proceedings at the 2024 Reagan National Defense Forum but should not be treated as an authoritative record.

NATO enlargement, but the cause of NATO enlargement. In recent years have also brought an historic increase in annual defense spending across NATO by almost \$80 billion. And all NATO allies agreed in 2006 to spend at least 2% of their GDP on defense. In 2014, only three allies hit that target. In 2021, only six allies did so. But this year a record 23 NATO allies are meeting that goal. That's because we understand that Putin's assault on Ukraine is a warning. As I said in Kyiv in October, we are seeing a sneak preview of a world built by tyrants and thugs, a chaotic world, violent world, carved into spheres of influence, a world where bullies trample their smaller neighbors. In a world where aggressors force free people to live in fear. So we can continue to stand up to the Kremlin or we can let Putin have his way and condemn our children and grandchildren to live in a world of chaos and conflict.

This administration has made its choice and so has a bipartisan coalition in Congress. The next administration must make its own choice. But from this library, from this podium, I am confident that President Reagan would have stood on the side of Ukraine, American security and human freedom. That brings me to my next key area, the Middle East. On October 7th, 2023, Hamas committed the worst terrorist attack in Israel's history. Hamas murdered 1200 civilians, including more than 40 Americans. It also kidnapped 251 hostages including 12 Americans. It was the bloodiest day in Jewish history since the end of the Holocaust. I flew to Israel just six days afterwards and it was the first visit by a Secretary of Defense to Israel during wartime in more than 40 years. And I made it crystal clear that America's commitment to Israel's security is iron clad.

And we have worked to support Israel to ensure that Hamas can never again commit atrocities like October 7th. And so since then, we have expedited security assistance to Israel through 391 foreign military sales cases worth some \$13.6 billion. And at the same time, we pushed hard to protect Palestinian civilians and to rush far more humanitarian aid in tag Gaza. As I said here last year, protecting Palestinian civilians in Gaza is both a moral responsibility and a strategic imperative. And throughout this crisis, we've moved urgently to prevent all-out war in the Middle East. And right after October 7th, we sent a strong message of deterrence to Iran and its proxies at the height of the crisis. The U.S. presence in the region included not one but two carrier strike groups, an amphibious ready group, a marine expeditionary unit, more air power, and a guided missile submarine. And when required, we have used direct action to defend our forces and our friends. We rallied partners to defeat two unprecedented and outrageous Iranian barrages against Israel. We helped Israel defend itself in April of 2024 against more than 300 Iranian missiles and drones. And in that attack, U.S. forces destroyed more than 80 one-way attack drones, and at least six ballistic missiles launched from Iran.

Our forces operated side by side with Israeli and partner forces to defeat 99% of Iran's projectiles. And we were there again for Israel in October 2024 when Iran launched over 200 ballistic missiles. To further strengthen Israel's air defenses. We have temporarily deployed to Israel, a THAAD battery and its crew of US

REAGAN NATIONAL DEFENSE FORUM 2024 - Keynote Address

Note: The following is the output of transcribing from an audio recording. Although the transcription is largely accurate; in some cases, it is incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription errors. It is posted as an aid to understanding the proceedings at the 2024 Reagan National Defense Forum but should not be treated as an authoritative record.

military personnel. In the Red Sea, U.S. forces have been defeating attacks on commercial and naval vessels by the Iran backed Houthi militia in Yemen, and we have destroyed hundreds of Houthi weapons in a series of deliberate strikes and self-defense strikes. In Lebanon, Israel has smashed Hezbollah. Now that has dramatically weakened Iran's strongest proxy, and it's created an opening for a diplomatic solution that will let civilians on both sides of the Israel-Lebanon border return safely to their homes.

We've secured the November 26th ceasefire for Israel and Lebanon, and that paves the way for a ceasefire in Gaza and a deal to finally free the hostages and we will remain focused on that. It brings us closer to a more hopeful vision for Middle East that's peaceful and prosperous and secure. Now we balanced our own readiness even as we surge security assistance to Israel, Ukraine and Taiwan. Leader McConnell is right that we've all got a lot more work to do. But the Department's investments since 2021 in the defense industrial base have positioned America to outpace any rival and ensure our enduring military advantage. But he is right. We have a lot more work to do here, and the industrial base is delivering a far more agile and lethal joint force.

We're growing our own production capacity. We're implementing the first ever national defense industrial strategy to modernize the defense industrial base. And that will make our supply chains more resilient and our acquisitions more flexible. But again, there is much more work to be done here. We've been buying to the limits of our defense industrial base, and we've been pushing hard with many in this room to expand those limits. This includes more than investing more than \$5 billion since 2022 to drastically increase the production of critical munitions. Everything from Patriots to 155 millimeter artillery rounds. And we've made major investments in cutting edge capabilities such as cybersecurity, AI, and autonomous systems.

And we've produced the Department's largest space budgets ever. And over the past four years, the Department has pulled the future forward. And one especially lasting legacy is our work on a combined joint all domain command and control. CJADC2 will connect us forces across all operational domains. It used to be a pipe dream and so many had said this cannot be done. No longer. In less than two years, we filled it capability for CJADC2 that is in active use at INDOPACOM, and we've established a minimum viable capability for CJADC2 across other combatant commands.

Another key legacy is the B21 Raider, which you'll recall I unveiled two years ago on my way to the Reagan forum. The Raider is America's first new strategic bomber in three decades, and it delivers an unmatched combination of range, stealth and durability. To build on all of this progress, I elevated the status of the Defense Innovation unit. I visited DIU yesterday in Northern California, and I saw again how it's helping us work much more closely with commercial companies. DIU is removing barriers to innovation and letting the Department take far greater advantage of private sector talent and tech.

REAGAN NATIONAL DEFENSE FORUM 2024 - Keynote Address

Note: The following is the output of transcribing from an audio recording. Although the transcription is largely accurate; in some cases, it is incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription errors. It is posted as an aid to understanding the proceedings at the 2024 Reagan National Defense Forum but should not be treated as an authoritative record.

DIU also advance the Replicator initiative, which helps the Department swiftly deliver capabilities to the war fighter at speed and scale. And Replicator is already delivering attritable autonomous systems to our forces. Two years ago at this forum, I launched the Office of Strategic Capital. We partnered with Congress on authorities and funding. And this office is on track to issue its first loans for equipment financing early next year. And meanwhile, we're deepening our partnership with private firms, and that includes new players that would have once stayed away from the so-called Valley of Death. Since 2021, at least \$375 billion in DOD funds have gone to non-traditional defense companies from commercial firms to defense tech startups.

Now in recent years, the threat of unmanned systems has grown exponentially. These systems are cheap, easy to use, and evolving at breakneck speed and less capable foes are using them to threaten our troops our bases and our interests. And these systems have been front and center in both Ukraine and the Middle East. This threat will only grow. And so yesterday at DIU, we unveiled the Department-wide strategy to counter unmanned systems. And this roadmap will help to ensure that our joint force can fight and win in an environment increasingly dominated by unmanned systems. And I am proud that we mobilized the entire department to tackle this urgent challenge and to remain masters of the changing character of warfare.

And that brings me to my sixth key area, and that's doing right by our all-volunteer force and our veterans and their families. So we've taken concrete steps to take the best possible care of our people and their families. Base pay for our troops is up almost 10% since January, 2021 with the help of Congress. And we proposed another 4.5% pay raise for 2025. I've also directed actions to make moves easier to help military spouses pursue their own careers to introduce universal pre-K in our outstanding DOD schools and expand access to affordable childcare and high-quality early childhood education. We've also tackle some tough problems that have no simple solutions and no place in our ranks. We've been driving hard to end sexual assault and sexual harassment in our military. We're implementing the approved recommendations of the Independent Review Commission that I stood up. And in fiscal year 2023, the prevalence of sexual assault in the military decreased for the first time in more than eight years. We've also established the offices of Special Trial counsel.

They take cases of sexual assault, domestic violence, and some other serious crimes out of the military chain of command and entrust them to independent and highly trained military lawyers. Now that's the most important reform to our military justice system since the creation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice in 1950. In 2022, I established a suicide prevention and response independent Review commission, and we're moving out urgently on its approved recommendations. And let me be clear, the only acceptable number of suicides in the U.S. military is zero. Now, I took office amid major headwinds in a recruiting environment, including a competitive job market and the aftermath of the pandemic. But we focused on a renewed call to service in on bending the curve

REAGAN NATIONAL DEFENSE FORUM 2024 - Keynote Address

Note: The following is the output of transcribing from an audio recording. Although the transcription is largely accurate; in some cases, it is incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription errors. It is posted as an aid to understanding the proceedings at the 2024 Reagan National Defense Forum but should not be treated as an authoritative record.

and returned around the recruiting picture in 2024. And I'm very proud that the department has kept up the high levels of retention throughout all the services. And finally, in everything that we do, American values matter.

Each soldier, sailor, airman, marine, and guardian swears to defend our country and our constitution. We protect not just the American people, but also the American idea. That is what we do and that is who we are. The Constitution charges us to provide for the common defense and we will continue to do just that. That means holding true to what makes America exceptional. It means keeping faith with our friends. It means standing up to our foes and it means knowing the difference between the two. I say all of this as a lifelong military man, and I know a few things about the American way of war. And over my decades of service to America, I have deepened some core beliefs. They are battle tested and they're tempered by decades in uniform, and they're forged by years at war.

So what do I believe? I believe peace is not self-executing. Order does not preserve itself, and security does not flower on its own. The world built by American leadership can only be maintained by American leadership. As President Biden has said, American leadership is what holds the world together. And from Russia to China, from Hamas to Iran, our rivals and foes want to divide and weaken the United States and to split us all from our allies and partners. So at this hinge in history, America must not waver. American leadership rallies our allies and partners to uphold our shared security, and it inspires ordinary people around the world to work together toward a brighter future. But the troubles of our times will only grow worse without strong and steady American leadership to defend the rules-based international order that keeps us all safe. And if we forfeit our position of responsibility, our rivals and foes will be glad to fill the vacuum.

Those beliefs were true when I said those exact words from this podium last year. They are true today, and they will be true tomorrow. Of course, there is far more work to be done, but at this year and this administration draws to a close, America is positioned to stand strong. Our alliances have been renewed and reinforced our recruiting trends point upward. Our investments in the future are vast, and our military reflects the full strengths of the great democracy that it defend. And so the baton will soon be passed and others will decide the course ahead. And I hope that they will build on the strength that we have forged over the past four years. Thank you very much. May God continue to bless the United States of America.

###

REAGAN NATIONAL DEFENSE FORUM 2024 - Keynote Address

Note: The following is the output of transcribing from an audio recording. Although the transcription is largely accurate; in some cases, it is incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription errors. It is posted as an aid to understanding the proceedings at the 2024 Reagan National Defense Forum but should not be treated as an authoritative record.