# Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

## Virtual Congressional Roundtable — United States Air Base Defense

**103rd Congressional Roundtable · Thursday, July 16, 2026**

## Participants

— Host: Mr. Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance (MDAA)

— Lt. Gen. Christopher J. Niemi, USAF — Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategy, Integration & Requirements (A5/7) and Chief Modernization Officer

— Gen. (Ret.) Glen VanHerck, USAF — Former Commander, U.S. Northern Command / NORAD

— Mr. John Rood — Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

From a great, wide-open country space day here in Rock Springs, Wyoming — I'm Riki Ellison, Chairman and Founder of the Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance.

We were founded 20-plus years ago, and we've been involved with missile defense for over 40 years. We have one singular purpose: to make our world and our nation safer through the advocacy, employment, and evolution of missile defense.

And there's no time greater than today to advocate for and put in place missile defense capabilities around the world. Today marks our 103rd Congressional Roundtable, and we are very honored to have some of the greatest experts on this specific issue with us.

Thank you, Lieutenant General Christopher Niemi — the A5/7, the Deputy Chief of Staff and Chief Modernization Officer for the United States Air Force. Thank you for being here with us, General. We also have the former NORTHCOM/NORAD Commander, General Glen VanHerck, USAF joining us from Missouri. And we have Mr. John Rood, the former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy at the Department of Defense under President Trump in his first administration. This is a great group to push forward and to really illuminate, educate, and advocate for how we can get our bases better protected.

As an organization, we have visited over 841 bases over 20 years. The majority of those are U.S. Air Force bases; a majority of our Air Force bases are defended by U.S. Army missile defense systems. We support this movement that's been put in place over the last 20 years, with our 16 Patriot battalions and our eight THAAD batteries that — predominantly, if not entirely, in their forward-operating mode — defending air bases.

We have just come back recently from Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia, from air bases in Germany in Ramstein, from where we were in the Republic of Korea, from Guam, and from Hawaii. These air bases are a key part of global posture to project power and deterrence. They are extremely valuable in their ability to deter and in their ability to hold our allies together against the threat.

We've also known that our biggest allies defend their bases with their own air forces. Israel — their base defense is the Israeli Air Force. You can look at others: Japan, Korea for example. We do it a little differently — with the U.S. Army as the predominant defender of our air bases. And that's appropriate, because the U.S. Army is built to defend land, to defend that aspect of it.

This decision goes back to 1948 and our division of roles and responsibilities, and I'm sure we'll have some of that discussion today. But we're at a point in time — Operational Epic Fury and Iran's response to it highlighted that point. And, I could go back even further, probably to when Glen was in command, when we had drones flying over Langley Air Base. We have drones flying over our bases, and we come to the reality of Epic Fury and the destruction to U.S. and Allied assets which has happened.

We can't deny it. It's happened on our bases, and it's been six months. We were just attacked on Sunday. We've got to find a solution and grapple with it — a tactical solution rapidly, and a strategic solution for the long term — because this is just a small example of our weak spot right now. For us to posture up and be able to deter China, we need to be capable of defending our bases, our air bases in the Pacific, everywhere.

This is the junction of how you do this better, how you make that change. The modernization of the Air Force, and the Air Force taking a leadership role in addressing this, is vitally important. We are just excited about the Chief, General Wilsbach ("Cruser"), taking the initiative, taking some responsibility on, and being able to do this. And we also know it's going to be a capacity issue.

Even if the Air Force has this mission, you still need to have your allies, outside of the base defense, to be able to best defend assets. It's a movement. I also want to recognize how well the U.S. Air Force has done with their F-15s and their ability to shoot down drones, which has considerably reduced the leakage — probably by 50% — by having them go air-to-air in those missions. We saw that in defending Israel last April.

We're seeing this every day, if they get the opportunity to get those planes up — but that's probably not the most efficient way to defend your base. And I don't think the U.S. Air Force gets credit for what they're doing with their manned air flights to take out these drones on top of that. I just want to push this over now and welcome General Niemi, who's a good friend.

He has flown every one of the big planes — F-22s, F-35s, F-15s — and he's the thinker behind the Air Force on how they best modernize and how they best protect their maneuvering force. And this is where this discussion is. I'm going to now lead it off and pass it over to you, General, for your remarks.

### Lt. Gen. Christopher J. Niemi — Deputy Chief of Staff (A5/7) & Chief Modernization Officer, U.S. Air Force

Thanks a lot, Riki. I appreciate the opportunity to join you today and to share some of the thinking inside the Air Force on this particular problem set.

I would start by saying over the last 30 years or so, there was certainly a level of awareness that a growing threat existed, and that the construct in which the U.S. Air Force depended primarily on the U.S.

Army — but also other services — to protect its assets was on increasingly shaky ground. And clearly Iran's response to Epic Fury, with the large proliferation of relatively low-cost effectors, has shined a light on that and made it very clear.

I think the big change is that you have these lower-cost tactical systems, and because they're lower cost, there are a whole lot of them. But the range is such that they can reach out and touch you at hundreds of miles, where before it was more limited in terms of the types of systems that could do that — think of shorter range ballistic missiles and other things. If you only have ballistic missiles to deal with, and there aren't too many of them, then the existing model, where the U.S. Air Force depends primarily on the U.S. Army to defend its assets, works. That clearly is not going to work going forward. One-way attack drones are going to continue to proliferate widely because of their low cost, and the fact that they're not very sophisticated and are relatively easy to build.

So General Wilsbach, my boss, the Chief, made what I think was a courageous decision, and one that will be significant in the years to come. He said, basically, the Air Force is going to get back into the business of defending our assets with destructive effectors. Think kinetic — guns, rockets, kamikaze drones — and non-kinetic destructive effectors — think directed energy, whether it's lasers or high-powered microwave — to protect our assets. It's clear that the capacity that will be required far outstrips what exists in the joint force today. I think that was certainly part of the decision that was made.

In that discussion at Corona, the four-star-level conference, the next question was: okay, what part of that threat are we going to go after? Because it's a pretty diverse threat when you look at everything from a small, off-the-shelf quadcopter-type threat all the way up to a hypersonic weapon that can go more than 1,000 miles. So where is the Air Force going to lean into this problem set to start? What was decided is that we're going to focus on three elements.

The first is small UAS — very similar to the threat we all saw with Operation Spiderweb, in Ukraine and Russia. We recognize that there are existing vulnerabilities today, and that that type of threat could manifest itself at any time. You don't need to be in an open war or conflict situation for someone to launch a small UAS and take out an airplane like an F-22 at Langley with something that's basically a quadcopter with a hand grenade. So that's one of the problems we've got to get after, and it's complicated by a lot of the policy barriers. It doesn't do any good to buy a system that may be very effective at mitigating that kind of threat if I can't employ it and use it at a place like Langley Air Force Base in peacetime. We've got to come up with effectors for that particular part of the problem set that can be used within the policy constraints. I think there's a lot of opportunities for things like kamikaze drones. You could imagine other things like nets, or maybe some directed energy weapons, depending on the work that's ongoing. There's a lot of complications there, because we need to make sure that if we're going to fire something like a high-powered microwave or a laser, we don't have collateral damage or unintended effects on civil aviation, airliners, etc.

The next parts of the problem, the second and third, are more unique to open conflict. That would be the one-way attack threat, which we've seen in large numbers and continue to see today in response to Epic Fury and the follow-on operations, as well as subsonic cruise missiles. Those effectors are probably going to We intend for the U.S. Air Force to build the institutional capacity to defend our air bases

against those three threats. Those aren't all the threats we're concerned about, but that's a good starting place, because there are an awful lot of threats they exist today — so we're late — and it's a solvable problem.

The U.S. Air Force had airmen firing air defense assets up through the '90s. The last unit was in Korea; they operated Stinger missiles for this mission, and we divested it because we were able to accept a risk that we were not comfortable with, but that — until we got to Epic Fury — didn't manifest itself, in terms of not having airmen do that. Now we're going to get back into that business. To do that, we need to build the institutional capacity, and that's where I'm spending a lot of my time and energy.

The focus often tends to be on the material solutions — what is the thing that I'm going to fire at it, or how am I going to know that there's a small UAS threatening an air base. That's certainly part of the problem that has to be addressed. But what I'm more concerned about is: where does the manpower come from? How do we train these individuals after they go to basic training? What does their tech school look like? What does their career progression look like? Where do we get the manpower from, given the other competing missions we have? Are we going to develop things like a weapons school for air base air defense, or a 422nd — which is our operational test organization? These are the types of things that, even though there's a lot of energy on the material piece, only the services can solve. And without solving them, the material piece is insufficient; it doesn't solve the problem.

So that's the decision that was made at Corona to start on this journey, and those are the first steps the Air Force is going to take.

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

Thank you, General. That is tremendous — that initiative, and the way you're doing it from the ground slowly up. Are the resources going to be coming from the Air Force, or are you going to have to go pass the hat for joint funding to support this effort? And is that a hell of a fight, because you're taking away trade space from other capabilities you could be investing in?

### Lt. Gen. Christopher J. Niemi — Deputy Chief of Staff (A5/7) & Chief Modernization Officer, U.S. Air Force

Right. Well, it'll be a combination of both. There is a lot of funding being applied through things like JIATF 401, and we welcome that. But the funding in JIATF 401 is primarily focused on the material part of the problem, so it doesn't address the manpower, the institution-building, and some of those other things. I think it'll be a combination.

The reality is that as big as the U.S. Air Force and the Department of War budget is, each year, when we get to the end of the budget cycle and we have to balance, there are things we want very badly that we cannot afford, because they don't all fit under that budget top line. A lot of my time and energy, in consultation with my counterparts in the HAF A8 and other stakeholders, is spent trying to navigate that process.

**Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance**

Well, when can we see this, U.S. Air Force? What's the timeline for you to fully — or partially — be able to defend your bases? And what are you doing between now and then? Is it 10 years away, five years away, six months away? What is the reality of the situation?

**Lt. Gen. Christopher J. Niemi — Deputy Chief of Staff (A5/7) & Chief Modernization Officer, U.S. Air Force**

Currently we already have a problem, right? We have had people killed and material destroyed over in the Middle East. We're trying to address that — triage, if you will. That work is primarily being done by General Cunningham, my counterpart in the A3, and we're working very closely to address the immediate need with the best options we have available. Clearly, they are not going to be satisfying options. There's a lot of ad hoc work going on. We have airmen firing effectors over in the Middle East right now, but they're doing things they weren't specifically trained for. It's sort of a pickup game — get a little bit of training and make it happen — because we have to; the needs exist, and we have to solve the problem.

Our partnership between the A3 and the A5 is taking that reality, whether we like it or not, and mapping it to a more sustainable future. So, figuring out, for example, as we have people getting this real-world experience over there, how do we leverage them? If we do things like build a new career field, we can bring them in and use that expertise, as opposed to sending them back to whatever career field they were in before and bringing in someone who has no experience. These are the types of things we're doing together, General Cunningham and I, so we connect with the urgent problem that exists today — messy and difficult — with a more thoughtful and planned future tomorrow.

**Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance**

Can you be more definitive on "tomorrow"? Is that 10 years, five years, three years?

**Lt. Gen. Christopher J. Niemi — Deputy Chief of Staff (A5/7) & Chief Modernization Officer, U.S. Air Force**

Well, I think it's probably more accurate to say it's happening today. There is capability and capacity today, because of triaging the problem, which didn't exist even a few months ago — but we know it's not sufficient. It's not possible to put a timeframe on it, because it's going to be evolutionary. I would say that if you were to plot the capacity and capability on a scale of zero to 100, we're down in the single-digit percentages right now, and we're going to grow that incrementally. I'm sure at some point, as we mature this, someone's going to label an FOC and an IOC, but frankly, I'm most interested in fielding the capability as quickly as I possibly can.

What that'll look like is growing capability — more threats we can go after — and growing capacity — more kinds of threats. We'll start with our highest priorities, the things we need to defend. You can imagine our nuclear enterprise; places like Whiteman will probably rack and stack very highly. Then we'll

scale to other places where we know we have a problem. But if we accept risk somewhere, we'll accept risk in those lower-priority places first.

**Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance**

And when we look at that threat, we're looking at mass, and mass needs to be defeated by mass. And — I might be wrong — but you couldn't have enough manpower or enough capability within your bases to do this mission; you have to have something outside your bases, whether it's in the United States or from your allies, to provide those other tools, whether sensors or effectors, to support that mission set. Am I off on that, or are we comfortable being able to defend against mass with what we're going to do in the future?

**Lt. Gen. Christopher J. Niemi — Deputy Chief of Staff (A5/7) & Chief Modernization Officer, U.S. Air Force**

Mass is absolutely in our cross check. As we look to the capabilities we're going to procure and field, particularly over the long term — when we can get beyond just reacting to the immediate threat — we're looking at things like: how do I reduce the manpower? If my problem is that I have to have a 24/7 capability to defend against a small UAS with a hand grenade, I'm not sure I want an airman at every base and facility worldwide up at two o'clock in the morning, watching a screen, waiting to hit a red button. I could imagine a scenario where that's an automated system that, within some guardrails, detects the threat and defeats it, and then someone gets a call to wake them up to go figure out what happened. We are thinking about how to automate and reduce the manpower requirements.

We're also thinking about the effectors. We know a big part of the problem is the mass of the threat, so we need effectors that are relatively inexpensive. You've seen that with our APKWS rounds that have been employed in combat over the Middle East. It's an adaptation of a Vietnam-era missile that costs less than a tenth of the alternative, an AIM-9. We'll continue to look for effectors like that — lower cost, that can achieve the same effects — so we can procure them in sufficient quantities to meet that mass problem.

**Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance**

So, just following up — what about outside the baseline, the defense line?

**Lt. Gen. Christopher J. Niemi — Deputy Chief of Staff (A5/7) & Chief Modernization Officer, U.S. Air Force**

I think what you're talking about is having a layered series of defenses. Particularly if you're talking about a mass problem — say you've got 100 threats being shot at you — what you want to do is not wait until all 100 arrive at your fence line. You want to whittle them away: knock down half of them 50 miles away, then another quarter 25 miles away, and so on. So that's absolutely in our crosscheck for how we do that. There's a lot of work that's got to be done there. I'm familiar, as you are, with some of

the work that's been done in Ukraine, and that's helping to inform some of our efforts. I think that's one of many questions that will be fleshed out in greater detail in the coming years.

A lot of my challenge is that when you have a really big problem like this — and I would characterize this as a really big problem — often times we want a quick solution, because we're very impatient. We say, "quick wins," things like that. And what we end up getting, when we try to get a quick win on a really complex, wicked problem, is nothing. I'm trying to be very disciplined about attacking the problem in a thoughtful way. I'm grading myself, if you will, by whether we're making progress as quickly as I assess is possible in the right direction — acknowledging that there's a whole lot of the problem that I want to get to in future years that I cannot get to today. And if I lose focus, I won't even solve the problems I can solve today.

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

That's excellent. Thank you. Really great information that you just put out to everybody. I'm going to pass it over now to the Honorable John Rood. Thank you for being here today.

### John Rood — Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

You bet. Well, thank you, Riki, for having me, and thank you to General Niemi and the others for participating. The timing of this couldn't be better, because we're really right in the thick of this kind of fight, and the need is very apparent.

At the macro level, I think we need to recognize a saying: when the rate of change is faster on the outside than it is on the inside, you have a big problem. When you're dealing with an enterprise like the Department of War / Department of Defense — whether it's a technology enterprise or any organization — your speed of relevance, for the changes you're implementing internally, need to keep pace with the speed of change externally. Let's start at the basic level and be honest with ourselves: we've got to confront the reality that our enterprise is not keeping pace with the speed of change on the outside. The rate of change on the inside is too slow, and there needs to be recognition of that.

This is one of the things I think policy needs to play a role in. What is that environment? What are we trying to accomplish? What is the nature of warfare, and therefore what does the character of the force — and our authorities and our organization — need to look like? I agree with the General that this is not a simple problem. This is not a technology issue; it's not a resource problem, and it's not some individual-authorities problem. It's a bigger issue, because if we look at where we sit today, we're on the cusp — the leading edge, I'd say — of a real change in the way warfare is being conducted: a highly autonomous, distributed way that reflects not only the information age that informed it, but the advancements since then in terms of lower cost.

Precision used to be the province of very expensive systems that we owned. That's not the case today. The reason I got to this office is that I used this little phone with a nice GPS tracker; it took me right to the parking garage. There's that level of precision that drones are being employed for — not just to hit a target, but to navigate through a racecourse, with netting and other protection, through exactly the

right ductwork, to go inside a building and down. These advancements have happened, and they're increasingly happening in an automated capacity. So, where I resonate with the General's comments: this is not an issue where, simply by adding $100 million or X dollars to a budget, or providing a certain authority, or empowering a new direct report or a new command structure, the issue gets resolved. It can be improved, certainly — and there can and should be incremental improvements — but I think we have to step back and look at that.

One of the things I'm glad to see is in the roles-and-missions area. It's always a role-and-missions fight between our services. After World War II, a lot of these decisions were put in place about what the Army's role would be for air defense, and what the Air Force's would be. Some of those definitions and roles and responsibilities have rapidly become outdated — they were probably outdated some time ago. At MDAA, we wrote a report in 2022 — we're now in 2026 — arguing that the change occurring now, for the Air Force to take on base defense, expeditionary defense, and forward defense of their air bases and operating locations, needed to happen, and that the mission probably needed to be moved from the Army to the Air Force because of the change in the way the air domain is operating.

It used to be a nice, neat division — the reason some of these decisions were made — that the Army's ground-based air defenses, which relied on kinetic means (essentially shooting flak, explosive rounds, and bullets toward incoming targets), covered up to about the range and altitude at which the Air Force took the mission above, back in the '40s. We've done derivatives of that ever since, but that's not applicable today. That construct doesn't work.

One of the other things I think we have to accept, by breaking the mold, is that we've tended to incorporate new technologies into our existing organizational and command structures — to inject or bolt on technology to our existing formations and think that will be sufficient. It is, in some cases, but this is a much more substantial change occurring in the method and nature of warfare, and we must change how we're operating to keep pace with it. And, again, we have to admit to ourselves: the rate of change internally is not at the rate of change externally. We're not moving at the speed of relevance. I'm glad to hear that the Air Force is moving to fill the vacuum, to do things like expeditionary and base defense.

The construct with Group 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 UAS is useful to a point, but we're also getting to a stage where some of the distinctions we use to categorize things for our own needs within the department have to have more elasticity and flexibility. Some of our constructs — that certain threats occur outside the United States, and certain things are done differently inside the United States — we're also going to have to be honest with ourselves that our structures and ways of operating are wildly out of date domestically.

The fight we're experiencing today, where — candidly — it's just unacceptable, the level of losses we're allowing ourselves to take because we allowed ourselves to be in this situation: losses to our forces and equipment, loss of life and injuries, and then the damage to our equipment and our ability to accomplish the objectives of the campaign — that can also be applied domestically. When I served in the Pentagon, for example, we first saw Russian forces in Syria being absolutely savaged by UAS attacks and swarm attacks. I recall going to the Secretary of Defense and saying, urgently, we must organize with rapid

equipping — this is coming for us. We're deployed all throughout the CENTCOM area of operations, and the same people are aligning themselves.

There has emerged a very mature axis. We're not just fighting Iran; we're fighting a group — Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran — sharing lessons learned, sharing resources, sharing the fight against a common enemy. We have to accept that reality. What I was concerned about in 2019, seeing these attacks, led initially to what was an incrementally positive step: establishing a two-star Army general to coordinate a number of the efforts. That made some incremental progress, but it was really not sufficient to get ahead of the threat, or to change how we're structured, resourced, and operated.

There's some significance to what's being done today, and I think it's fine in the interim to create a direct-report program manager and other things, but that's not a long-term, enduring solution to a multifaceted, complex problem. I think we've got to look at more. I would argue the Air Force needs to be given the mission for area air defense and beyond, to accomplish that and to coordinate the procurement and resourcing decisions — because this arbitrary distinction, between air-to-air aircraft occupying a certain domain and drones and cruise missiles very nicely fitting into our organizational construct, with the threat choosing to operate within our constructs and the ways we organize ourselves, doesn't apply.

And we're not going to school on the lessons learned from Ukraine. Yes, the fight is occurring with Shaheeds and other things attacking air bases there, but you're also seeing — and this could just as easily happen here, whether in New York, at National Airport, O'Hare Airport, or Langley Air Base — that the same tactics being employed in Ukraine (trucks showing up with 500 drones and other things to saturate an airfield, to attack it, to achieve an operational kill of an airport) could be employed tomorrow, whether in Los Angeles or elsewhere. And screening those things at the border will not occur.

If we had to respond, and someone said to the Commander of NORTHCOM or others, "Address this issue — all three of the New York-area airports have been taken down," he would not have the authorities or the ability to do that, much less the technical means. It's a bigger issue, and it's one that candidly calls for some leadership from not only Department of War-level leaders — we're going to have to have some national leaders recognize that it's not going to be a simple or short-term fix, or a matter of applying a $1 billion budget, or "let's procure 10,000 drones rapidly." There's must be a more systematic effort that we undertake. And it's not just kinetics.

We're behind in using the electromagnetic spectrum and electronic warfare, both to counter threats and to operate the defense. That is dominating the battlefield on some days in Ukraine. And as much access as we have, and as many people as we have deployed, the system here is still operating without sufficient knowledge. If we just replayed — I don't know — what happened in the last 30 days in Ukraine, and applied that force being applied [there] to our force, how would we do? How would we respond? How would we organize? If you organized a war game on that, we would be very unhappy with the results. Very unhappy. We're not doing enough with that.

There has been very noteworthy progress on acquisition processes and other things, but there's still not this feedback loop moving at the speed of relevance in the way that, for instance, in Ukraine an individual unit will use a UAV, provide feedback within hours or days, and the cycle of innovation gets accomplished. Now, the conflict, by necessity, is driving that level of innovation — but we are not responding the same way.

The last thing I'll say is that quantity, or mass, is [an area where] we were operating in a different environment, where we emphasized quality — qualitative overmatch — and that was appropriate for the conflicts we were in at that time, say 20 years ago. Post-Desert Storm, we really reduced our force structure, and we were okay, but we've been warning for many years that we can't do two major regional contingencies — i.e., a conflict with Korea and a conflict with Iran — at the same time. We can't handle a China contingency, and we can't handle a war with Russia when it's sufficiently sized. That's much more acute now. We have to accept that we're going to have to have a larger number of less-expensive units that are expendable, and we're going to have to be able to absorb losses, and at times deal with leakers, and have passive defenses and other things that — in our DNA — didn't feel right to have a lot of at air bases. But when 5,000 or 10,000 small drones — swarms of 100,000 launched by China — are reached, it's not realistic to think that, even by the law of large numbers, if you do 99.99% defense, you're not going to have leakers. We've got to accept that we've got to be able to have passive defenses, and we've got to be less predictable, use deception, use some of the tactics we used to use but have grown a little rusty at as a force.

So anyway, that's probably enough for me, Riki, but I just wanted to set the table on a few of the broader questions.

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

John, I have two big questions for you. The U.S. Air Force, as General Niemi said, is going small — but is the vision for air defense to really take the Patriot and hypersonic defense away, or is that for them? Is that where we're going to end up at some point, for you and policy-wise? And the second thing is a new command coming up: the RAS, the Robotic and Autonomous Systems Command. They're getting a Direct Report Program Manager, just like Golden Dome, and they're going to be able to create and develop thousands and millions of things for that automated fight. So how does the Air Force get that? Is that funding, or is it technology, going with them? Can they tap into it? Is that real? I'm just throwing a couple of things at you. I know we're ready to go, but if we get a command like that, do you need a warfighter to operate it, or does everybody have to have a component? Just throw that at me. That's a lot to throw at you, but if you can summarize it, that'd be great.

### John Rood — Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

That's a lot to throw at me, but I'll try. The short summary I'd give you is that there are different command structures. Meaning: I'm going to operate the forces that have been deployed to theater and command and control them. Something like a RAS could do robotic and automated systems, much like a Navy component command provides to the combatant commander. How do you operate? I've sent

whatever forces to the region; now the combatant commander — that's what he or she is given to work with — and these are specialists in a certain domain to assist the combatant commander, who should play an integrating role to bring the joint force together.

We can't lose sight of one of our "secret sauce" areas of success — something we've done better than anybody else in the world since Goldwater-Nichols — and that's fighting as a joint force. That's been an amazing strength: fighting as a joint force across service lines, but importantly with allies, better than anybody in the world. And that's being tested, candidly, right now. I think we've got to look at that at the operational level and at command structures — not just bolting on or injecting new technology into existing relationships or force formations, or telling people in their current military occupational specialties, "Guess what, you get to do A, B, or C in addition to that." There's got to be a willingness to change those things. That's what you're talking about with RAS, at the level where you're procuring resources — it's a very complex system.

But when you're setting your strategy, and then saying, "These are my war plans to accomplish that strategy, and these are my requirements to achieve that war plan, and here's how I'm going to budget, resource, and procure those things" — and the services will train, equip, and organize for operations — I don't think that broad construct gets broken. But I do think you've got to look at integration. Some of these seams that made sense before, between lower-tier air defense and upper-tier — the enemy has chosen not to accept our definitions and rulebook, and they are playing by a different set of constructs. It's Swiss cheese in terms of the holes there. I think we have to talk about, in my view, the Air Force playing a bigger role in coordinating those things. But that's not going to mean the other services don't have programs, don't have budgets, or don't have a need to do things — it's a coordinating authority.

And here, traditionally, is where there's got to be civilian leadership. Leaders need to lead, and civilian leaders need to drive this — and ensure the services and others understand what their roles are to accomplish those broader national mission areas. That would be my argument.

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

Thank you, John. Okay. Very honored to have Glen here — General VanHerck.

### Gen. (Ret.) Glen VanHerck — Former Commander, USNORTHCOM/NORAD

Hey, thanks, Riki. Great topic. I appreciate the comments from my fellow panel members — great comments.

You know, I hear comments like "Epic Fury exposed the threat" or "the threat rapidly adapted," and we're seeing that play out. The truth is, we've known about the threat for years. This is not new. We watched the threat rapidly advance since February 22. We watched the threat grow, expand, and rapidly adapt. The battlespace changes. We didn't change our processes — as John Rood said — to adapt and operate inside their OODA loop as well. Commanders conveyed their concerns.

I can tell you, you can go look at open testimony and open posture hearing statements — and you can know that in closed hearings, these things were articulated. I can tell you that in my reports to the

Secretary of Defense — both my 90-day report after I took command in August of '20, and when I left, and multiple times in between — there are memos conveying the lack of capability, capacity, responsibility directed, and authority given to execute against this threat. I can tell you that in the spring of '23, right before Langley happened in December — the UAS events — during an event in the Pentagon with all senior leaders together, I expressed my concerns about the UAS threat, both home and abroad, and was largely ignored, candidly. Just stating the facts as they are.

We rolled into this fight, Epic Fury, with a force laydown and a command-and-control structure designed for a 30-year-ago threat. And we should have expected what we got. We put things in place to defend against ballistic missiles, with limited capacity. But in the end, we lost infrastructure; we lost key treasure, and — most importantly — blood and lives that we lost. That's very, very disappointing.

I can tell you that the budget process functioned as it should. The bottom line is, we made decisions to accept this risk as part of the budget process over numerous years, over multiple administrations. The Defense Planning Guidance during my time in command — I non-concurred every single time, because although Homeland Defense and defense of our forces is always stated as the number one priority, the planning guidance and the budget didn't reflect this. And for those out there who don't know what that is, the Defense Planning Guidance is the guidance to the services on what you're going to buy and acquire in the future. Those are just facts.

What didn't work? Services attempting to push TOA — Total Obligation Authority — to somebody else to pay for it. The bureaucracy is bickering among themselves. I can tell you, for years we talked about whose responsibility it was to acquire and operate this, and ultimately the department — I'm talking at the strategic level — didn't throw down and make a decision and pin the tail on somebody and say, "Go fund this, go organize, go train and equip the joint force to accomplish this mission." And we did accept that risk.

What needs to happen? We need to make sure we have the proper policy in place, the right responsibilities with the required authorities, and that all the documents reflect that. I'd remind people — we talk a lot about the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Army. We don't fight the Air Force and the Army; we fight as a joint force, and they're going to organize and train those forces. John talked a lot about that.

Today, we don't have the domain awareness in place to put together a command-and-control structure to command and control these threats like we do more broadly for missiles and air threats. Group 1, Group 2, and even the smaller portions of Group 3 UAS are largely not fitting into the command-and-control structure we have today. We need to go look at how we're going to do this differently. In the homeland, they've given it to the services to defend their individual installations. Forward, that may have to happen as well. But the bottom line is, I don't believe we have the right structure or the right organization in place to have the right domain awareness and the right ability to execute this mission. The budget must reflect this as we go forward.

And the bottom line, it doesn't require a whole bunch of new sensors, oftentimes, Riki. It requires the sharing of data across organizations, across governmental agencies, with allies and partners — fusing

data, using artificial intelligence and machine learning to process that data, and getting that data to the right decision-maker or effector to be able to move forward. But all too often, that data falls on the cutting-room floor; it is not processed; it is not shared. That's something we have to move beyond.

Industries got to be part of this. They must move more rapidly, and they must collaborate across industry. The days of proprietary solutions, with an individual company moving out on its own, must go by the wayside. We've got to have them collaborate to create affordable, adaptable, rapidly adjustable, modifiable solutions. And the bottom line is, there's no silver bullet. Depending on the situation — what you're defending, the area you're defending — it's going to require integrated solutions, everything from RF capabilities for Group 1 and 2 up to kinetic capabilities for military-style drones, Group 3s, etc. Depending on what you're defending, you may not need everything — you may just need non-kinetic effectors. But if the infrastructure is so important and critical, you may need a combination of everything to defend it. Those are policy decisions that absolutely need to be made.

General Niemi brought up a great point: this isn't a Band-Aid solution. Whoever gets this pinned on them has got to organize, train, and equip around it — and that includes ops, maintenance, supply chain, everything that goes with it — to be able to execute this mission. This isn't a pickup game that you're going to be able to do. This is here for the future, and we've got to get this right.

Many people are talking about the lessons learned in the Middle East. On the bottom line, this applies globally and right here at home — and John Rood talked a lot about that. At home, largely, the Department of War does not own this mission; it's the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, and other agencies. So, we must collaborate across the government for a whole-of-nation solution — not a whole-of-government, a whole-of-nation. The commercial industry will have to be part of this solution as well, as about 80% of the infrastructure we project power from — that sustains our power projection, that produces industrial capacity; telecommunications — resides in the commercial sector. You can't rely on the government to defend them all, so they've got to be part of the solution as well.

Let me just stop here really quickly and say: we need to move with a sense of urgency, and I have not seen that. I think General Wilsbach gets it. General Niemi clearly gets it. How fast we move within the bureaucracy — that needs to change. We have to move forward. Loss of lives, loss of critical infrastructure — we can't accept this in the future. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you, Riki.

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

That was awesome, Glen. Does the Golden Dome, the Direct Report Program Manager, or the RAS Direct Report Program Manager — answer some of those bigger questions about data sharing and your big challenges? Are they the answers, to move on to it?

### Gen. (Ret.) Glen VanHerck — Former Commander, USNORTHCOM/NORAD

Well, they are moving on to it. Last month they did a demonstration against a cruise-missile-type threat, Group 3 UAS and above; that was largely effective for the problems I'm talking about — Group 3 and

above. But Group 1 and 2 have to be part of that as well, and that's bifurcated. JIATF 401 is working with the Group 1 and 2 threats, largely across the interagency. The bottom line is, they'll all have to share domain awareness and information to create a solution — whether forward or at home — to be able to solve this problem. You can't have it worked in stovepipes: across services, across organizations, across industry.

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

But you obviously believe in General Niemi's first step and General Wilsbach's (Cruiser's) first step. That integration of the next layer — bringing in Patriots, the next upper layers, with the defense of the base or the area — do you agree with that, that that should be an Air Force [mission]? I know it's a joint mission, but base defense — or do they cut it off at some point, at some level?

### Gen. (Ret.) Glen VanHerck — Former Commander, USNORTHCOM/NORAD

I think the ideal solution is for a single commander to have responsibility for area air defense — a joint task force commander assigned to do that. And that would include defense of the carrier. Obviously, the Navy is going to do largely the defense of the carrier, but that can't be an isolated solution worked in a vacuum. The area air defense commander — and that doesn't have to be U.S. Air Force, it could be another service — needs to have awareness, responsibility, and authority designated to operate across the joint area of operations to be able to accomplish that.

Domain awareness today is my concern. You can't give somebody responsibility and authority without ensuring they have the capability to execute the mission you've given them. And if you don't have domain awareness for Group 1 and 2, and portions of Group 3, then a single commander can't execute that. That's where we are in our homeland today. The NORAD/NORTHCOM commander does not have the domain awareness to be able to defend every installation and piece of critical infrastructure. Therefore, the services have the responsibility today to defend their installations. Forward, it's likely going to be that way for a little while, until we can get domain awareness broadly enough that you can have a single commander to do that, Riki.

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

Can you just explain to everybody — currently we have an AOC commander for this, and an AAMDC commander. So, what's the difference between what you're saying and what we have in place today for area defense?

### Gen. (Ret.) Glen VanHerck — Former Commander, USNORTHCOM/NORAD

Well, the AOC commander is largely in the planning function — the strategy function, producing the air tasking order, the daily operations, planning and executing the mission — not responsible for defense of the air. That will go, oftentimes, to the JFACC, the Joint Force Air Component Commander. The AOC commander typically works under the JFACC. And then you'll have the AAMDC — the missile [command]

— which typically falls under the Army for operating THAAD, Patriot, those types of things. But they all fall under what I would call the Area Air Defense Command. They should fall under that single commander. Does that make sense?

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

That makes sense. So, you're saying we need to be more defined — one person in charge of all of that? That's what you're arguing about, correct? What's the difference between what we have today?

### Gen. (Ret.) Glen VanHerck — Former Commander, USNORTHCOM/NORAD

What I'm saying is, ideally, we would have a single commander to be able to do this — like it's set up to do today, a JFACC, an Air Component Commander — and the subordinate units would fall under him, whether for missile defense or whatever; but you have a single commander. That single commander today does not have the domain awareness to make decisions such as engagement authority — "Yes, go engage that threat" — because you don't have the domain awareness to do that today, to see those threats, for that commander to make those decisions. But that would be the ideal solution.

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

Thank you. I just want to have a couple of minutes here — Glen or John. If you want to ask some questions, that'd be great.

### John Rood — Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

Yes. One of the things we do at MDAA is ask the audience to send in questions, so we've gotten some, and I've got a couple here I wanted to ask both General Niemi and Glen. One of the questions we got: there's obviously a lot of experience we're gaining — good and negative — in the current fight and from our allies, whether Ukraine or others. So, the questioner asks, how are we going about — as a force and as a government — capturing those best practices across multiple geographic areas, with the objective, of course, of a comprehensive layered defense against missile and drone threats? Are there any particular structures or ways we're approaching capturing those lessons learned and incorporating them into our future planning and our force?

### Lt. Gen. Christopher J. Niemi — Deputy Chief of Staff (A5/7) & Chief Modernization Officer, U.S. Air Force

There are. So, JIATF 401 has already been mentioned; they're largely focused on the material side and the procurement assessment — figuring out what works, what doesn't, procuring that, and fielding it. That's allowing us to do that collectively, as opposed to each individual organization within and across the services trying to relearn it themselves. That's helpful; it's not sufficient.

There are certainly other efforts ongoing. Within about the last couple of months, there were a couple of high-level meetings that were basically debriefs of the experience we had all gone through with Epic

Fury with regard to the one-way attack threats — an assessment of what we know about it and what our plan should be going forward. That was attended by multiple four-stars at a very high level, and it involved the practitioners who had been over there and had the direct experience, so that we could connect that experience to the resourcing and policy decisions that need to happen in order to effect real change. I do agree with the comments — we're moving too slow. There's rarely a day that I'm satisfied with the pace at which we're moving forward. But I think we are doing better, and we have a long way to go in that regard.

### John Rood — Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

Yes. Well, General VanHerck — Glen — one of the other questions I was going to ask you. When we've gone through these various scenarios, it's helpful but simplified to say our forces are in one location and the enemy forces are in another, and so we need to be able to detect an incoming threat — whether cruise missiles, drones, or what have you — and as the threat gets closer to what we want to defend (our forces or our cities), we'd have a layered approach to attrit the threat and deal with it. But one of the things that's been experienced in the Ukraine conflict — and to a certain extent by our Israeli friends — is that the frontline is sometimes penetrated by the enemy. For example, the Ukrainians sending special forces with large numbers of drones to operate inside Russia; you see that sometimes occurring by the Russians on Ukrainian soil.

When you were in command, we experienced some things, whether at Langley Air Force Base or reports of drones over New Jersey or New York. So, consider a scenario where there were nightly attacks in New York, or in Los Angeles, and in some of these other locations. It's common on the battlefield today in Ukraine that drones will land near targets, to be commanded — when 100, or 50, should go aloft and surge to a target when something interesting is happening. They might land 50 yards away, or 25 yards away, and just wait to be commanded. So, let's envision a scenario where, if you were in your command at NORTHCOM, and in Los Angeles and New York there were intrusions by drones, and experiences with swarms coming from either trucks that released them, or from wooded areas, or areas where we don't know — how would we approach that? Because the FBI or the FAA would assert their authorities, but if we were starting to take losses at our air bases, or Los Angeles airport or the New York City airports were being shut down for days on end, people would be asking for the military to play a role. So can you talk about how we would approach that today, and where we need to get to? Because you labored under this, with some similar incidents, when you were in command.

### Gen. (Ret.) Glen VanHerck — Former Commander, USNORTHCOM/NORAD

Yeah, John, you highlight some great points. The bottom line is, today the Department of War is not the lead federal agency for the scenario you just described — that's Homeland Security or Justice. The way it would work today is that General Guillot has been given a fly-away package to support those requests, from another agency or the department, to add capacity and capability in the case of a drone threat to an airport or to critical infrastructure. But largely, he does not have responsibility, authority, or forces assigned day-to-day to go to execute that mission.

So that would be just routine DSCA — Defense Support of Civil Authorities — where we would need another agency to ask for DOD/DOW support to go provide the capability to defend. And then you're going to have, likely, presidential authority to be able to execute and enforce laws. DOD, day-to-day, cannot conduct law enforcement, and much of this occurs under law enforcement authority and responsibility. So General Guillot would have to be given that responsibility through a presidential authority as well.

I've asked to go back and look at policy and law, as the world has fundamentally changed, and threats have changed around the globe, including here in our homeland. The policy and law have not kept up with it, John, and we've got to go look at that. That's part of what I talked about right up front — to get the policy right, to ensure we're not hampering ourselves from defending and providing national security.

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

All right. Yes — we're going to have to wrap up pretty quickly, because time's running out. But I do want to ask one question to both General Niemi and Glen. We talked about lessons learned over the six months. Why haven't we — from your perspective specifically — been able to adapt to those lessons in six months, such that our bases are still getting hit? It's just frustrating to see what's happened; we're much better than that, to go six months of this and still get hit. Is the data being used? Are we leveraging the data and the lessons we're learning from every single attack — that's data — are we adjusting to that, or are we not? From an outside perspective, it doesn't look like we're evolving to be able to have that. Could you guys answer that one at a time? We'll start with General Niemi, if you can.

### Lt. Gen. Christopher J. Niemi — Deputy Chief of Staff (A5/7) & Chief Modernization Officer, U.S. Air Force

Thanks for that question, Riki. As I alluded to before, there's rarely a day that I'm satisfied with the progress we're making. And it would be very unsatisfying if I described my assessment of why that is. From my perspective, that's wasted energy, because it is what it is, and where I'm spending my time and energy is on solving the problem. There has been a lot of progress in the last six months — not nearly enough — but I don't think it's productive to spend our finite time and energy investigating why we didn't do better over the last six months. I would rather spend that finite time and energy solving the problem, so that we do better in the next six months.

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

A good answer. Glen?

### Gen. (Ret.) Glen VanHerck — Former Commander, USNORTHCOM/NORAD

Yeah. I'm not in a really good position to know exactly what has transpired internally, and what they've put in place to defend. But the bottom line is, lessons from Ukraine, lessons from around the globe,

capabilities that were rapidly developed — we should look closely at those and implement them, working closely with industry. There are technological solutions. This is not a technology problem in many aspects; this is culture, this is bureaucracy, this is moving fast and taking some risk and putting solutions in place. And that's just not our culture.

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

Thank you, Glen. John, you want to chip in on this too?

### John Rood — Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

I don't have a noteworthy thing to add to that point, but I accept the last thing Glen said. I think if we were to use as a vignette some of the recent experiences in Ukraine, or elsewhere, and say, "Let's just play that out — if that occurred in Chicago, or if that occurred to shut down our base at Whiteman Air Base in Missouri — how would we respond to that?" — we wouldn't like the results. We would feel inadequate from an organization, authorities, and policy perspective, and from a technology and capability perspective. I agree with Glen — it's not purely a technology issue — but there are technology solutions that will help that are not being incorporated rapidly enough. We're being slow at adopting even some of the technologies the Ukrainians have offered, or that are available to utilize in our current fight. So, I think we've got to adjust our planning and our thinking on that, Riki.

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

I'm with everybody. You play with what you've got, and you play fast, and you play furious, and you get that thing moving. I'm so happy and relieved that the Air Force is taking a much stronger role in what they can do, for the level they're at, being in front of the fight and making that first change — a formal role-and-responsibilities change. Thank you all. Let's go around really quick — closing remarks would be great. John, do closing remarks.

### John Rood — Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

I'll just simply say again: one, acknowledge the problem — the rate of change is not sufficient. Two, this isn't an individual issue with a single capability or a single commander; I think we're in the context of a real change, one of those large changes in the nature of the way warfare is conducted. We must acknowledge that, and not be wedded to our current structures, authorities, and ways of approaching the problem. And lastly, we do have this tremendously innovative private sector, and we're not fully unleashing it. As somebody who leads a small company, I'd say we are not sufficiently looking for the sources of innovation and leveraging what makes us great as an enterprise to bring great technology solutions. We can do a lot more of that.

### Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance

Thanks, John. Glen.

**Gen. (Ret.) Glen VanHerck — Former Commander, USNORTHCOM/NORAD**

Yeah, thanks, Riki. I applaud General Wilsbach, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, and his team for stepping up, owning this, and moving forward with solutions. So, well done, Cruiser and team — great job. We've got to move faster, and the bureaucracy has gotten out of the way. John said something that's really, really important: small and mid-sized companies have developed a lot of capability and technology to help solve these problems. Their challenge is scaling what we need for this solution, and the department and larger companies can help scale. That's where I'm talking about collaboration across companies. Don't look at a small company and go, "They can't deliver." Look at the technology they're delivering and go, "How can we scale this to be part of our solution?" I think that'll help us be more effective.

**Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance**

Thank you, Glen. General Niemi?

**Lt. Gen. Christopher J. Niemi — Deputy Chief of Staff (A5/7) & Chief Modernization Officer, U.S. Air Force**

Yeah, Riki. I appreciate the chance to join the panel today and provide a little insight into what the Air Force is doing. My portfolio is much broader than what we've talked about today, so I just wanted to add that I'm absolutely looking at how we mitigate these risks — but I'm also spending a lot of time figuring out how we change the way we fight in order to reduce the vulnerabilities that are inherent. The way we've fought over the last 35 years depended on our ability to operate from proximate, safe-haven bases, and that's clearly an advantage that is eroding before our very eyes. So we need to figure out how we can defend our assets and our air bases — that was the focus of today's discussion — but we should also spend time and energy figuring out how we can fight in a different way that inherently has less vulnerability to these threats we're facing.

**Riki Ellison — Chairman & Founder, Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance**

Thank you, General Niemi. Thank you, all of you. This discussion was very enlightening, very educational — especially for those who don't understand the problem here — and it showed great courage and great conviction for the Air Force to lead. You're leading out and making it happen. So, thank you for this great discussion on air base defense. We look forward to getting that capability, and — as you said, notably — it's going in phases, and it's going in right now. That is great news to hear. Great leadership. And thank you, all three, for taking the time and effort to articulate this great information.