



INTERVIEWS

This section of the *Journal* features an interview with The Honorable Mark T. Esper, who served as the 27th Secretary of Defense and the 23rd Secretary of the Army. In the interview, David Trachtenberg asks questions about Secretary Esper's views of the most pressing national security threats to the United States; regional challenges in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East; the changing nature of warfare; nuclear modernization and missile defense efforts; and impediments to success in the Pentagon bureaucracy.

An Interview With The Honorable Mark T. Esper, former Secretary of Defense and Secretary of the Army

Q. What, in your view, are the most significant national security challenges facing the United States today and how well prepared is the United States to deal with them?

A. The most significant national security challenge facing the United States today is the People's Republic of China (PRC), and it will remain so for the coming decades. The PRC wants to displace the United States and become the world's dominant power by 2049. To achieve this goal, Beijing has developed a comprehensive long-term strategy that includes building a modern military that is the world's largest, dominating key sectors of the global economy, possessing ample diplomatic influence, undermining the United States and its allies, and so on. America's aim must be to meet them head on in each of these areas in a whole-of-government/whole-of-country approach designed to sustain, increase, or regain overmatch, while also leading the world's democracies to see China for the threat it is and take appropriate action. It is important that we work with our allies and partners – our strategic advantage – during this period to deter Chinese aggression and reshape Beijing's behavior.

Q. As a former Secretary of Defense and Secretary of the Army, what do you consider the main impediments to sound, timely decision making within the Pentagon? Are they bureaucratic, institutional, fiscal, political, technological, or a combination of the above?

A. There are many impediments to timely action at the Pentagon. Weapons acquisition is a particularly troubling area given the large budgets involved, the speed of technological change, the complex bureaucracy, the demands of joint warfighting, and the needs of our service members, among other things. Chief among these are a prevailing culture of risk aversion and unaligned incentives in the broad middle management of the Pentagon; cumbersome weapons approval procedures that can cause unnecessary delays and increased cost; and a lengthy and uncertain congressional appropriations process that is too



slow to meet today's threats and the speed of technological change while also denying Pentagon leaders the authority and flexibility they need to do both.

Q. China has been described as the “pacing threat” guiding U.S. military efforts. Do you believe the United States has sufficiently prioritized the capability investments necessary to deter China and potential Chinese aggression against Taiwan or U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific?

A. The U.S. military takes the China threat very seriously and is committing a good deal of time, energy, and resources on this problem. My larger concern is that the United States does not have a comprehensive whole-of-government/whole-of-country strategy to deal with the PRC – technologically, economically, diplomatically, informationally, etc. – let alone do so in a coordinated manner with our allies and partners. That said, I believe deterrence also depends on the demonstrated capabilities and perceived will of our allies and partners abroad. A decisive deterrent to a Chinese attempt to seize Taiwan, for example, begins with a well-armed Republic of China (ROC) military that possesses a broad range of asymmetric capabilities and an associated warfighting strategy; a highly-capable active duty force backed up by an extremely large and trained reserve force; large stockpiles of the munitions, commodities, and resources needed to sustain the fight and the population for several weeks; and a visible and convincing ethos across the island that the Taiwanese people will fight like the Ukrainians to defend their sovereignty and independence.

Q. A recent public opinion poll in Europe indicated an increase in the number of Europeans that see China in more friendly terms than the United States. How serious is this and what should be done about it?

A. If the polling is accurate, then it is a serious issue that must be addressed. I believe that the United States must remain the leader of the free world, and that we do so by acting on our democratic principles, leading with our values, and engaging our friends and allies in a positive way to advance our goals and interests. This will begin the process of changing others' opinions. In addition to maintaining the best military in the world, it also means we must place greater emphasis on the soft power of our diplomatic corps, smartly leveraging our foreign assistance and foreign military sales, breaking down barriers to expanded trade, reenergizing our public diplomacy, and looking for areas to cooperate and collaborate with friends on issues of mutual interest. At the same time, we should not hesitate to highlight China's malign national goals, its poor record in areas like human rights and freedom of religion, its willingness to break international law or abandon global norms in matters such as trade and intellectual property protections, and the frequency by which it bullies its neighbors and others who cross Beijing's path.

Q. How do you assess the importance and political and technical viability of President Trump's "Golden Dome" initiative? Do you believe such an initiative can be implemented in a sufficiently timely manner to counter effectively growing missile threats to the U.S. homeland?

A. It is important that the United States continue to develop the means to protect the homeland and the American people from accidental or intentional missile launches. The threat to our country currently exists from longstanding adversaries such as Russia to newer ones like North Korea. Meanwhile, China is expanding its strategic forces and Iran aspires to build such capabilities. That said, from a programmatic perspective, the first questions to be asked are whether we have the technology to build a missile defense "dome" that can reliably protect the entire country, and second, what are the fiscal and opportunity costs of doing so. The answers to these questions are critical to assessing whether such a program is politically viable and addressing a host of other issues.

Q. Are space-based elements, including both sensors and shooters, necessary for Golden Dome to meet its stated objectives? Or can the system accomplish its goals using only terrestrial-based elements?

A. Space-based sensors and C3I [Command, Control, Communications, and Intelligence] are necessary for any national missile defense system. Space-based shooters, when integrated into a broader and robust network, would be a great feature of such a defense that could provide even greater reliability, flexibility, and performance as complements to ground-based systems, assuming the technology is viable, reliable, scalable, and reasonably affordable.

Q. How do you assess the current conflict with Iran? In your view, did Operation Midnight Hammer and Operation Epic Fury succeed in achieving their stated goals? What more should be done to ensure that Iran does not acquire a nuclear weapon? Is a negotiated agreement with Iran a viable solution to the current conflict?

A. My sense is that Operation Midnight Hammer was successful in setting back Iran's nuclear ambitions by many months, if not years. The head of the IAEA said as much as well. Regarding Operation Epic Fury, the U.S. military was successful in significantly degrading Iran's conventional military forces. These tactical achievements have yet to translate into strategic success, however, which I define as a permanent reopening of the Strait of Hormuz and the conclusion of a long-term nuclear arrangement with Tehran that completely, irreversibly, and verifiably checks the country's nuclear ambitions.

Q. The Russia-Ukraine conflict is now in its fifth year, with many observers believing the Ukrainians have done a remarkable job developing and employing sophisticated technology to stymie Russian advances and impose harsher costs on Russia. The Trump Administration has encouraged Europeans to shoulder more of the burden of assisting Ukraine in its defense against Russian aggression. Should the United States do more to assist Ukraine or step back and allow the Europeans to take up the slack?

A. Ukraine has done a remarkable job in blunting Russia's advances, and may have begun turning the tide in the conflict through a combination of grit, perseverance, technical innovation, and strategic prowess. It is good and right that our European allies share more of the burden when it comes to supporting Ukraine. I think they and other democracies around the world should do more in a number of areas. That said, the United States can also do more to support Ukraine, relative to where we can uniquely contribute and in the context of the other global threats against which we must continue to deter and defend.

Q. Drone warfare is becoming a staple of modern-day conflict. Russia, Iran, and Iranian proxies have launched thousands of drones against military and civilian targets in Ukraine, Israel, and the Gulf Arab states. How should the United States plan to counter drone warfare and is the United States investing sufficient resources in this effort to succeed?

A. Drone warfare, both offensive and defensive, will be an important (though not exclusive) and growing part of military operations now and in the future. American industry and innovators have put forward numerous solutions to drone-based problem sets. In the context of drone defense, the challenge is building effective and reliable counter-UAS systems that are relatively inexpensive and can be built and deployed in volume at scale. Achieving this will likely require a combination of low-cost missiles, counter drones, guns, and directed energy (laser and high-power microwave) that are employed in ways (e.g. layered) and at times that will offer the best defense.

Q. The NATO alliance has been buffeted by political strains and uncertainties that some observers believe may fracture the unity of the alliance and lead to its ultimate demise. Do you believe this is a possible outcome and, if so, what should the United States do about it?

A. NATO has been an effective and credible alliance that has helped keep the peace in Europe and served American interests for decades. The alliance has also faced political strains in the past and overcome them. That said, there are many things about NATO that should be reviewed and reformed if the alliance is to remain effective and credible in the years ahead, especially now that we are in an era of great power competition with a hot war in Ukraine. Getting NATO countries to spend more on defense is an important start. This additional funding must be translated into readiness and real capabilities, however, that can be

deployed to deter adversaries and defend allies. And member capitals must be willing to significantly grow their armed forces and employ them as needed, without condition. If fundamental changes such as these can be made and sustained, then NATO will endure because of the value effective collective defense can provide to like-minded democracies that face threats from authoritarian states as close as Russia and as far away as China.

Q. North Korea has received relatively scant attention of late in light of other world developments. How serious a security threat is North Korea and what should the United States do about it?

A. North Korea remains a current and growing security risk to America's allies in Asia, principally South Korea and Japan, and increasingly to the United States itself. The DPRK continues to sustain large conventional forces, complemented by growing drone capabilities, along the demilitarized zone (DMZ), while also reportedly expanding its nuclear arsenal and working to develop a capable ICBM. On top of these force developments, Pyongyang is also cooperating more with Russia, where it is benefiting from technology exchanges and gaining battlefield experience in Ukraine. As such, U.S. policy towards North Korea needs to be revitalized, beginning with our allies and partners in Asia, to develop a comprehensive plan to both bolster our own defenses and cooperation while also diplomatically engaging Pyongyang and its supporters.

Q. Do you consider the program of record for U.S strategic and theater nuclear forces to be adequate for U.S. strategic and extended deterrence purposes, given contemporary and emerging threats? What, if any, hedging measures should the United States take now to help prepare for the future?

A. The United States is making considerable investments in all legs of the nuclear triad. These are generational investments that have been ongoing for years and are long overdue. In addition to these major investments, the United States must continue to build adequate and reliable missile defenses (ballistic, cruise, and hypersonic); keep modernizing our space-based and other sensors to guarantee we have sufficient early warning capabilities; ensure we have strong export controls and security procedures to deny our adversaries access to cutting-edge technology that might improve their own capabilities; build robust nuclear command and control systems with adequate cyber security and other defenses to protect them; and, explore other ways to deploy and employ strategic weapons to bolster deterrence. Lastly, in an era of drone warfare, we must ensure our strategic forces and their bases in the United States are protected against drone surveillance and attack.
