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Israel and Great Power Competition
DASD Michael Mulroy Opening Statement
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Opening Statement

The National Defense Strategy directs the Department of Defense to focus on great power competition. Although our day to day work may be driven by deterring Iranian aggression, leading a Coalition to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS, and addressing the crisis in Yemen, we are equally focused on Chinese and Russian military intentions in the Middle East and how to leverage our regional partners as part of our global strategy to compete. As DoD's most strategic Middle East partner, Israel understands the United States' national security priorities and we are working to adapt the defense relationship to focus on both our countries' priority concerns.

DoD is highly focused on competition with China, which Secretary Esper has only further emphasized for the Department. China is working to erode U.S. military advantages while challenging U.S. and our partners' values, including respect for human freedom, free commerce, others' sovereignty, and intellectual property. As the Department's Chinese Military Power Report details, there is significant concern with China's long-term play for influence, particularly through access and basing, economic agreements, and technology and intellectual property theft.

Last year China pledged \$23 billion in loans and aid to Middle East states and made \$28 billion in infrastructure investments in the region, and we are highly attentive to China's investments in Israeli infrastructure and their increased trade. By 2021, a Chinese state-owned company will operate a portion of the Haifa port, while another Chinese state-owned company will develop a port in the south, near Israel's naval base in Ashdod. This is in addition to Chinese investment in the Tel Aviv light rail—which will run past the Kirya, Israel's defense headquarters.

While we are not asking Israel to avoid dealing with China entirely, we have open discussions with all our closest allies and partners on the national security implications of Chinese investment. The openness of the U.S. and Israeli economies is a strength to our countries, but malign actors can take advantage if we are not cautious.

DoD also confronts an aggressive Russia intent on establishing a multipolar world, controlling a broad sphere of influence, safeguarding autocratic regimes, and asserting a role as major power broker. Russia intervened in Syria to protect a long-time ally, prevent democratic change, and re-establish its status in the Middle East. In Syria, Russia has marketed a brand of pragmatic security cooperation, while improving its military capability, expanding access to NATO's Southern Flank, and establishing an indefinite military presence at Hmeimim and Tartus. We need to guard against similar interventions and ensure Russia bears the financial and reputational costs of its destabilizing interventions.

As many have said, Russia plays arsonist and firefighter. It supports the Assad regime, fomenting regional instability, and feeding a global refugee crisis while at the same time seeks to build bridges to right wing, anti-immigration parties in Europe. It positions itself as an alternative power broker, while violating others' sovereignty and international treaties, using its seat on the Security Council to protect Iran's malign activity, and ramping up defense exports – including the S-400 and fighter aircraft sales – in attempt to create fissures with U.S. partners.

Russia's expanded influence in Syria puts a new power in Israel's backyard and we understand Israel sees a need for engagement to preserve its security. It is imperative we collectively hold Russia's feet to the fire – so that Russia presses the Syrian Regime to participate in a political

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process under UNSCR 2254, makes real vice rhetorical contributions to global counterterrorism efforts, and delivers on promises to remove Iran's military from Syria – without also burnishing Russia's credentials as arbiter of choice in this conflict.

We should be realistic about Russia's weaknesses – its military reach (even in Syria) is limited and Russia is unable to project power and security like the United States; its economy is stagnant; and its network of allies is limited. We need to remind our partners that Russia's major international interventions have fed global instability and amplified human suffering – not just in Syria with support for Assad and regime chemical weapons use, but also in Georgia, Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and Venezuela.

I look forward to discussing with you how we adapt our top-tier defense partnership with Israel to address great power competition in the Middle East and the need to balance our immediate and long-term national security imperatives.

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