

October 9, 2025

Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson

Moderated by Bradley Bowman

Introductory remarks by Cliff May

*This transcript has been edited for clarity*

**MAY:** Welcome and thank you for joining us for today's event hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. I'm Cliff May, I am the founder and president of FDD. It's Thursday, October 9, and we're pleased to have you here for this conversation, some in-person, some tuning in live, some listening to this as a podcast.

The United States confronts an extraordinary array of threats, including communist China, new imperialist Russia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the dynastic dictatorship in North Korea, what we at FDD have been calling for some years now an "Axis of Aggressors."

Notably, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Dan Caine testified this summer that these four countries are "pursuing unprecedented levels of cooperation, driven by a desire to challenge U.S. interests and stability around the world." He emphasized that, quote again, "their collaboration extends across military, cyber, economic, and informational domains."

As the Trump administration finalizes its new National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Global Posture Review, how can Washington align ends, ways, and means to ensure Americans and our interests are protected?

To discuss these issues and more, we are joined by an expert lineup today.

LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster serves, I'm proud to say, as the Chairman of the Board of Advisors of FDD's Center on Military and Political Power (CMPP). H.R. was the 26th assistant to the president for National Security Affairs during President Trump's first term.

He served as a commissioned officer in the United States Army for 34 years before retiring in June of 2018. From 2014 to 2017, General McMaster designed the future army as the director of the Army Capabilities Integration Center and the deputy commanding general of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. As commanding general of the Maneuver Center of Excellence at Fort Benning, he oversaw all training and education for the Army's infantry, armor, and cavalry force. His extensive experience leading soldiers and organizations in wartime includes commander of a combined joint interagency task force in Afghanistan from 2010 to 2012, commander of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Iraq from 2005 to 2006, and famously as Commander of Eagle Troop's 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Operation Desert Storm from 1990 to 1991.

A soldier and a scholar, H.R. is the author of the award-winning *Dereliction of Duty*, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*, and *At War with Ourselves: My Tour of Duty in the Trump Administration*, which was published last year.

Gen (Ret.) Laura Richardson is a member of the board of advisors for FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. She served more than 38 years in the United States Army, culminating her career as commanding general of the U.S. Southern Command from 2021 to 2024. She also served as the commanding general of the U.S. Army North, deputy commanding general of U.S. Forces Command, deputy commander of the 1st Cavalry Division, and commanding general of the U.S. Army Operational Test Command. While commanding an assault helicopter battalion in the 101st Airborne Division, she deployed her unit to Iraq during the first year of Operation Iraqi Freedom, which she flew combat missions, and she served at Afghanistan in the International Security Assistance Force during Operation Enduring Freedom.

Moderating today's conversation is Bradley Bowman, senior director of FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. Brad spent nine years in the U.S. Senate, including six years as the top defense advisor to Sen. Kelly Ayotte, then senior Republican on the Senate Armed Services' Readiness & Management Support Subcommittee. Brad also served more than 15 years in active duty as a U.S. Army officer, including time as a company commander, Black Hawk pilot, congressional affairs officer on the Army staff in the Pentagon, and staff officer in Afghanistan. He also served as an assistant professor at West Point, where he taught courses in American politics, foreign policy, and grand strategy.

October 9, 2025

*Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman*

*Introductory remarks by Cliff May*

So, if my math is right – and our researchers have checked it, so I'm sure it is – it occurs to me that we have more than 87 years of active-duty U.S. Army service represented on our stage today. I look forward to this conversation.

OK, before we dive in, a few words about FDD for the record. For more than 20 years, FDD – 20 years – for more than 20 years, FDD has operated as a fiercely independent, non-partisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. As a point of pride and principle, we do not accept any foreign government funding. For more on our work, please visit our website [fdd.org](http://fdd.org); follow us on X and Instagram; and subscribe to our YouTube channel. We're – we're everywhere.

Brad, the floor is yours.

**BOWMAN:** Great. Thank you very much, Cliff. I really appreciate the introduction. I thank you all for joining here in person and those joining online.

And most of all, thanks to you two, General McMaster, General Richardson, two individuals whom I admire so much. And I'm so privileged and honored to be associated with you here at our Center on Military and Political Power.

And I think we would need about three or four hours to talk about all the questions I'd love to ask both of you, so with your permission, I'll just love to jump in and get started.

We're framing this discussion around the Axis of Aggressors, as Cliff just detailed. This is something that we've been focusing on here for quite some time. We're more than 14 or 15 months into a research project where we're trying to understand how these four adversaries are working together, what the implications are of their cooperation, and most importantly, what we, the United States, and our allies and partners should do about it.

We're into the drafting stage of that report. And as Cliff said, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs said that these four countries are pursuing "unprecedented levels of cooperation."

And you may have noticed in the 2025 Director of National Intelligence Annual Threat Assessment, which we know reflects the consensus or collective insights of our intelligence community, they said, "growing cooperation among them is increasing their fortitude against the United States, the potential for hostilities with any one of them to draw in another, and pressure on other global actors to choose side." That's what our intelligence community said.

We recognize that there is friction among them, right? We're not trying to suggest they're monolithic. There are differences between them that, frankly, we should understand and try to exploit where we can. But as the Defense Intelligence Agency said in their report, I believe in May, these four adversaries, Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Pyongyang, are seeking to compartmentalize their differences as they advance military security and intelligence cooperation.

And this is really playing out in all, you know, areas of responsibility around the world. We know that China, North Korea, and Iran are materially supporting Vladimir Putin's war of conquest in Ukraine, the largest war in Europe since World War II, in very tangible ways.

Admiral Paparo in the Pacific, the commander there, said their cooperation among them threatens to – his words, not mine – "exacerbate and accelerate security challenges in the Pacific."

General Brunson on the Korean Peninsula, commander of U.S. forces there, testified earlier this year that Russia is – this is his quote, "Russia is expanding sharing of space, nuclear, and missile-applicable technology, expertise, and materials to the DPRK." And he talks about how that's going to have implications the next three to five years for their weapons of mass destruction programs. And he used a word that you don't often see as in congressional testimony. "Increasingly insidious" was the word he used for this cooperation that they were talking about. So, when you have someone with that kind of knowledge and experience, I don't think we should slough that off.

October 9, 2025

*Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman*

*Introductory remarks by Cliff May*

General Caine, after that other quote I said earlier, said, "This convergence marks a strategic shift, one that reinforces the need for sustained American resolve and unity in the face of more aligned challengers." So, that's my effort to kind of set the table.

General McMaster, if I can start with you, if I may. I'm interested in what your assessment is of this Axis of Aggressors, how they're cooperating, the implications of that?

And most importantly, right, because we just don't want to admire the problem – what are some of the key things that come to your mind when we think about how to begin to respond?

**MCMMASTER:** Hey, well, thanks, Brad, and Cliff, for the opportunity to be with you. And to be with Laura, who I've not been able to say publicly, thank you for your amazing career of service. You know, it was such a privilege to serve alongside you for so many years, and great to be with you here at FDD.

**RICHARDSON:** Thank you, H.R.

**MCMMASTER:** You know, I think you laid it out so well. I mean, I think this is a – this is a real danger. This is why I think President Trump is confronting a much more complex and dangerous world in his second administration than he was in his first because of the coalescing of this Axis of Aggressors.

And you mentioned that they're working together in very tangible ways, but also less tangible ways. The tangible ways are, hey, 30,000 more North Korean troops may be headed to fight on European soil, or the 10 million rounds of artillery provided to the Russians such that one out of every two artillery rounds now fired at Ukrainians are North Korean.

North Korea is getting lots of support in return, which is less tangible. You have support, as you mentioned, for a broad range of military-related technologies. And, also, the underwriting of the entire war machine of Vladimir Putin by China, and China also aiding and abetting the North Koreans.

It's important to see, also, the connection to Iran. And one of a – I think one of the facilities, that's sort of just as an example of this, is a Shahed drone factory that's cranking out 5,000 Shahed drones a month, in which 25,000 – I would call them North Korean slave laborers – are providing the labor force.

So, what do we do about this Axis of Aggressors? I think we have a tremendous opportunity – we, the United States, our allies, and partners around the world. That opportunity is associated with each of the members of this axis overextending themselves and creating real weaknesses in each of their societies and each of their economies.

Russia, of course, overextended itself in 2022 with the invasion of Ukraine. They packed their dress uniforms in their vehicles because they thought they were going to be on parade, you know, in Kyiv. And, of course, there are real frailties in the Russian economy now.

Putin's sitting on piles of cash he can't convert. He has a labor shortage. The economy's stagnated. Inflation is high. He's spending 50 percent of his federal budget on defense, which is unsustainable. So, real weaknesses in Russia. Not to mention the 30,000 casualties a month after taking a million casualties, right, in that – in that war.

North Korea, you know, Victor Cha called it the impossible state for a reason, right? It doesn't seem like it's possible. It's the only hereditary communist dictatorship in the world.

There are significant weaknesses there, weaknesses that I think we were exploiting effectively going back into 2017 with a maximum pressure strategy. That pressure has been alleviated because North Korea is now the beneficiary of support from both China and Russia in particular.

October 9, 2025

*Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman*

*Introductory remarks by Cliff May*

Iran overextended on October 7, 2023. As we commemorate that very grim – that grim anniversary of those horrific attacks, Iran thought that we're weak, right? The West is weak, decadent, divided. Hey, time to light the ring of fire around Israel.

And, thankfully, Israel didn't listen to any of the advice we gave them in terms of, you know, "take the win," you know, "de-escalate," and really revealed the profound weaknesses of the Iranians and their proxy forces.

So, there are vulnerabilities across the whole Axis of Aggressors. Quickly then, to get to your point, what the heck do we do about it? I think we should analyze what are the sources of strength and support for these authoritarian regimes.

I like the framework that my colleague at the Hoover Institution, Stephen Kotkin, came up with. You know, he talks like Joe Pesci. He says, "Five things, five things." These are the authoritarian regimes. But they need cash flow, right? And so, we should go to work on that.

You know, we should seize those Russian assets and then go after the ghost fleet or the black fleet, which is now like a thousand ships maybe, to constrain the flow of cash into that ATM.

President Trump has an idea about tariffs on countries that are buying their oil and gas. Can we displace some of that gas, us and some of our friends and partners, in the Gulf? So, cash flow.

They need security forces. Security forces that, in the case of these authoritarian regimes, can often be pitted against each other. And we should be thinking creatively about that. Remember an ex-hot dog salesman, an ex-con, marched on Moscow after taking over the equivalent of CENTCOM headquarters and shot down multiple aircraft and so forth. So, there are some weaknesses there.

You know, the third thing that they need are control over life choices. The fourth thing they need is stories to tell their people. "Hey, there are Nazis in Ukraine," or, you know, "I'm aggrieved because this is all due to NATO enlargement," and so forth. So, we can – there's an informational cognitive warfare dimension of this.

And finally, they need an international system. The system – this club that was on display at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that compensates for the isolation of these regimes. We ought to go after – we ought to go after all that, I think, in a more offensive mindset.

Putin has an offensive mindset. I think he's waging war against us right now. I believe that these violations of Polish airspace, Danish airspace, these are acts of war. These are Article V actions.

And so, I think it's time for us to go offensive, because I don't know of any competition, sports, you know, or in conflict, that has ever been won by playing only defense. So, I think there's a lot we can do because of the weaknesses they have.

**BOWMAN:** Thank you, H.R.

General Richardson, welcome again. The last time you were here, you were U.S. Southern Command commander, both for the event on this stage and the podcast we did. And it's just a real honor to have you back here. And I want to ask you to talk about the Axis of Aggressors in the context, if you're willing, of what's happening in the Caribbean and Latin America. Often when we talk about these four adversaries, we talk about them in the context of the Pacific, the Middle East, or Europe.

But we know that they're doing things right here in the Western Hemisphere as well. So, I would love to, both for your three years in command and more recently what you've seen, what do you see China and Russia up to in the Western Hemisphere?

October 9, 2025

Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson

Moderated by Bradley Bowman

Introductory remarks by Cliff May

**RICHARDSON:** Yeah. So, I've talked extensively about what China has done in the region. And I've said that the first and second island chain to our homeland is in the Caribbean and Central America. And they're in the red zone to our homeland, make no mistake. And so, while we've been focused on hotspots and crises elsewhere, they have quietly, through economic, what they call diplomacy – the Belt and Road Initiative has been alive and well and very, very active in South America, Central America, and the Caribbean, and 23 of 31 countries.

And you know, as you put the – I have a graphic that the previous commanders had made. I kept that, and I would use that for my testimony. And I believe Admiral Halsey is using it, too. But I think we're the only ones that really can put everything that the Chinese are doing in the region on one graphic, right? But when you look at it, it's all the critical infrastructure, right? And that should really cause us to pause, because in our own critical infrastructure, right, and it's been said many times publicly by our intelligence officials, the protection of our own critical infrastructure, we got to be really, really concerned about.

But as I watch it in Latin America and the Caribbean, and deep water ports, energy grids, 5G, safe city, smart city technology, and then also in the space infrastructure, why in my hemisphere, the hemisphere that I was responsible for working with militaries and public security forces, is there the most PRC space enabling infrastructure than anywhere else on the globe? And so, quite honestly, I believe that this region has been feeding and fueling the world for the last 15 years. I say again, feeding and fueling the world, but not getting the benefit from it. It's being extracted, it's being taken advantage of.

And when you think about – second behind Saudi Arabia in terms of oil reserves in this region, you've got 60 percent of the world's lithium in this region. You've got rare earths. You've got the most copper, silver, gold. I could go on and on about that. Amazon, biodiversity, beef, soy. 50 percent of the globe's soy comes from this region. So huge, again, feeding and fueling the world. I think that what China has done has been incredible.

But then the other thing I realized is that U.S. and Western companies weren't competing on the tenders as much as I thought that they were when the countries put them out for the critical infrastructure. Which caused me to then work with more closely with our interagency to find out what are the barriers to compete? You got to compete to even have a chance of winning. You got to be on the field with your jersey on and your number, or you're not going to even have a chance of winning, right? And so, we have to compete.

And quite honestly, you don't have to outspend the Chinese on the Belt and Road Initiative to out compete them. But you got to be there, and you got to be there for them. I would say in terms of Russia, the information, as we talk about instruments of national power, diplomacy, information, military, and economics. They have the information – corner market on the information. *Sputnik Mundo*, *Russia Today Espanol*, all over the place. Social media – over 30 million followers putting out disinformation each and every day. And they do it pretty well.

There is a Lebanese Hezbollah diaspora that's in the region and the tri-border area of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil. And so, we got to be aware of that, not forget the bombings that took place at the Israeli embassy in '92 and the Israeli community center in '94, that killed over 100 people between the two of those bombings. And so, very, very severe. We need to remember those things. And that group has been active in terms of gaining – in terms of gaining funding for the larger parent organization, about a third of it from South America.

**BOWMAN:** Thank you.

H.R., these things are happening, and the Trump administration is putting together several strategic documents. And I'm reminded that you and Nadia Schadlow led the effort to put together the Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy. And as a strategy dork, I can't resist asking you, what does a good and bad National Security Strategy look like, and what do you expect and hope to see in this new National Security Strategy?

October 9, 2025

*Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman*

*Introductory remarks by Cliff May*

**MCMASTER:** Well, one of the great things about Washington is you can critique these strategies even before they come out. It's probably the only place you can really do that. So, but I think that what people are most concerned about in Trump-2 is what some people would call maybe a new isolationist wing, but maybe the skeptics about sustained U.S. commitment abroad, right?

And I think it's really important to understand, like, where these people are coming from, why they're skeptical about our ability to achieve positive outcomes for Americans with, you know, with an engaged foreign policy and an engaged defense strategy. And I think the reason has a lot to do with big transitions that occurred in the global economy after the 2000s. And China's entry into the WTO, the loss of manufacturing jobs. I think also, like the unanticipated length and difficulty and cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Financial crisis 2008, 2009. Toss in an opioid epidemic. Graft onto that social media, and the effect of really showing people more and more extreme content to get more and more clicks.

And this involves conspiracy theories, that sort of thing. And so, then we had lots of other traumas after that, right, with the COVID-19 pandemic, you know, the increased kind of polarization of our partisan political discourse and so forth, and vitriolic nature of it. And I mean, just the list goes on, right? So, I think there's a big sentiment that is associated with, hey, we got our own problems here, right? You know, what the heck are we doing, worrying about Europe's security when Europe is 19 percent of the world's GDP and 50 percent of the world's social spending, and we've been covering their social spending by underwriting their defense?

You know, so, these are all valid, but I think what President Trump is getting are some of the outcomes he wants with burden sharing now from Europe, for example. And I think there is an increasing recognition of the danger associated with the Axis of Aggressors and the fact that really what provokes them is not us being abroad, it's the perception of weakness. And what you see, Russia, China – and Iran was engaged in this activity – is a strategic behavior of probing at the far reaches of American power, you know, and when – where they're not stopped, they'll continue to probe and become more aggressive.

That level of aggression, whether it's in cognitive warfare, or if it's infrastructure attacks, or if it's cyber-attacks, or if it's drone and MiG overflights, whatever it is, that will then become the new normal, and we're on a path to even greater danger with – you know, two of these adversaries – or well, three of them – are nuclear armed, right.

So, the best way to prevent war, I believe, is what President Trump says often times, peace through strength. But he has to reconcile this kind of dissonance within his administration – and frankly, you know, I think that there are – you know, the President is a lot less isolationist than some of the people in his administration.

And what you've seen him doing lately is kind of backing into policies and strategies that I think have become quite effective, on Iran for example.

Vladimir Putin, I think is disabusing the president of the idea that he'd get a big deal with him, you know, or that he can get like a ceasefire under terms that are acceptable to the Ukrainians without imposing much more severe costs on Vladimir Putin, and Vladimir Putin, in my – I believe – will not stop until he is stopped.

So, what are the implications for defense strategy? I think the most important thing to look for is is there a sustained argument in these documents for peace through strength, which includes the forward positioning of capable U.S. Joint Forces, who can operate as part alliances in sufficient scale and for ample duration to fight and win in war.

Because if you don't have that, you can't prevent wars, because really the deterrence relies – no kidding – on hard power, right? I mean, we tried all these nifty ways to deter, right, we – the Biden administration called it "integrated deterrence." We should have just called it pixie dust, right?

October 9, 2025

Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson

Moderated by Bradley Bowman

Introductory remarks by Cliff May

And we saw really the failure of deterrence on Ukraine. I think hard power really matters, and it's much cheaper, I think – for those who are skeptical about you know, defense spending versus other spending, it's a heck of a lot cheaper to prevent a war than to have to fight one. And challenges to our security that develop abroad can only be dealt with at an exorbitant cost once they reach our shores.

The narrative and the concerns about, "Well, Vladimir Putin, well, could he use a nuclear weapon?" You know? "Could this be World War III?" You know? I don't think any of this is helpful in connection with the war in Ukraine, but we wouldn't be talking about that if the massive re-invasion had not occurred in 2022.

And what might have prevented that? Well, hey, what if Ukraine had all the capabilities that they have now, you know, back in 2022? And what you used to hear from people, "Well, that would be provocative," you know?

**BOWMAN:** Yes.

**MCMASTER:** Actually, you know what's provocative? It's the perception of weakness, is what's provocative. So, I would – that would be the main, I guess, criterion by which I would judge the documents. Does it acknowledge kind of this essential element of deterrence and make an argument for reasoned – you know, engagement abroad, prioritizing U.S. interest, but a recognition that capable U.S. forces are really essential to our homeland security.

**BOWMAN:** Thank you.

General Richardson, speaking of strategies, we talked about the National Security Strategy, the Trump administration's also working on their National Defense Strategy, and if the reporting is correct, it appears and we're already seeing some steps in that direction that there's going to be this increased emphasis on the Western Hemisphere.

According to the reporting by the *New York Times* yesterday, "President Trump has called off efforts to reach a diplomatic agreement with Venezuela, according to U.S. officials, paving the way for potential military escalation against drug traffickers and the government of Nicholas Maduro."

There have been at least four U.S. strikes on boats the administration says were trafficking drugs. What is your view on the Maduro regime, the challenges emanating from Venezuela, and the best path forward?

**RICHARDSON:** Yeah, well thanks for that question...

**BOWMAN:** Yes, all in like two minutes...

(LAUGHTER)

**RICHARDSON:** But – and I would say the – just in terms of the National Defense Strategy, you know, it's good to have a national security strategy first, before you...

**BOWMAN:** Yes.

**RICHARDSON:** ... you know, and they can work simultaneously, and hopefully that is happening.

I would say with Venezuela, you have an illegitimate president that's in there, claiming to be the president of Venezuela. He's caused one of the most – worst humanitarian crises across our globe. Eight million people have fled out of that country into a region that's already hurting with GDP impacts from COVID.

And they can't support these folks. We've seen unprecedented levels of migration through this region, and so, it goes on and on and on.

October 9, 2025

*Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman*

*Introductory remarks by Cliff May*

I think the – in terms of the Western Hemisphere, the – I said and testified that I think an economic recovery act is needed for this region, AKA a Marshall Plan, as a result of the COVID GDP impacts and, this region relies a lot of tourism and that was extremely impacted. And then, of course, the crime wave that's ensued.

What I don't think should happen is – we have a lot of U.S. companies that are in the region, a lot more than people really think, or know, I think. And the worst thing would be for companies – U.S. companies, Western companies – to leave.

This is the hemisphere with which we live. Again, I think it's been feeding and fueling the world for a while, and as General McMaster had talked about, you know, I think that the – all of these objectives align within the U.S. safer, stronger, more prosperous, right? And really creates a bubble around our country when we have allies and partners that we partner with, that we work with, that trust us.

But we have to be there all the time, we can't be – we can't be there – here for three years and then away for three years and then have capability for three years, and you know, and be sporadic. You got to be consistent. You got to build that trust. And that trust is built over time and by working hand in hand with these partners.

**BOWMAN:** There was a report in *POLITICO* this week saying that a copy of the National Defense Strategy was presented to Secretary Hegseth on his desk in August, but it was held up for multiple reasons, according to *POLITICO*, including objections by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and regional combatant commanders who disagree with elements of the changes suggested by Elbridge Colby.

And it seems – I remember when you and I talked, General Richardson, when you were here in your former capacity, you had talked candidly about how you sometimes struggle to get military assets into the region, and so that...

**RICHARDSON:** So, now they're there.

**BOWMAN:** ... And so, now, they're there, which I bet is – your successor appreciates having resources there, but it occurs to me just with my old Senate staffer hat on, that when you have new requirements, right, you either have funding for those new requirements or there's a bill payer...

**RICHARDSON:** Yeah.

**BOWMAN:** ... or you're in – or you have unfunded requirements, and then you have, over time, a hollowed out force or reduced readiness, and so, there is some concern. At least, I have. And happy to have either of you tell me you disagree or change, but before we saw these incursions with drones in Poland – roughly 19 drones – an incursion with Romania, the Russian fighters going into Estonian air space, all NATO member countries just a few weeks prior – not cause and effect [necessarily], maybe not a coincidence – we had Pentagon officials telling Baltic countries that we wanted to reduce our support for Baltic security and that we had some portion of U.S. forces in Eastern Europe looking for the exit.

So, I'm all for – from my humble foxhole here, having more resources for SOUTHCOM, but I think if you're going to have additional requirements, we should have additional funding and we should be careful about the bill payers in Europe or the Middle East, or we're going to reduce readiness and hollow out the force.

General McMaster, would you tweak any of that? Or what are your thoughts on that?

**MCMASTER:** Yes, and obviously there's also, you know, Europe is committed to spending what they should have been spending on defense now, but it's going to take it some time to build up the range of capabilities and the capacity in their armed forces.

October 9, 2025

*Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman*

*Introductory remarks by Cliff May*

So, it would be a big mistake, I think, to disengage portions of our force from Europe and it would just repeat the mistakes the previous administrations have made. I mean, the pattern of Vladimir Putin's aggression really became readily apparent in 2004 when he poisoned a Ukrainian presidential candidate. It became even more dramatically obvious in 2007, with fomenting uprisings and the massive cyberattacks on the Baltic states, Estonia in particular. It became even more apparent in 2008 with the invasion of Georgia, right? So, the list goes on.

What was our response to each of these incidents and increasing aggression by Putin? You know, the Munich speech – I mean – the list goes on – is we just kept reducing our forces from Europe.

And our response to Putin has been very weak – had been tepid, you know, even after the illegal annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine in 2014. And so, our perceived weakness is what is – is what I think is – has been provocative.

In the run-up to the massive re-invasion of Ukraine in 2022, again we did some kind of nifty things, right? We threatened sanctions, we declassified intelligence for influence, and so forth.

But what did we do from the military perspective? We suspended lethal assistance to Ukraine – I'm talking about the Biden administration. This is after going to Geneva and laying out the red lines for Putin, which for Putin is like a green light for everything else, you know? We withdrew our forces out of the Black Sea. We evacuated all of our advisors, and then we evacuated our embassy and scuttled our embassy.

So, I just think that we should be in the business these days of portraying strength. I believe, as I mentioned, we are strong relative to this Axis of Aggressors. You – I've got to admit, they look great on parade, man, I'm telling you. I mean, that Beijing parade? Fantastic, right? And Secretary General Rutte called it a ballet, you know?

(LAUGHTER)

But I do think there is an inverse relationship between how well you march and how well you fight. Thankfully, for the U.S. Army, if you saw the...

(LAUGHTER)

...So, you know, I think we should be confident, and I think what we also have to do is recognize the degree to which security in various theaters are connected to one another. Confronting the Axis of Aggressors in our hemisphere is important.

And the outcome of the war in Ukraine, I think, will have dramatic consequences for security in the Indo-Pacific. I believe that this perception of weakness, as I mentioned, led to these cascading crises from Ukraine into the Middle East. Now it's time to really focus on restoring peace and preventing these crises from cascading further into the Indo-Pacific.

**BOWMAN:** I'm interested in this inverse relationship between fighting and parading. I'm going up to a 30th year reunion at West Point, and I think there's a lot of cadets that would say, "Yes, we should stop spending so much time drilling and parading so we can focus on fighting." I think they would endorse that policy.

As we continue our fast-paced trip around the world here, let's go to the Middle East real quick. You've mentioned, you've mentioned Middle East a couple times. We marked this week obviously, as you said already, two years since Hamas' horrific terror attack on Israel on October 7.

On that very same day [this] week, [Ayatollah] Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, tweeted a, what I would call deplorable message attempting to justify that despicable terror attack. He called it an irreparable defeat for Israel in his X post.

October 9, 2025

*Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman*

*Introductory remarks by Cliff May*

Yet we have seen since October 7 the decapitation and severe degradation of Hezbollah; we've seen the fall of the Assad regime; a significant degradation, not destruction, of Iran's nuclear program during the Twelve-Day War; and now we see this incredible potential deal between Israel and Hamas that might, among other things, might finally bring the hostages home.

Despite that, you have an Iranian regime that remains committed to the oppression of the Iranian people, determined to export and support terrorism, and still seems interested in nuclear weapons. We're continuing to see activities, for example, at Pickaxe Mountain, where they're trying to dig deeper than Fordow. You don't really need to do that if you're not interested in enrichment for a nuclear weapon.

There's also some concerning roles that China has [playing, including] – delivering ballistic missiles precursors, propellant precursors [to Iran]. There is some reporting, not yet confirmed, that they may be helping Iran reconstitute their ballistic missile production capabilities. There are also concerns about Russia's cooperation with Iran's nuclear energy program, the potential provision of Su-35 fighters, and the provision of other advanced conventional weapons from Russia and even China. We've seen the snapback of sanctions. That's good, but now they have to be enforced. And so, there's a lots of things happening.

You both spent a good portion of your careers leading and fighting in the Middle East. So, I'm interested to see how, both in your experience and currently, you see the role of Iran in the region, what you make of this news coming out of Gaza, and the path forward in the region?

General Richardson, would you like to start?

**RICHARDSON:** Well ...

(CROSS-TALK)

**BOWMAN:** It's a smorgasbord. You can pick any one of those that you want.

(LAUGHTER)

**RICHARDSON:** I'd just say it's a – it's very complex, obviously, what's happening now, and in terms of the different positions and how dug in different positions are, in terms of what the outcome of all of this should be.

And certainly, the role that the United States plays as – from a position of strength or not – I think, again, back to what H.R. said about appearing and being strong, we have to act from that and from that position of strength versus not.

And so just as the – there will be some things that'll happen, I think, as this unfolds and continues to move hopefully towards a solution of some sort, but there will be some audibles that'll be called, and it'll be all how we handle the audibles, and is it from a position of strength or not?

**BOWMAN:** Thank you, thank you.

**MCMASTER:** Well, I mean, I think we should all be very happy, appreciative of the efforts to get the hostages out first, you know?

And then the steps that are laid out in the agreement are logical steps that have to occur if there is ever going to be an enduring peace between Israel and the Palestinians, especially in Gaza, or a better life, you know, for the Palestinians, especially in Gaza. And those steps include, you know, the creation of some kind of a peace enforcement force that forces Hezbollah [sic Hamas] to disarm and creates space for a political entity other than Hamas to emerge.

October 9, 2025

*Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman*

*Introductory remarks by Cliff May*

What has been astounding to me in recent months is the degree to which people have fallen into this habit almost of blaming Prime Minister Netanyahu for the hostage crisis, you know? I mean, hey, that crisis could end any moment, any time with Hamas releasing the hostages.

And also, what's been, I think, so astounding in terms of the illogic of it, is to talk about how there's a need for a ceasefire and then to restore progress toward a two-state solution. How does that happen when Hamas still has the guns in Gaza and it's an organization that's committed to destroying Israel and killing all the Jews? That doesn't sound like they're signing up for a two-state solution to me, you know?

So, I think that a prerequisite, you know, for enduring peace and for a better life for Palestinians is the destruction of Hamas or the disarmament.

What are the implications of that for the future of the peace - you know, getting toward a peace agreement and implementing the second and third phases of this ceasefire? I think the - I think the chances of Hezbollah [sic Hamas] disarming themselves, you know, are pretty close to zero, you know? And I think what probably will happen in the ensuing, I don't know, months, is that the IDF is going to have to destroy them. And I know that people say that's not possible and so forth, but I think it's actually the only way this ends. And then what is required I believe would be some form of a multinational force to create that space and then to begin rebuilding.

One of the things that I think is heartbreaking - most heartbreaking, one of the most heartbreaking things - is that there has been no safety valve for the Palestinian people. I think it's the only case that I'm aware of in history where a population has been prevented from fleeing that kind of violence. And again, I would blame Hamas for, you know, for, you know, principally, you know, for the losses of Palestinians. But I think the Sinai should have been opened. There should have been a humanitarian facility established there.

I mean, you know, 2 million people sounds like a lot, but it's really not that - it's not that big. You know, if you have a multinational effort to provide that relief - a temporary relief while Hamas is destroyed, security is put in place to allow rubble removal and reconstruction to begin. You know, so we're at just, you know, this might be, to use the Churchill quote, you know, the end of the beginning. But it's certainly, it's certainly not the end.

**BOWMAN:** Thank you. I want to get to the Pacific here in a minute, but General Richardson, I wanted to ask you about, from the perspective, you know, based on your time commanding U.S. Southern Command and the issue of timely, predictable, and sufficient funding as we sit here with the government shutdown. If my math is right, and you can hear the former staffer in me here talking, only once since fiscal year 2011 has the Pentagon started the new fiscal year on October 1 with a full year appropriation.

Only once since fiscal year 2011, if my math is right. And so, as we're sitting here right now, we don't even have a continuing resolution, which, as we all know, it's where you copy and paste an old budget, ignoring what's happening in the world and what you need right now onto the next fiscal year. And we have a government shutdown. There's reporting in *POLITICO* that Rep. Ken Calvert, the House Republican in charge of defense funding, is supporting a bipartisan bill who would help ensure that members of the military to get paid during the government shutdown.

General Richardson, I went back and looked at your 2024 posture statement, and there was a quote there that I just thought was so powerful. You said at the time, "In this region," referring to Southern Command's area of responsibility, "a small investment, whether in time, physical resources, funding, or collaboration, goes a long way. We don't," you just said it, "We don't have to outspend the PRC, but must be present." And then you went on to say, "This requires having a timely budget. Continuing resolutions are disruptive to U.S. and partner nation efforts to defend against threats. The PRC and Russia are already here in the Western Hemisphere. Time is of the essence."



## Countering the Axis of Aggressors with LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and Gen (Ret.) Laura Richardson

October 9, 2025

*Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman*

*Introductory remarks by Cliff May*

During your four decades of service – almost four decades of service in uniform – I'd love to hear about the impact that continuing resolutions, government shutdowns, the problems of not receiving timely, sufficient, and predictable funding, how it made it more difficult for you to do the missions you were given.

**RICHARDSON:** Yeah. So, I mean, I can speak for the entire Department of War, right? Or all of the interagency as well but being able to have predictable funding that you don't have to worry about. The drill to go into a government shutdown, just in terms of my headquarters when I was the commander, because we had to do it during that time, plan for it, right? Because it was close, but it didn't happen.

However, it's a lot of time spent on who your key and essential people are that are going to stay and the ones that are going to go home. That takes hours of planning where we should be focused on what our mission is – not having to do that. I would say that we need to have a room on the Hill. We need to order a bunch of pizza and put it in there and get everybody in there that's got to make the decisions and lock the doors. We absolutely need the funding.

I mean, when you're talking about technology, the speed of technology and change, and every service is in transformation right now. Trying to keep up with the technology, trying to maintain the overmatch. And when we can't even get a budget to fund these programs and new start programs, we can't even do new start programs. We have such tight restrictions on our funding, and it just it makes no sense. So, you know, as H.R. was talking about, you know, looking weak or do you look strong? We look weak right now. Right? Because our government can't pass a budget. And so, we need a budget, period.

**BOWMAN:** If I had a...

**RICHARDSON:** ASAP.

**BOWMAN:** Amen. I mean, serious times, let's be candid. I mean, if I had a dollar for every time I was sitting there in the second row behind a senator or congressman, never the senator and congresspeople I worked for, but the other ones, saying, "Hey, Pentagon, what's taking you so gosh darn long to get X or Y or Z done?" Right? Well, you know, I don't know, maybe do your job. Article I, Section VIII. Do your job, Congress, if I can say that, you know.

It's kind of like a Congress that can't keep the government open and legislate, especially provide a budget for the Department of War/Defense, for national security, for our service members – and we have questions that our service members are not going to get paid on October 15 – that's like a fisherman that doesn't know how to fish, or a pitcher that doesn't know how to pitch, or a quarterback that doesn't know how to throw a football. It's your fundamental job. Do your job, I would say. I don't know. Can I say that? I just did.

OK. OK. General McMaster, anything to add on that?

**MCMASTER:** No, no. Not for the most part of that.

**BOWMAN:** All right. Yeah, I get a little excited about that. OK. Energy dominance. The establishment of energy dominance, H.R., in the 2017 National Security Strategy was something you emphasized there. The Trump administration continues to emphasize that.

FDD has just created a new Energy and National Security Program led by Rich Goldberg, who recently served as ...White House National Energy Dominance Council senior counselor. We're hosting an event with [Secretary] Doug Burgum here on October 24. We'd love to hear from either of you on how you see the intersection between energy and national security in the context of what we've been talking about?

October 9, 2025

Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson

Moderated by Bradley Bowman

Introductory remarks by Cliff May

**MCMASTER:** Yeah, and if I can plug Cliff's recent episode of *Foreign Podicy* on this topic, it's fantastic. You know, so, obviously we said, you know, in 2017, and this is true, we've known this for many decades that energy security is national security. And the decade that really that came home to us was in the 1970s, if you remember the multiple energy crises and the degree to which we have become dependent on Gulf oil.

I think we had been on a path for a while to recreate something analogous to that, to that dependency on China, especially related to renewables and solar turbines and solar panels and the supply chains for all renewable energy sources that really were controlled by China, various rare earth metals and the separation and refinement process for them. So, I think when we talk about energy security, we have to look at the sources of energy. Certainly, we have tremendous benefit associated with fracking, you know, that gave us access to cheap natural gas and now has made us a major exporter of natural gas as well as oil.

We want to keep that going to be a source of energy security for the world. But as we transition to other forms of energy, we need to deepen, you know, our capabilities in supply chains that are relevant to the energy transition. And of course, I think as everybody's starting to realize now, there's a tremendous opportunity with accelerating to small modular reactors and our EM squared reactors, new technologies, but the infrastructure, which is what we were just talking about actually before here, you know, is immensely important for energy distribution as well.

So, I think it's important to look at the whole system and to recognize that all the things that we want to achieve in terms of being the leader in AI and the compute power associated with that, as well as to invigorate our industrial base and our defense industrial base, to reduce our – the fragility of our supply chains, everything comes back to energy, you know. And I think that there have been a number of mistakes that have been made around the world that we could learn from.

I mean, I think Germany, for example. Over reliance on a hostile authoritarian regime for their energy source and then leaping ahead to renewables, you know, while you're canceling all of your fission capability. I mean that was a leap off a cliff and into Vladimir Putin's arms, you know. So, I think the key thing that I think we've been missing for so long is really separating what needs to be fused in terms of approach, which is the need for energy security, and the efforts to reduce manmade carbon emissions, and to recognize the international dimension of this, right? Of both of those problems and the national security dimension.

So, energy security, national security, reduction of manmade carbon emissions. You know, a lot of what we did was counterproductive because when you cancel fission, for example, then you have to increase coal plants. You know, if you want to go to all electric cars – hey, if the batteries and all the magnets for those cars are manufactured in China, using electricity from coal fired plants, that's like a net loss in terms of manmade carbon emissions reduction. So, I just think, you know, looking at the whole system holistically and making decisions based on that holistic understanding is what's really important.

**BOWMAN:** Thank you.

**RICHARDSON:** Yes, I think we have a great opportunity right now and it's open to modernize our clean energy transition because we have an old legacy system that's built upon a hodgepodge of systems to secure it and to work on it. And we're relying on remote abilities to remote in and do things like that on a legacy system of stuff that's just been ad hoc onto the system already. It's old. It needs to be transformed. And this is a great opportunity during this clean energy transition to do exactly that and to harden and secure a major critical infrastructure for Team USA.

October 9, 2025

*Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman*

*Introductory remarks by Cliff May*

**BOWMAN:** Thank you. We're going to get to questions here in a moment if you can get ready. One last question for me. And then we'll go to questions from the audience. General McMaster, I want to ask you about warrior ethos. Secretary Hegseth has prioritized the warrior ethos, including in his recent speech at Quantico. You are someone who knows a lot about being a warrior. You've thought deeply about that. You've written extensively on it. What is a healthy warrior ethos and unhealthy warrior ethos? How do we know the difference between the two, and how do we promote the former rather than the latter?

**MCMASTER:** OK, well, thanks for the question. You know, I mean, for many Americans, I think it probably sounded like an esoteric topic, warrior ethos, you know, but this goes back, you know, this goes back to, you know, at least, you know, the ancient world and ancient Greece. And it has a lot to do with the covenant, a covenant that binds warriors, soldiers to one another and to the society in whose name they fight and serve. It has a lot to do with principles such as your sense of honor, courage – you're willing to sacrifice for one another and the mission. But it also has a lot to do with what we expect of one another as soldiers and what our society expects of us.

And so, I think that there's been a lot of damage done to the warrior ethos. You know, popular culture, I think, cheapens and coarsens the warrior ethos. A lot of war movies or video games have a lot of violence in them, but it doesn't tell us anything about what motivates our men and women when they take the oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States and sign up to be willing to take risks, right, to defend us and our way of life. So, we don't really learn much about what motivates our young men and women.

I think combined with that, there's been kind of an assault on the warrior ethos in many kinds of post-modernist, post-colonial interpretations of history, new left interpretations of history that kind of blame us for all the problems in the world.

I'm concerned that, you know, if you teach young people that their country is not worth defending, don't be surprised when you look behind you, like there's nobody willing to defend you, you know. So, I think that's an element of what we've seen.

We've also seen in recent years a lack of commitment to win in war, you know. I mean, I've been really disappointed in this. I mean, even some of our fellow general officers at times, I've heard them use the phrase "responsible end." I want to bring this word of "responsible end," you know.

And I mean, I used to box, and I never got into the ring and said, "Hey, I just want to bring this to responsible end..."

(LAUGHTER)

You know, it's not going to end well. It's not going to end well.

So, I think the commitment to winning is part of the warrior ethos. But what I'm concerned about is as the Trump administration and Secretary Hegseth apply what they perceive as a corrective to the Biden administration's pushing of, I think, reified philosophies, again, post-modernist or various critical theories that I think are destructive to the warrior ethos, right, that they don't apply a cure that's worse than the disease.

And when I talk about kind of some of the Biden agenda, I'm talking about really a quality of outcome rather than a quality of opportunity. And then to judge people by identity category rather than, you know, their sense of honor, courage, all the elements of the warrior ethos.

And what I heard in the speech were a couple of troubling things. One was, you know, an idea that women cannot do what men do in war because of physiological differences. I do think there should be gender-neutral standards. But women have proven, obviously, you know, their value of warriors.

October 9, 2025

*Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman*

*Introductory remarks by Cliff May*

And I think also there is maybe, you know, a disparagement of women that doesn't reflect the profound dangers that women take on in combat in multiple roles. I mean, who is more courageous? Somebody who's flying a helicopter forward of any friendly troops or me in my 70-ton tank?

I mean, I felt a heck of a lot safer than our aero scout pilots felt, you know, for example, in a – when I was a cav squadron commander – and those pilots were oftentimes women, you know.

The other thing that I thought was troubling, the second – there are really three elements here that I thought was troubling – was this idea that when you're fighting a brutal enemy, that you should lift restrictions, maybe you put place on yourself, consistent with applying firepower with discrimination, right, which is one of the criteria for just war and something we internalize.

Now, believe me, I mean, I am very sympathetic to bumping up in terms of the weapon system you're using. I mean, you know, I really ascribe to what General Ernest Harmon said, "If it takes a toothpick, use a baseball bat."

But what we pride ourselves in, and an element of our war ethos, is that we overmatch the enemy, but we apply that firepower with discipline and discrimination. So, the warrior ethos is what makes units combat effective, but it's also what makes war less inhumane, and maintains our moral ethical standards.

And then the final thing is I'm afraid of this kind of erosion of the bold line between partisan politics and our military. I think elements of both political parties have been guilty of this, trying to pull the military into partisan politics.

The most recent practices of this, I think, go back to Bill Clinton when he lined up, you know, all the admirals and generals to sign up for him. And then that's become kind of like a practice of dueling flag officer endorsements for politicians.

But also, you know, I think that this narrative that got out there, that the military is extremist and like the extremist stand down. And this idea that military veterans were overrepresented on January 6th, which they won't – weren't – or that the military is woke.

I mean, I don't know Laura. Do you know any woke generals and admirals? I don't know.

**RICHARDSON:** Nope. There's none.

**MCMASTER:** So, I think that, you know, this narrative that the military is woke, the military is extremist, I think it's just destructive to our professional military ethic and to that covenant part of the war ethos that we have with those in whose name we fight and serve. And so, yeah, I'm worried about it.

**BOWMAN:** General Richardson, as a combat veteran and warrior yourself, anything you want to add to that?

**RICHARDSON:** Yeah. So, I think that was very well said, and I agree with all that and – but I think we have a lot to lose. We've got, you know, the – we have 50 percent of our talent pool is women and we're kind of late to the game, our country is, in terms of women serving in the military.

There are many decades of women serving in other nation's militaries and doing excellent work in those militaries. And, you know, just to see – my husband also served and in his Apache battalion, his top gun pilot was a woman. And so, I think we've got to be careful, right? I think that the women we have serving today and in today's military are doing a fantastic job. They're trained. They are very capable.

And in terms of the standards the, you know, in terms of the gender-neutral standards to be able to meet those requirements, I agree with that, and so do the women, right, that serve. And so, I think very, very powerful what H.R. said, and he said it very well. So, I agree.

**BOWMAN:** Thank you. Thank you both for those insights.

October 9, 2025

Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson

Moderated by Bradley Bowman

Introductory remarks by Cliff May

Let's go to the audience now. If you could wait for the microphone to come, identify yourself and your affiliation, and we'll start right here.

Thank you, Brad.

Good afternoon, ma'am. Good afternoon, sirs. I'm Chris Orr, former Air Force Security Forces officer – hooah – now senior defense editor for *National Security Journal* and a proud FDD donor. I have a two-part question.

General McMaster, the first part goes to you, given your armored cav background. Some would say that the Russo-Ukrainian war has rendered armored warfare obsolescent or outmoded given the fact that main battle tanks on both sides of that conflict have been taken a shellacking from – whether from HIMARS [High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems] or Bayraktar drones, what have you. So, I was wondering what your response would be to those pundits?

Second part goes both general and to Brad, since you're both former Black Hawk drivers. Some of these same pundits also say that the Russo-Ukrainian war has rendered attack helicopters an outmoded former warfare as can be seen from the shellacking taken by the Hind/Havoc and "Alligator" helicopter gunship. So, how would you respond to that? Those allegations about these things? Thank you.

**MCMASTER:** Thank you. Yeah. As a cavalry officer, I would just say try to think of a problem, you can't solve with the tank. You can't.

(LAUGHTER)

**BOWMAN:** So, what is it? Mobile. Protected. Firepower...

**MCMASTER:** Mobile protected firepower, so, yeah. I think there has been a shift in the character of warfare, certainly, based on the ubiquity of drones and the impact on armored vehicles.

And the ability to conduct a large-scale mounted offensive operation, for example, has been made. These FPV drones, you know, which can do top attack on armored vehicles and do it in sufficient scale was just – it's tough to just to shoot them all down or to jam them and to take their countermeasures.

But, you know, I think about combat as like the child's game of rock-paper-scissors, right? None of these tools that you have available to you, your combined arms and your joint capabilities, are decisive in and of themselves. They have to be used in combination, oftentimes simultaneously or in quick succession to gain and maintain a physical, or a temporal or a psychological advantage over your enemy – the initiative, essentially.

And what I'm seeing in Ukraine is how some new forms of warfare have been grafted on top of the old, have not replaced the old. This is why it's kind of looks like the western front of World War I in a lot of places, because that kind of defense, like the Ukrainians have put together with FPV drones and artillery, is very similar to the German elastic defense, which was the answer to *Materialschlacht*, or the massive artillery rounds.

The German Offensive looks a lot like the Ludendorff Offensive of 1918, which was meant to be able to penetrate defenses through infiltration tactics.

What you're seeing, I think, emerge is the demand, the need for future joint forces to blind the enemy. What all of this has in common, I think, is the transparency of the battlefield.

And so, what you're going to need to do is have a range of capabilities like tiered and layered air defense, including, I think, especially electromagnetic warfare and directed energy weapons, that can shoot down these low, slow, small drones – the FPV drones – combined with the ability to blind your enemy in space.

October 9, 2025

Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson

Moderated by Bradley Bowman

Introductory remarks by Cliff May

The next war is going into space. I mean, because it's really what is in low-earth orbit is affecting in a profound way what's happening terrestrially and in the aerospace domain broadly.

And then you know, I think that there will be an enduring role, to your question, for mobile protected firepower. That's what a tank is. If you don't have mobile protected firepower, you know what you have? You've got a flak vest, man. I mean, what would you rather have?

And then also, you know, I'll tell you, this has been in so many firefights. I mean – not a significant number of firefights – where I rolled up on that firefight in a Bradley fighting vehicle or a tank, and there was a machine gun duel going on, back and forth.

It could have gone on for 14 hours, but instead it went on for like four seconds because I gave a fire command to my gunner, ended the firefight and had a snack, you know? So, I just think, I think, you know, why would you not want that advantage of mobile protected firepower?

Because, you know, what you'd never want is a fair fight in close combat. Even if you win a fair fight, it's an ugly outcome, right? So, you want to just be able to overmatch, and a tank gives you that.

Now, will the tank design look much different? Of course, it will. You see all the modifications already. But really, it'll be the tank's ability to operate, you know, with air defense capabilities and a broad range of capabilities to create kind of a defensive bubble against these kinds of capabilities.

**BOWMAN:** General Richardson, time to retire our beloved Black Hawk helicopter?

**ORR:** Or Apaches?

**RICHARDSON:** Yeah, so, I think in terms of the attack aircraft, I think the reduction of the – of those attack aircraft, I think that there needs to be – I think it's a little too much from Richardson's perspective.

I think that man-to-man teaming needs to be there. There needs to be a human in the loop because when you're supporting the soldier on the ground, I know that soldier on the ground is going to want a human in the loop somewhere, right?

I think the Apache aircraft has proven itself. We had a program, the Future Attack Reconnaissance Aircraft that is no longer on the horizon, but the Long-Range Assault Aircraft is.

But I think we're going to have the – we still need the – we need manned-unmanned teaming with the drones, but I think we're going a little bit too low on the attack aircraft.

**BOWMAN:** Other questions? Yes, right up here, up front in – oh, yeah, I'm sorry, right here. Thank you. Coming to you next, Michael.

**ASDAL** Hi. My name is Kirsten Asdal, I run a China-focused risk consultancy. Thank you both for your time.

Why do you think that we are so comfortable passing judgment on certain regimes around the world and saying, "I'm not OK with you being in power right now and I'd really rather you don't, and we're going to make it very difficult for you to remain in power," and on other ones, you know, we're allergic to regime change and we can't say it and it's dangerous for us to even talk about regime change? Why the discrepancy? Is it because we're afraid to confront certain bullies and ones that are weaker than us? We're fine talking about regime change for them? Do you think this is a political will problem? Do you think it's a strategic-level awareness problem? It's like Axis of Aggressors versus axis of evil, you know? Is there something there where we're not saying what we really want to say?

**RICHARDSON:** Oh, why don't you go first on that?

October 9, 2025

Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson

Moderated by Bradley Bowman

Introductory remarks by Cliff May

(LAUGHTER)

**MCMASTER:** Hey, well, you know, I think that there is – you know, there has been a degree to, like, moral equivalency that has played into this. I think there's also been, I mean, maybe to overstate a little bit, a kind of element of self-loathing and blaming ourselves for the behavior of hostile authoritarian regimes, for example.

And then I think, you know, a lot of it in recent years has to do with kind of the end of the Cold War and assumptions that were made after the Cold War that the – what would emerge in the post-Cold War world would be a kind of a condominium of nations who would work together cooperatively to solve global issues, and a great power rivalry was a relic of the past, and that there had been this arc of history kind of that guaranteed the primacy of our free and open societies over closed authoritarian systems.

So, I think ignorance of history has a lot to do with it, for example. You know, I think the – you know, the unwillingness to confront China might be based on the fact that many people don't know that the Chinese Communist Party, you know, killed more of their own people than Stalin and Hitler combined, you know? And it, you know – a willingness because, maybe, of avarice or commercial interests based on real – where you're working to turn their eyes away from cultural genocide against the Uyghurs, for example, or slave labor or a whole range of un-trade – unfair trade and economic practices.

But how much just even the outward hostility of preparing for cyberattacks to take down all of our infrastructure, which we've seen with the Volt attacks, for example. Or the fact that China is brazenly preparing for war against us and says so?

So, what we have done with China, I think, is particularly astounding because, you know – because of the egregious human rights violations. You know, I mean, I – for one, I think slave labor might – should be, like, an ESG issue, you know, when you're deciding on whether to invest in China or do business in China.

And then – and then also, you know, I think there's been a reluctance based on, you know, the belief that China would just kind of change, right? Well, we know that's not going to happen under the Chinese Communist Party now.

So, you know, I think this is a dynamic, I mean, that is concerning. We criticize, for example – I there's the Senate Minority Leader, you know, was happy to call for regime change in Israel, you know, but I don't think he did it, you know, for – you know, for China or, you know – or maybe in Russia or, you know – so anyway.

Yeah, it's a problem.

**BOWMAN:** All right. I think we have time for maybe one more question. Michael up here up-front. Here's the microphone. Thank you, Lisa.

**GORDON:** Yeah, Michael Gordon, *Wall Street Journal*. The new, emerging National Defense Strategy is not only going to emphasize hemisphere defense but it's being emphasized now in a certain kind of way, which is the military has been used in counter-narcotics operations that have heretofore been in the province of really law enforcement.

So, I have – my question is, do you think this is an appropriate use of the military, to use them for these counter-narcotics, aggressive missions, given other threats that we face?

And also, given that there's no AUMF [Authorization for Use of Military Force], that foreign terrorist organization designation does not confer the right to use force, that these operations that we deserve since the – observe since they put out the video are not self-defense in any kind of immediate sense, do you think the military's carrying out lawful orders? Because you're – both have experience in combat, are these lawful military orders, in your judgment?

**BOWMAN:** I'm glad we saved the easiest one for last.

October 9, 2025

*Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman*

*Introductory remarks by Cliff May*

(LAUGHTER)

**MCMASTER:** Laura's taking that one first.

(LAUGHTER)

**RICHARDSON:** So, you – this isn't the first buildup of military capability. It also happened under Trump-1. And I would say that when you add up – again, I'd go back to the graphic that SOUTHCOM has. We have a graphic of transnational criminal organizations, now foreign terrorist organizations designated.

And in terms of what we put together or think that the magnitude of this problem is, is \$358 billion annual revenue from these organizations. \$358 billion annually. And if I were to add up the GDPs – or the budgets, not GDPs – but the budgets of the defense forces in the region, it's six times that what the criminals are making.

And so, you know...

**MCMASTER:** Are the criminals making six times more than the budget?

**RICHARDSON:** Yes.

**MCMASTER:** ... yeah.

**RICHARDSON:** I'm sorry.

**MCMASTER:** Yeah.

**RICHARDSON:** And so, when you take the \$358 billion – this is a powerful, powerful network that has – you know, in COVID, they found different ways of doing their business, and now that COVID is over, it has taken over the region in some cases. A couple of the countries have had crises that have occurred.

And so, when you see this capability, I think this pressure campaign, which is what I see this as, is not just about the narcotics. I mean, you have all the illegal things going on in this region. You've got the illegal drug trafficking, you've got the human trafficking, you've got the illegal mining, you've got all these rare earths and the – and so on and so forth. It goes on and on and on.

And so, I talked about Venezuela before. I didn't talk about the pressure that Maduro has been putting on the country of Guyana, which is to its east – its neighbor to the east, and claiming that half of that country is Venezuelan country, not Guyana. And they continue to probe into that disputed area.

And I mentioned, in terms of the oil reserves, right, in this region, ironically, right offshore is the oil reserves that have been discovered for Guyana. And Guyana's the fastest-growing GDP country in the world by 25 percent every year for the next five years. And, ironically, right offshore in that disputed region is half the oil reserves.

So this pressure campaign that Maduro has been putting on Guyana for the past two, three years, threatening to take over that disputed area, so on and so forth, I see this as a disputed – or I see this as a campaign, a pressure campaign against Maduro and that eight million people that have flown – that have fled out of that country into a region that's already having a tough time. And so, I just see this vicious cycle of threats that continues. Now, I will tell you that in terms of what we were doing before, in terms of interdicting these drug boats, you can't interdict your way out of this problem. Everybody knows that, right?

October 9, 2025

*Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman*

*Introductory remarks by Cliff May*

And so, this is an optic, I think, from Richardson's perspective that's happening. And when you look at the – in terms of all of the semi-submersibles and vessels and things like that that are carrying drugs we used to pull alongside the vessels, board the vessels with a law enforcement entity, and you talk about a dangerous activity in doing that yourself. When you get on a drug boat that you know is loaded with drugs and the people know they're caught, right? Then what happens?

So, I'm not saying, you know, everything is right in terms of what's happening, but I will tell you that the, in terms of a position of strength, we're very much present now in the Western Hemisphere. I think that the capability that's in the region – there used to be quite a bit of capability in the SOUTHCOM region that would sail around the region. For example, there was an ARG/MEU [Amphibious Ready Group/Marine Expeditionary Unit] that would sail around the region during hurricane season. We're in hurricane season, right?

So actually, I'm happy to see that there because if something does happen, it's there. But there's a lot of training and exercises and work that – with partners that happens with the partner nations that I think is invaluable for them. But in terms of when I was in command, you know, having like a 1.0 presence, having one ship, you know, just in the Caribbean, when you got 31 countries, the entire Central America and South America and you can't even come up with one ship except for an exercise one time a year for maybe a week.

I mean that's, you know, I was partnering with our allies that are in the region, the UK, Canada, French, and the Dutch, because they had capability that would be – was coming into the region more so than what I had to show our partners, right? So again, presence matters, and I think we are lacking in presence, but we're not now. And so, for all of those things that are happening, in terms of the FTO [Foreign Terrorist Organization] designation and what's occurring now, from my perspective, I do think that it is. That it is lawful.

**BOWMAN:** All right. We've talked about a lot of threats and challenges, but General McMaster, I'd like to take a page out of your notebook where you often cite George Costanza and the desire to go out on a "high note." So, I've known you both for a while. You spoke of get up on Capitol Hill to help solve the government shutdown. We first met, I think, when you were a colonel in Army, a legislative liaison.

And so, you know a bit about that. But I've known you both for a while and admired you the whole time. And you both seem to me to be optimists about our country and our future. And perhaps that's why you both were such effective leaders.

Why, if I'm right in reading you as optimists about our country, why do you feel that way? What makes you an optimist about the United States, given all the extraordinary challenges we just talked about? Either one of you want to start.

**RICHARDSON:** Well, I think we always – we sell ourselves short just on how – what our strengths are in our country. I mean, we can pick apart all the little things, you know, that we could do better and be critical of ourselves. I think that's what makes us – I think that's what makes our country so great, to be honest with you. And we're not just a good country. I think we're a great country. And because we can do the things we do, and the ability to compromise and come up with solutions. And I'm confident that with our government shutdown, that we will do that, and that we will prevail.

But you know, you have to be an optimist because we got a lot of strengths in our country. I'm proud to be in this country. I'm proud to have been in the military and led America's sons and daughters in combat. And we take our, in the military, we take our positions very seriously. And we would, you know, give our lives for our nation, and serve. And I think it's selfless service. And so, I'm proud to have served almost 40 years in the military, and I'm very proud of that service, and proud to serve with H.R. and also Brad.



## Countering the Axis of Aggressors with LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and Gen (Ret.) Laura Richardson

October 9, 2025

*Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and GEN (Ret.) Laura Richardson*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman*

*Introductory remarks by Cliff May*

**MCMMASTER:** OK, Brad, I'm going to be short because I want you to tell us what makes you optimistic. So, hey, I think it is our young people, in our military in particular, at our service academies, who I have been able to interact with them. I kind of follow the Army rugby team, you know, the women and men. The warrior ethos is really alive and well in both those teams, for sure, and broadly across our military academies and across in our military. But I would add also our students at universities.

I mean, I get a chance to interact with students in universities, and what I see among them is an untapped desire to serve and make a difference. And they're inspiring to me. So, you know, the younger generation is much pilloried, you know, these days. And I think there are maladies associated with, you know, social media and obsession with your phones and all that kind of stuff. But I really am impressed with the people I interact with, and it makes me confident about the future of our country.

**BOWMAN:** That's great. Well, thank you. Sincerely, both of you. It's such an honor to have you here. I just respect you both so much, and I've learned a lot from this conversation. And I want to thank you all for joining as well. And for those joining online. For more information about FDD, you can go to [fdd.org](http://fdd.org), we encourage you to visit that, and we hope to see you all again soon. Thank you very much.

END