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STATE OF DEFENSE 2026



Virtual Event / March 24-26

REGISTER NOW

Tuesday, March 24, 2026

2:00 PM EDT

Leadership Keynote - Navy

30 MINS

Keynote

2:30 PM EDT

30 MINS

Panel

Building the Golden Fleet



Eric Chewning

Executive Vice President, Maritime
Systems & Corporate Strategy
HII/Ingalls Shipbuilding



Bryan Clark

Senior Fellow and Director, Center for
Defense Concepts and Technology
Hudson Institute



Seamus Daniels

Fellow, Defense Budget Analysis
**Center for Strategic and International
Studies**



Lauren Williams

Business Editor
Defense One

President Trump has focused on shipbuilding as one of his top priorities in his second administration, and Navy Secretary John Phelan in December announced that Trump had OK'd a future "Golden Fleet." Speaking at the Reagan Defense Forum, Phelan said, "We will continue to build ships that are the cornerstones of the fleet—carriers, destroyers, amphibians, submarines. But we need new ships and we need modern ships." Join us for a conversation with experts about the current challenges in the shipbuilding industry, how the Navy is working to overcome those challenges, and what the Golden Fleet may look like.

3:00 PM EDT

30 MINS

Panel

Operation Southern Spear



Meaghann Meyers

Staff Reporter
Defense One

The U.S. in late August began a naval buildup in the Caribbean Sea, and in September began launching strikes against alleged narcoterrorists in the region as part of Operation Southern Spear. Join us for a conversation about the Caribbean operation designed to "crush" drug trafficking in the Western Hemisphere, and what America's naval forces are learning from the ongoing efforts.

3:30 PM EDT

10 MINS

Break

3:40 PM EDT

30 MINS

Keynote

Leadership Keynote - Marines

4:10 PM EDT

30 MINS

Panel

Beyond sea to shore



Col. Gabe Diana
Commanding Officer
3d Marine Littoral Regiment



Col. Richard Neikirk
Commanding Officer
12th Marine Littoral Regiment



Jenifer Hlad
Managing Editor
Defense One

The Marines' mission has moved beyond the traditional capability of projecting power from the sea to the land, to now include operating from and to all domains. The conversation will explore how leadership decisions, force employment, and cross-domain integration are shaping readiness, deterrence, and joint operations across the III MEF enterprise.

4:40 PM EDT

30 MINS

Panel

The future of Marine technology



Brig. Gen. Simon Doran
Commanding General
Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory



Lauren Williams
Business Editor
Defense One

New technologies are steadily changing how the Marine Corps plans, trains, and operates on modern battlefields. Advances in autonomy, unmanned systems, and long-range precision fires are expanding the tools available to commanders and creating new options for operating in complex, contested environments. In this session, Marine Corps leaders and defense technology experts will discuss how autonomous and semi-autonomous systems are being integrated into today's force. The conversation will explore the growing role of drones for intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and logistics, the emergence of robotic wingmen and human-machine teaming, and how long-range fires are evolving alongside modern sensor and targeting networks to enable more precise and responsive operations.

2:00 PM EDT

30 MINS

Keynote

Leadership Keynote - Air Force



Thomas Novelly

Senior Reporter

Defense One

2:30 PM EDT

30 MINS

The Congressional Blueprint for Integrated Air and Missile Defense



Deb Fischer

R-NE

US Senate



Thomas Novelly

Senior Reporter

Defense One

Senator Deb Fischer serves on the Senate Armed Services Committee and has been a leading congressional voice on nuclear deterrence, strategic forces, and the modernization of U.S. air and space defense capabilities. As security competition intensifies and emerging technologies reshape deterrence, Congress is playing a central role in guiding investments and policy for homeland and global defense. In this conversation, she will discuss priorities across integrated air and missile defense, the evolving concept of a “Golden Dome” homeland defense architecture, the future of strategic deterrence and New START, and how the United States is balancing resilience, escalation management, and readiness in an increasingly contested air and space domain.

3:00 PM EDT

30 MINS

Panel

CCAs



Dr. Jason Levin Ph.D.

SVP, Air Dominance & Strike
Anduril Industries



Becca Wasser

Adjunct Senior Fellow
Defense Program CNAS



Thomas Novelly

Senior Reporter
Defense One

The Air Force has rapidly progressed on its first collaborative combat aircraft, going from concept to first flight in just 16 months. Now, the service is looking at the second round of its drone wingman completion and has incorporated the robot drone concept into its future fighter jet plans. What innovations does the Air Force want to see from industry on future CCAs while still balancing cost expectations? What will the integration of drone wingmen mean for future combat operations?

3:30 PM EDT

30 MINS

Panel

Acquisition reform



Todd Harrison

Senior Fellow
AEI



Lauren Williams

Business Editor
Defense One

The Air Force has worked quickly to comply with Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's acquisition reform mandates. In addition to announcing new program acquisition executives, the service has named an Air Force general as a portfolio manager for critical major weapons systems, reporting directly to the Office of the Secretary of Defense on major programs such as the Sentinel and Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles, the B-21 bomber, the F-47 fighter jet, and the VC-25B presidential aircraft. Does Air Force leadership believe these changes will lead to more affordable and effective defense programs? This panel will examine that question and more.

4:00 PM EDT

10 MINS

Break

4:10 PM EDT

30 MINS

Keynote

Leadership Keynote - Space Force



Lt. Gen. Gregory Gagnon

Commander

**U.S. Space Force Combat Forces
Command**



Thomas Novelly

Senior Reporter

Defense One

As global competition accelerates and space becomes an increasingly contested warfighting domain, the U.S. Space Force is transforming how the nation protects, operates, and prevails in space. From building resilient satellite architectures and advancing space domain awareness to integrating digital systems and autonomous capabilities, the service is redefining how space power enables joint and coalition operations. In this keynote conversation, Defense One will speak with Lt. Gen. Greg Gagnon, Commander, Combat Forces Command, about the operational execution of spacepower. The discussion will examine how combat-credible space forces are organized, trained, and employed to support deterrence, crisis response, and high-end conflict. The conversation will also explore operational readiness in contested environments, integrating capabilities across the joint force, and how the Space Force is preparing to fight and win in competition and conflict beyond the atmosphere.

4:40 PM EDT

30 MINS

Panel

Contested space



Lt. Gen. Dennis Bythewood

Commander

U.S. Space Forces



Victoria Samson

Chief Director, Space Security and
Stability

Secure World Foundation

As space becomes an increasingly critical domain for military operations, the United States and its allies are facing a more congested, competitive, and contested orbital environment. From counterspace threats and debris risks to the growing reliance on space-enabled intelligence, communications, navigation, and missile warning, space is now inseparable from modern deterrence and warfighting. In this session, senior military leaders and space policy experts will examine how the U.S. is preparing for operations in a contested space environment. The conversation will explore evolving threats from peer competitors, the role of resilience and deterrence in orbit, and how military and commercial partnerships are reshaping space architecture. Panelists will also discuss what it means to operate, defend, and sustain space capabilities in an era where space superiority can no longer be assumed.

5:10 PM EDT

30 MINS

Panel

From Testing to Orbit: Operationalizing AI Across the Space Enterprise



Col. Corey Klopstein

USSF Program Executive Officer,
Operational Test and Training
Infrastructure and Commander,
System Delta 81

U.S. Space Command



Patrick Tucker

Science & Technology Editor
Defense One

As military operations extend deeper into contested and data-saturated space environments, the ability to sense, decide, and act faster than an adversary is becoming decisive. Space forces are moving beyond isolated AI pilots toward an enterprise approach that integrates artificial intelligence across training, testing, and operational infrastructure. By embedding AI into mission rehearsal environments and operational architectures from the outset, leaders aim to accelerate capability validation, improve resilience, and ensure operators can trust automated decision support under real-world conditions. This conversation will explore how the service is developing an end-to-end framework for AI in space operations, spanning digital test ranges, synthetic training environments, and live mission systems. The discussion will examine how realistic data environments enable rapid iteration, how human operators learn to collaborate with autonomous tools, and how organizations validate safety, reliability, and performance before fielding capabilities at scale.

2:00 PM EDT

30 MINS

Panel

Leadership Keynote - Army

2:30 PM EDT

30 MINS

Panel

Transforming Army Tech



Meaghann Meyers

Staff Reporter

Defense One

The Army's modernization initiative, Transformation in Contact, is dramatically changing how the service handles acquisition—allowing contractors to bring their tech to soldiers in the field, take feedback, and make changes on the spot. In just the first iteration of the initiative, soldiers tested 360 unmanned aerial systems, 800 mobility systems, 50 counter-UAS systems, 20 persistent lower-orbit communications systems, and 10 electronic warfare systems. And now the Army has expanded the program to more units throughout the service. In this panel, Defense One will speak to leaders about what they've learned so far, and what the future holds for Army tech.

3:00 PM EDT

30 MINS

Panel

Allies, Algorithms, and Advantage: NATO's Technological Transformation



Admiral Pierre Vandier

Supreme Allied Commander

Transformation, French Navy

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

(NATO)



Patrick Tucker

Science & Technology Editor

Defense One

As NATO confronts an increasingly complex and contested security environment, the alliance is accelerating efforts to modernize its forces and harness emerging technologies to maintain collective defense and deterrence. From artificial intelligence and digital integration to data-driven decision-making, rapid innovation is central to how NATO prepares for the future fight. This discussion will examine how NATO militaries are advancing modernization across domains, fostering deeper collaboration among allies and industry, and embedding AI and digital capabilities into operational planning and force development. The discussion will explore how NATO is aligning innovation with interoperability, resilience, and mission readiness.