

TRANSCRIPT

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Holds Press Conference Following Ukraine Defense Contact Group Meeting, at Ramstein Air Base, Germany

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PENTAGON PRESS SECRETARY MAJOR GENERAL PAT RYDER: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you very much for being here today. It is my pleasure to introduce Secretary of Defense Lloyd J Austin III. The secretary will deliver opening remarks and then we'll have time to take a few questions. Please note that I will moderate those questions and call on journalists. Secretary Austin, over to you, sir.

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD AUSTIN: Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for joining us today.

And I know that all Americans are thinking today of President Jimmy Carter on this National Day of Mourning. He was a great son of my home state of Georgia, a man of deep faith, and a tireless champion of democracy and human rights. And I hope that President Carter's legacy will continue to inspire people around the world to find their own ways to serve.

Now, all Americans are also watching the terrifying wildfires that are ripping through parts of Southern California. The Department will continue to stand ready to surge support as needed. That includes federal air assets that California can request to help

fight the fire from the sky. And many U.S. military installations are in the area, and they have personnel and equipment that can also be used to fight this awful blaze. We stand with the people of California in this terrible time.

Now, we have just wrapped up the 25th meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group.

And of course, that was my final time convening this Contact Group as Secretary of Defense. And I ended our session by challenging this history-making coalition to continue to support Ukraine.

So I'd like to say a few words about that challenge. But I also want to take a few minutes to reflect on how far we've come.

You know, throughout the day, I've been thinking back to our very first meeting here at Ramstein. We gathered on April 26, 2022—nearly a thousand days ago.

The world was reeling from the shock of Putin's imperial aggression. The Kremlin had invaded the second-largest country in Europe with the largest military in Europe. Russian troops had just massacred Ukrainian civilians in Bucha.

And many pundits said that Ukraine was doomed. But President Biden saw a way forward—paved by Ukrainian courage and allied commitment.

And I came to Ramstein after a secret visit to Ukraine with Secretary Blinken. We were in Kyiv during Orthodox Easter. And Ukrainian citizens were huddled in churches to pray. And Ukrainian leaders huddled in bunkers to plan. I heard directly from Ukraine's most senior leaders what it needed most, from President Zelenskyy on down.

Now, in the days after Putin's all-out invasion, many countries were flooding Ukraine with ad hoc donations of ammo and other capabilities. But I knew that if Ukraine was to survive, we needed to coordinate that security assistance. And we needed to do so in a way that met the evolving nature of the fight.

So I convened nations of goodwill right here at Ramstein. And I carried with me the urgency that I heard in Kyiv just hours earlier.

So I opened our hastily arranged first meeting by urging some 40 countries to build "a common understanding of the situation in Ukraine."

And today, this Contact Group provides more than a common understanding.

It provides a common cause.

Today, some 50 countries of conscience are coordinating closely with Ukraine to send vital, consistent, and cutting-edge security assistance. And that has helped turn Ukraine's struggle into one of the great military success stories of our times.

The Ukrainian military has shown breathtaking courage. And the Ukrainian people have shown magnificent defiance.

Ukraine's cause has inspired free people everywhere—including in my country.

And you know, back in the desperate days of February 2022, Ukrainian citizens were making Molotov cocktails to defend their homes. But today, with the help of this Contact Group, Ukraine has a battle-tested military and a booming defense-industrial base.

We're meeting the most urgent needs of Ukraine's troops even as we're building Ukraine's future force. And over the past three years, we have helped coordinate striking improvements to Ukraine's capabilities—all while managing our own readiness.

Now, we know that no single capability will turn the tide. So we have always stayed focused on what works and on the combined effects of Ukraine's capabilities.

You know, Ukraine has started to fly fourth-generation fighter jets. It now fields advanced, Western air-defense capabilities. And it produces and operates state-of-the-art unmanned systems.

All this positions Ukraine to defeat Russian aggression today and to deter Russian aggression tomorrow.

And so, our work together has changed the course of history.

Now, I am deeply proud of the assistance that the United States has provided to Ukraine. President Biden's support for Ukraine has never flagged. And Ukraine has also had strong bipartisan support in Congress.

Since February 2022, we have stayed laser-focused on providing Ukraine's defenders with the capabilities that they have needed at each stage of the fight.

First, artillery and rockets have been fundamental to this war. Since 2022, the United States has provided Ukraine with more than 2 million artillery rounds and more than 20,000 rockets—all while maintaining the readiness of our own forces.

Second, we relentlessly pushed to provide Ukraine with air-defense systems and missiles to defend its skies, its cities, and civilians.

Third, the Department is working to support Ukraine's drone industry.

And fourth, we've surged other critical capabilities to Ukraine, including HIMARS, ground-combat vehicles, Javelins, and much, much more.

Time and again, we have seen the huge significance of these combined capabilities. In fact, many of these lower-key capabilities have had a far greater battlefield impact than some higher-profile systems that we've also helped to provide, including F-16s and Abrams tanks and ATACMS.

In a war like this, no single capability is game-changing. As I said in Kyiv in October, what matters is the combined effects of your military capabilities—and staying focused on what works even as the fight evolves.

Now, the Ukraine crisis exposed some shortcomings in our defense industrial base. We've still got a lot more work to do. But we have galvanized our own defense industry—investing nearly \$70 billion at home to produce capabilities for Ukraine and replenish our own stocks.

And so, we still face major challenges ahead. But as the founder of this Contact Group, I am very proud of the way that our allies and partners have stepped up. Since April of 2022, the Contact Group's other members have committed more than \$60 billion in direct security assistance to Ukraine.

Ukraine's needs on the battlefield have evolved over the past two-and-a-half years. And so have the contributions of the coalition.

Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and Spain have joined to provide Ukraine with more Leopard tanks.

Germany has developed and led its Immediate Action on Air Defense Initiative, which has spurred partners to pledge more than a billion dollars to support Ukraine's air defenses.

The Czech Republic has led a dozen countries in surging critical munitions through the Czech Initiative, which coordinated the delivery of hundreds of thousands of rounds of artillery ammunition last year.

And Denmark and the Netherlands have provided Ukraine's first F-16 fighters.

And Canada, Denmark, France, Romania, the U.K., and the U.S have found creative ways to train Ukrainian pilots.

And Ukraine's partners have provided broad and sustained support—from Patriot and HAWK air-defense systems to thousands of armored vehicles.

And so all told, Contact Group members have committed more than \$126 billion in security assistance to Ukraine. They have expanded production capacity in factories around the world. And they have raced in sustainment capabilities to keep Ukraine's equipment in the fight.

So this coalition has become the arsenal of Ukrainian democracy.

It has become an engine of global security.

And this Contact Group has become the most consequential global coalition in more than 30 years.

The Contact Group's mission is now driven by its eight Capability Coalitions, with support from the National Armaments Directors. Today, 14 countries and Ukraine lead these important coalitions. They focus on Ukraine's air force; armor; artillery; de-mining;

drones; information technology; integrated air and missile defense; and maritime security.

And today, the ministers of defense here endorsed each of the coalition's roadmap for Ukraine's future force.

Now, each roadmap lays out an efficient and sustainable approach to helping meet Ukraine's long-term and near-term capability needs. And that's how this Contact Group has produced so much progress: by working together for our shared security interests—and by standing together for our shared principles.

And the battlefield results have been plain.

Since 2022, Russia has suffered more than 700,000 casualties in Ukraine. Now, that's more than Moscow has endured in all of its conflicts since World War II—combined. Russian casualties in Ukraine now surpass two-thirds of the total strength of the Russian military at the start of Putin's war of choice. In November 2024 alone, Russia lost nearly 1,500 troops a day.

You know, volunteers cannot make up for these stunning losses. So the Kremlin has been reduced to scouring Russia's jails and coercing contract soldiers.

Moscow has even rushed troops from North Korea into a war that they don't belong in. That's another clear sign of Putin's desperation. North Korean forces have suffered more than 1,000 casualties since they enlisted last December in Putin's war. And of course there are other estimates that are far north of that.

Meanwhile, the economic cost to ordinary Russians of Putin's imperial fantasies has been staggering. The Kremlin plans to spend about 40 percent of Russia's 2025 budget to keep up with the Contact Group's support to Ukraine. Now, that's a 25 percent increase from last year. Meanwhile, the Russian ruble has continued to plummet.

The Kremlin has become more isolated. And Russia's global stature and strategic position have continued to decay.

And so Russia has paid an appalling price for this indefensible war. Yet Putin has not achieved a single one of his strategic objectives. Not one.

In fact, Putin was so bogged down in Ukraine that when the vicious Assad dictatorship in Syria collapsed after more than 50 years, all he could do was watch. Russian troops had to race to haul equipment and personnel out of Syria—which had once been a centerpiece of the Kremlin's global ambitions. Putin's failure to save the Assad regime is a stark warning to the few remaining countries that might align themselves with the Kremlin.

Now, I am deeply mindful of the anguish that Putin has inflicted on Ukraine. For Ukraine, these have been years of tragedy—of entirely unnecessary agony caused by one man's imperial greed.

In my final hours at Ramstein as Secretary of Defense, I mourn for every Ukrainian man, woman, and child killed in Putin's murderous war. And I salute the Ukrainian troops who are fighting so bravely for their country and their freedom.

And this coalition has had their backs for nearly three hard years of war. And we must not stop now.

So I'm leaving this Contact Group not with a farewell, but with a challenge.

The coalition to support Ukraine must not flinch.

It must not falter.

And it must not fail.

Ukraine's survival is on the line. But so is all of our security.

Putin wants to avenge a fallen empire—and to rebuild it. The Kremlin's assault starts with Ukraine. But it will not end there. And the dangers are global.

Putin wants a world where empire tramples sovereignty—a world where conquest trumps human rights—a world where tyranny bulldozes democracy.

Every autocrat on Earth is watching to see whether Putin gets away with it.

So this coalition must continue to stand foursquare with Ukraine—and to strengthen Ukraine's hand for the negotiations that will someday bring Putin's monstrous war to a close.

Now, that road is challenging. But all the alternatives are far worse. No responsible leader would let Putin have his way.

As I have said, peace is not self-executing. Order does not preserve itself. And security does not expand on its own.

And so, we must stand up for our security. We must hold firm to the bedrock principle that aggression is a sin. And we must never lose our nerve.

So let me again urge countries of conscience from around the world to help Ukraine succeed—and to ensure that Putin does not prevail.

And to my brave Ukrainian teammates—and to my friends who have already given and sacrificed far too much—let me urge you to stay in the fight.

We have come so far over the past 25 meetings of this Contact Group. And the structure of this coalition is built to succeed, built to adapt, and built to last.

Three years ago, at the founding of this Contact Group, I said here at Ramstein that this coalition "reflects a galvanized world."

It still does.

I called Putin's war "baseless, reckless, and lawless."

It still is.

And I called the Kremlin's onslaught "a challenge to free people everywhere."

It still is.

I will always be proud that the Ukraine Defense Contact Group has held high the torch of security and freedom.

And so I will keep saying it: free people must refuse to replace an open order of rules and rights with a violent world of force and fear.

Thanks again for being here. And with that, I'll be happy to take some questions.

PRESS SECRETARY MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Our first question will go to Tara Copp, Associated Press.

Q: Mr. Secretary, I'd like to start with the wildfires. Given the scope and the destruction going on in California, why haven't more troops and aircraft been sent? Is it because California hasn't asked? And if they do ask, how quickly could DOD send additional assets there?

And then secondly on Greenland, do you think President-elect Trump is serious about taking Greenland from NATO ally Denmark? And how destructive are these remarks to the NATO alliance?

And then for my last and third question for you, has the incoming administration reached out to you at all about continuing the Ukraine Defense Contact Group? And if not, how concerned are you that this might be the last meeting of this historic group?

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD AUSTIN: It's Tara, isn't it?

Q: Close.

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD AUSTIN: Well, Tara, first of all, the US military stands ready to assist in any way that we possibly can to help the people of California. As you know, California has a lot of capability on its own, but these are pretty significant fires.

And while no — well, few requests have been made thus far, we stand ready to surge capability in as quickly as possible. I've done some things to cause our troops to get in a three point stance, to make sure that, you know, if the whistle blows, we are ready to ready to move in and provide assistance. And so —

Q: So, those additional assets have not been requested?

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD AUSTIN: Well, we are providing some modular firefighting systems, so that when the winds are — allow, we're able to employ that system in support of California.

But we have a lot more capacity, a lot more capability that can be requested. And so, we're going to make sure that we remain closely linked to the director of FEMA and the leadership in California to ensure that, if they have a need, then we're ready to respond.

In terms of the contact group, your question is whether or not the next administration will decide to continue this effort. That is a decision that's, you know, up — that's for the next administration to make. And I won't speculate on which direction they would go in.

But what I will tell you, Tara, is that this is important to — not only to Ukraine, but to the United States of America, to Europe, and to — and to the entire world. And as you know, we've seen bipartisan support in Congress. And, you know, I think that, again, it's up to the future administration to make their own decisions. We want to make sure that we've done everything we can to ensure that, you know, we're continuing to support, to provide — and they have the options to go in whatever direction they want to go in.

I'll also tell you that I heard from my colleagues here today in stereo, you know, a number of times, that they really believe that this is important, and they really believe that this format has served us well. And so, you know, we'll see what happens. It's not the only format that can work, obviously, but they believe that this is important. So —

Q: And on Greenland, do you think Trump is serious about taking Greenland?

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD AUSTIN: I would defer that question to the president-elect, and I won't speculate on whether he's serious or not. So —

Q: But how destructive is that to the alliance?

PRESS SECRETARY MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Can I move on to the next question? Our next question will go to Ute Spangenberg, ARD.

Q: Mr. Secretary, one last question. Looking back at 25 Ukraine group meetings, would more help have been possible or did the group fall short because individual nations allowed themselves to be too intimidated by Putin's aggressiveness and nuclear threats?

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD AUSTIN: So, Uta, you just heard me say that Russia has experienced 700,000 casualties. And the war is not over. They will continue to experience more casualties going forward. They've lost a lot of equipment. They — Putin's isolated. You know, he doesn't have the ability to project combat power as he would have had in the past, and we saw that with Syria.

So, I think I would — I would challenge as to whether or not Ukraine has fallen short. I think Russia is falling short. Those numbers of casualties, without accomplishing a single strategic objective, that's unthinkable, unthinkable.

So, I think — I think, you know, this format and our ability to rush urgently needed security assistance into Ukraine has been quite remarkable. We've done that at a speed and in volumes that have not been seen in the past. So, I really applaud the work that the team has done together. But there's more to be done, and we clearly recognize that. And we're going to continue to do everything we can to help Ukraine for as long as we can.

PRESS SECRETARY MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Thank you, sir. Our next question will go to Carla Babb, Voice of America.

Q: Hi, Mr. Secretary. Thank you so much for doing this. Since you mentioned the remarkable nature of what you've done the past three years, I want to focus on what happened today. And are the commitments and the roadmaps made today for Ukraine by the capability coalitions enough to give Ukraine the upper hand this year, or will it simply keep them in the fight?

And then since you missed — mentioned the fall of Assad on Russia's recent loss of its bases in Syria, has that affected Russia's ability to support its military presence in Africa and the Middle East?

And then finally, the Justice Department has acted on behalf of the Pentagon in your final days in office to enforce plea deals in the 9/11 cases. Why is this so important to you? And is [inaudible] justice to families who have been waiting more than 20 years in limbo, potentially denying them justice?

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD AUSTIN: Carla, tell me what your first question was again?

Q: First one is about the Capability Coalition's commitments. Is it enough to give Ukraine the upper hand or will it keep them in the fight?

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD AUSTIN: The Capability Coalition's, I think, are doing tremendous work to build the future force for Ukraine even as countries continue to support Ukraine in the current fight in a very credible way. And so as we look at, you know, what the capability coalitions are doing and when things come into play, when they become available in terms of capability, it is quite impressive. And you know, what I've seen from countries that are part of these capability coalitions that they is that they are absolutely committed to working hard to ensure that that capability comes to life in a — in a — in an expedient time — manner — matter of time.

So I'm optimistic about what we're doing with the capability coalitions. I do believe that — that it will provide the means to continue to modernize Ukraine's military, which will help it accomplish other things in the future. And as you think back to where we were when we started — this fight started, it was a military based on Soviet equipment and, you know, used a lot of Soviet doctrine. We are a long way from where we were then.

So the final question out of the eight questions that you had, Carla —

Q: — Just three this time —

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD AUSTIN: — Was regarding the Guantanamo Bay recent decision. My — you know, I — I've stated my — where I — where I am on this and I haven't changed. And so we are in the process of appealing that ruling and, since we are appealing it, I don't have any comments to make on the issue.

Q: And then on the Post-Assad Russia, have you seen the loss of the bases in Syria affect its ability to conduct military operations in Africa and the Middle East?

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD AUSTIN: I think that, you know, based upon the fact that Russia used its capabilities, its bases in Syria to project combat power into Africa, I think that we will see a knock on effect. We will see that this will affect their ability to place capability into Africa as they have been in the past and sustain that capability. So yeah, I think it's going to have an effect.

PRESS SECRETARY MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Our final question will go to Anselm Stern from ZDF.

Q: Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary. In a few days, Donald Trump will be president. Will the United States remain a reliable partner in NATO? And what do you expect from your successor as Secretary of defense? Thank you.

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD AUSTIN: The United States of America has always been a reliable partner. We will always be a reliable partner in the future. Just like any other country, you know, we have administrations change and some policies change from time to time. But our values don't change. Our commitment to allies and partners doesn't change either.

So in terms of what I would expect, that — that's irrelevant. The question is what does his boss expect from him? And you know, I've had a great boss that I've had the ability to engage frequently and been given a latitude to, you know, accomplish what needs — need to be accomplished, and so it's been a great experience for me. And I would hope that any future Secretary of Defense would enjoy that same kind of relationship.

If you don't have that relationship, it's a very difficult job to do. But I — again, I've been blessed to work with — to be able to work with an incredible team in DOD, but also, you know, in the cabinet, especially the members of the National Security Council. It's all been — all been very positive — they've all been a very positive experience. And that's a great thing because if you look at the challenges that we've been faced with, we've had to manage multiple significant challenges simultaneously. We were able to do that because I think we had a very solid national security strategy.

My boss continued to resource us in a way that allowed us — allowed us to execute that strategy. And so it's been a pretty good experience for me and I have thoroughly enjoyed having the opportunity. And I think if you look at where we are right now, our adversaries are weaker, our relationships with our — with our allies and partners are stronger, the economy is as strong as it's been in a long time, and so I think we're in pretty good shape. And Patrick, I think that's the last question.

PRESS SECRETARY MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. That was the last question. This concludes our press briefing. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us today.

