

Speaker 1: [00:23](#) [inaudible].

Speaker 2: [00:23](#) Good afternoon everyone. Welcome back to the Aspen security forum. My name is Laurie Shearer. I'm the vice president of intelligence portfolios at the minor corporation. It is my distinct honor and privilege to introduce our next session, a conversation with the director of the of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Lieutenant General Robert Ashley, uh, and serving as our moderator for the conversation this afternoon is Jim [inaudible], Jim Shuto, chief national security correspondent for CNN. I can't think of a better time to discuss the importance of intelligence and its critical role of informing decision makers at all levels of the u s government. As director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Lieutenant General Ashley leads more than 16,500 men and women worldwide who produce, analyze and disseminate military intelligence information, excuse me, to combat and non-combat military operations. Lieutenant General Ashley is a career army military intelligence officer. He served as the army deputy chief of staff where he was the senior advisor to the secretary of the army and army chief of staff for all intelligence, counter-intelligence, and security matters. Some of his career highlights include serving as a director of intelligence for US Army Joint Special Operations Command, the director of intelligence for you, a central command, the deputy chief of staff intelligence, International Security Assistance Force and director of intelligence, US forces Afghanistan to name just a few in addition to his distinguished military career. My own Intel sources have led. I have let me know that a lieutenant general Ashley plays a mean electric guitar and is a huge fan of the Minnesota Vikings. And with that I turn it over to Jim and Lieutenant General Ashley

Speaker 1: [02:18](#) [inaudible].

Jim Sciotto: [02:19](#) Let me begin by thanking you general for joining us today in a year when there has been a dearth of administration officials, uh, willing to speak. Uh, it's a, I know, I appreciate it. I'm sure many people in the audience appreciate your taking the time and taking the questions. All right, thanks Jim. I appreciate it. I want to give you a chance cause I think even in an environment like this, a lot of folks don't know the details of the DA's role. Um, in a, in an enormous intelligence and infrastructure apparatus today, the biggest, biggest in the world before I get there. As you know, there's been some news hovering around the Persian Gulf, Iran, et Cetera. And I know this is a British lead, it's British tankers. The other appears to be Liberian. So I don't, I'm not going to put you on the spot in that sense, but, but you are the dia is the eyes and the ears of the u s military tells them

what's going on in the world, I imagine tries to fit those pieces together. So can you help us understand how these Iranian activities that we've seen from a drone shoot down to now that seizing of the tankers to these, it seems that attacks on tankers prior, how that range of activity fits together and if you have a sense of what the intention is from the Iranian side.

Robert Ashley:

[03:32](#)

So let me put it in the context of what the DA's core mission is. Um, I don't think I can really get to the, to the last one that you laid out. So for us, the defense intelligence agency, it's a team sport. And what we do is we provide all sorts of intelligence. So the two key things we do are foundational intelligence and foreign militaries in the operational environment. If you were to put it in two major buckets, um, rough sports analogy is we provide the scattering and report on the Vikings. We provide the scatter report, pick your team and we also give you the environmental of the city. And so those are the major things that we do. Um, we fuse all the information that comes out of the other intelligence organizations. So again, it's a team sport. We're the one dod all source intelligence agency.

Robert Ashley:

[04:19](#)

Now, in addition to fusing everything that we get from the other members of the intelligence community, uh, we also have, you know, collection and stuff that we produce originally. Although defense attache is work for the, well, I mean they worked for the combatant commanders, but they're part of the defense intelligence agency. We have science to technical capabilities that allow us to look at, uh, weapons development across major powers. We can look at space counter space. So there's a, there's a heavy engineering stem capability in science and technology. There's the human side for the [inaudible]. And then there's that fusion of the all source intelligence, which gets into a lot of what the panels talked about earlier in terms of how we leverage artificial intelligence, machine learning, things like that. So when the context of what's what's evolving in Iran right now, what the baton commander would do would be come back to dia.

Robert Ashley:

[05:10](#)

And we have employees in every combat and command. So the joint Intel ops center, which is all the officers that are under the J twos, the senior intelligence officers for all the combat and commands, about 80 85% of those are DII employees. So we are in every combat and command. And so what we provide that foundational intelligence and that analysis is so that you can look at and go, okay, what are the capabilities of the fast attack aircraft or a ships, the fast intercoastal ships. What's the nature of the doctrine behind what's taking place in the military districts where the surface to air missile? So all that order of

battle, all that capability that exists inside of foreign military is what we update constantly. So we've got a foundational database that has all that information. We don't pick the targets, but what we do is we're able to vet and tell you about pattern of life and what's behind this.

Jim Sciotto: [06:04](#)

Okay. Without go on enough to say this. But I will say without going into classified information, can you characterize what's going on there and how severe it is or just the range of activities that Iran is carrying out right now.

Robert Ashley: [06:21](#)

So let me put it more on the strategic content in terms of just the specific events that are taking place today. And I had a chance to be interviewed and talk about this a couple of weeks ago and one of the comments I made was I see Iran at an inflection point and you had a chance through the panels earlier today to hear about the economic pressure and all the things that are taking place. Now that gets into the policy side, that's not my realm. So what we do is we inform policy, but that that's not a, you know, an area that we get involved in. But as we do the analysis, we look what's taking place. My comment about them being at an inflection point was really about how do you change the status quo. Now you heard the economic breakdown in terms of the pressure that's on or the regime, uh, where the GDP is going, the fact that they're going into a recession and the glide path that they're on is more of the same.

Robert Ashley: [07:13](#)

So what is it they have to do to Kinda change the status quo, which was Duran up the level of activity. And we saw this coming or a couple of weeks out before it happens. So we're able to provide that information to senior leaders, both in Department of Defense and obviously they provide their best military advice, uh, to senior leaders on the hill and within the White House. And for us. Just the other thing I wanted to mention that I didn't talk about yet was, so who's my boss? So I have lots of bosses, but I'll give you the, the, the principle is the under secretary of defense for intelligence, a retired Vice Admiral Joe Kernan is my immediate boss. And then it's the secretary of defense. But you're from Admiral Davidson yesterday. All the combatant commanders are my bosses because I serve all of them and we'll also research policy and the executive brain.

Jim Sciotto: [08:02](#)

I can identify, I have a lot of bosses as well. And then I'm sorry then and then my wife Barbara. Yeah, exactly what the top of that. I'm with you on that. Um, Iranian inflection point. And again, I don't want to talk the whole afternoon about Iran cause

we, we, uh, we want to get the great power China, Russia, but, but Iran in an inflection point trying, feeling the pressure you're inflicts, you're in effect saying they're feeling the economic pressure and they're striking out. They want to change the status quo.

Robert Ashley: [08:27](#) So and then your, what, what you see is an attempt to, to break that status quo is to look, to divide us with our European powers, to try to get the European powers to come back in to have an economic impact. So you kind of watch this across the dime. Now my responsibility is to be very deep in the military part of the instruments of power. But as you look at what takes place in the world, while I have responsibility for the m, I cannot ignore the diplomatic, the information, the economic right. Because all those come to bear, uh, on the military piece. And in some cases it informs indications or warning or where a nations may be going, where they're investing, uh, equipment that they're buying, where they open a new port. If we get back into great power, you talk about belt and road, which is principally an economic endeavor from the Chinese, but it has potential for longterm military implications, which we watch. There

Jim Sciotto: [09:19](#) are the actions we see and then the actions we don't see, particularly in the environment of modern warfare that we have today. How hot is the cyber front of this conflict with Iran today.

Robert Ashley: [09:34](#) So, so let me put that in, not just with Iran but with cyber in general. And, and kudos to the panels that talked to your earlier this morning about all the things that are taking place in cyberspace and that is very active. Uh, it's very active for a number of nations without getting into specifics. And part of what I would echo you heard earlier this morning and that gives me concern is the reconnaissance that is ongoing for the potentiality of something that you may want to do in the future. And so think about what you heard about skate systems, supervisory control and data acquisition, industrial control systems, things like that because the Internet of the Internet of things creates a degree of vulnerability in all the things that are hooked into that. And so cyber defense is absolutely critical. So I was glad that we had the panel talking about that, but whether it's in the military around whether it's infrastructure, power grids, banking, uh, the cyber net of things or the internet or things can reach into all kinds of areas.

Robert Ashley: [10:36](#) And when people ask me, say, what keeps you up at night? That's kind of, that's kind of the one that keeps me up at night because you look at the time it would take to move a carrier battle group or a time to move an air wing. That how long does

it take to move ones and Zeros globally. It's near instantaneous. And the other thing is there's not just state actors now you have non state actors that can be empowered and then how do you go back against a non-state actor because you're not going against something that's territorial in nature. So it's a degree of complexity, uh, in, in future war

- Jim Sciotto: [11:10](#) have to usually, I've had folks in the NSA tell me that they, for instance, in their homes, will not have internet connected appliances or like an Alexa because they say these, these are open invitations to be, to be hacked.
- Robert Ashley: [11:21](#) Yeah. Not, not to make light of it, but there's some great briefs that NSA will give you and you literally will throw your phone away on the way out.
- Jim Sciotto: [11:27](#) Yeah. Uh, China and Russia. You, you said, what keeps you up at night? Whenever I asked that question, uh, of Intel officials, they will always put China and Russia at the top of the, at the top of the list sometimes, you know, sometimes in reverse order, but it's China and Russia. Are we today in the midst of a new great power competition?
- Robert Ashley: [11:48](#) So we are, and it's really what's emerging, uh, over the course of probably like the really, since 91, you know, since the Russians have recovered from the period of the Soviet Union. But the, it's the character of that conflict that is very interesting because of the diffusion of weapons and technology. So think about the nature of war. And I get to channel my inner journal Maddis here for a second. Um, one of the things that General Mattis as secretary did a great job in testimony and help educating in that testimony was to talk about the nature and the character of war. And what he said is you'd go back to the time of facilities and as you read about the Peloponnesian wars, the nature of war is fear. Honor an interest that is immutable that has not changed. But what has changed is the character for and the character for is via the technology.
- Robert Ashley: [12:39](#) So if you look at all the different things that have come out in the ability to be competitive in that space, because one of the things that we have responsibility to do is look at weapons development of, you know, globally. And it used to be that was kind of a binary in the bipolar time that we had with the Soviet Union. You're watching missile tests and everything that's going on, uh, with the Soviet Union. Now you have the diffusion of that technology, China selling ballistic missiles. And so our ability to watch that is now becoming much more global. As you see, lots of different people are getting that technology in China

is absolutely prolific in their sales, uh, ballistic missiles and weaponize drones.

Jim Sciotto: [13:19](#) Um, as you know, I had a pet issue for me. I wrote a book about this and, and kind do the expansion and the use of technology, the multiple fronts of the war, just below the threshold of, of what we think of in historical terms as a shooting war. Um, and there, there, there are a lot of fronts. Space. Let's talk about space. China and Russia have both deployed space weapons. They're floating around, they have capabilities in each, each earth orbit, um, is the u s behind in that conflict?

Robert Ashley: [13:47](#) Yeah. So I can't, I can't tell you who's the front who's behind, but let me just talk a little bit about the context of what's being developed. Um, and, and the good thing is we're able to get a lot of this out in the public domain. Uh, we were asked last year, can you get something out that's unclassified to talk about developments from the Chinese, the Russians, the Iranians, and the Koreans as, as it pertains to, uh, challenges in counter space. And so we thought it's pretty sensitive area. It's probably going to be a trifold. There's probably not a lot we can get out on that. And as we dug into it and what we're able to share, there is a 30 page unclassified booklet called challenges in space and we profiled the capabilities of those four nations and that is available. Matter of fact, it's kind of interesting and there's some enterprising entrepreneur out there.

Robert Ashley: [14:40](#) If you go to Amazon and you put that title in there, he, someone is actually selling it for about \$25. Um, you probably could get you a copy for free gym. But what we're able to profile there is that space is contested. Now, if you go back to the counterterrorism fight, what we've been involved in the last 16 years between the different domains and we talk about maritime land, air space and cyber. The only domain that was truly contested was the ground domain. And you saw that in ids and attacks against her ground forces. Even going back to desert shield, Desert Storm, I mean it was a very limited time, uh, before we actually really had an air supremacy and our pilots were no longer at risk. But what we're able to provide in this, um, in this booklet was to talk about directed energy weapons which are being developed by both the, the Russians and the Chinese.

Robert Ashley: [15:34](#) The fact that they have direct ascent a sat, uh, weapons that literally can go up and target a satellite and unfortunately create a lot of debris, uh, the ability to have co orbital satellites. So just think you have a satellite extensively and the way you portray it as it's got an arm on it that it can do maintenance. But

if that satellite nestles up against jurors, then you have the ability to damage a sensor. You can cut lines. You in fact could disable that with the coal Bertel satellite. There's base commander likes to talk about kamikaze satellites, kidnap or satellites and both China and Russia have demonstrated that capability. And so there's, there's electronic warfare, the ability to jam synthetic aperture radars, other kinds of satellites both from the ground and from in space. So we're seeing a period of great competition that is moving its way into space.

Robert Ashley: [16:24](#)

And the risks there are obviously from war fighting standpoint is precision navigation. And timing. We have great dependence on that. What you depend on when you don't have to read a map cause you just plug it into your phone and you know where you want to go. Uh, things along those lines. Uh, meteorological data. So you know what the weather is going to be tomorrow. Uh, satellite early warning, or excuse me, missile already warning systems. So there's a multitude of things that are potentially at risk. What I can't talk about is what we're doing to ensure that we have resilience and redundancy and that is being addressed. I'll reserve questions about the x 37 be okay. Uh, hypersonic weapons has the age of the IPR saw how our hypersonic weapons already a threat to the u s forces. So we'll see those filled at the end the next couple of years.

Robert Ashley: [17:09](#)

And so we're watching those developments. We're actually watching and trying to learn from the systems that we're developing. But part of that technical collection is we're making sure that we get a sense of what the parameters are of those hypersonic weapons, how they perform, how they operate. Because of the trajectory is that literally mach five and beyond defines hypersonic is they have the ability to move. And so when you think about ballistic missiles, which have some ability to turn or um, the geometries kinda predictable, so it allows you to go in and have the ability to potentially kill it in route. So think about a hypersonics in the decision time, the decision you have with something that's low hugging the earth and has the ability to turn. So part of what we have to develop, and this gets into, uh, artificial intelligence algorithms, advanced analytics is can you be predictive in nature and how that vehicle is going to operate.

Robert Ashley: [18:04](#)

And so we have to gather a lot of data, start training algorithms and see how we can do that. But you're defeat mechanism starts all the way from when the missile is actually launched all the way back to susceptibility before it even leaves the launch launchpad with patch, which gets back to the Internet of things. So you have to think about the entire, what we would call kill

chain analysis of how you defeat a weapon systems. So for one of the key things the defense intelligence agency does is we're a big part of having the engineers and you've been to the missile space Intel center down in Alabama Missick which was one of our organizations that they actually kind of disable or you know, they take those weapon systems apart so that we can understand how they operate and how we can work to defeat them.

Jim Sciotto: [18:48](#)

Yeah. They, they, uh, they wouldn't tell me how they got all those missiles around the world, but they find a way to get them and reverse engineering and figuring out what to do about it. Yeah. Yeah. Um, artificial intelligence, there's a quote, uh, that will often read to people in speeches and it talks about the potential for AI, both in, uh, commercial applications, military government applications, and often has a crowd said, who do you think said that? And they'll say Elon Musk, or, you know, Jeff Bezos, but in fact, it's letting me or Putin, uh, Russia and China very interested in that space. What capabilities do they have today? And how quickly does AI factor into, into military planning, right?

Robert Ashley: [19:26](#)

Yeah. So really developing artificial intelligence is it's solving problems. It is creating decision space. It is allowing analysts to spend time doing analysis and not having to do a lot of just rigorous kinds of work. It also gives you insights that you may never see because of its ability to aggregate information together. And so that, that gets into us. It's looking at big data and how we apply that. So artificial intelligence, machine learning or integral to what we do from an analytics standpoint. Uh, one of the programs that we're looking to build over the next couple of years is, uh, the machine assisted analytic rapid repositories system. Mars, um, somebody actually got probably a promotion or cash bonus for coming out with the name of it. But what it's meant to do is to replace the modern integrated database mid B, which is where all that foundational intelligence is.

Robert Ashley: [20:22](#)

That database is 1996. It is not AI ready. It's not machine learning ready. And it does not scale to really create an information environment to allow us to not only archive all that information about those foreign militaries and the operational environment, but by applying artificial intelligence, computer vision, we can have a much richer debt information environment with all that data in there. And it really, it updates itself and you take the human out of the loop. For example, if I were to say part of that foundational intelligence, I need to, I need to know where all the hospitals are. Okay, well, for a



person to do that and look at imagery, go through that, you might be able to do thousands of images in the period of a year, uh, by applying computer vision. What we're doing right now. We go through millions of images, but we have applied tradecraft, analytic tray traps so that I can say I have a high probability that that's a hospital. Because we went back, we trained it on a series of images that, so that's a high probability that you know that it's a, that it's a hospital cause it actually is. And then so when you get that information, you get through millions of images and you have an incredibly rich database, uh, that you know, that you've applied tradecraft against, but you didn't necessarily have to have a person in the loop. And so that's the kind of scaling that these tools are going to bring to us.

Jim Sciotto: [21:41](#)

For the purposes of my book, I asked Submarine Commanders, I asked folks in the NSA, folks in, in, in Space Command pilots flying surveillance aircraft missions. The question, when you look at Russia and China, but even Iranian and North Korean capabilities in all these realms, so all these fronts of this kind of new hybrid warfare, does the u s still maintain the lead? And the uniform answer was yes, but shrinking. And if we don't make big changes, we're going to lose that lead. And I wonder if you agree with that? Uh, in particular with respect to Russia and China.

Robert Ashley: [22:17](#)

So if you go back and read the national defense strategy says the central problem that we have to solve is that our military advantages eroding. Um, now you can break that down into a bunch of categories and in some cases we're in parity. In some cases we're a little bit behind. In some cases we're ahead. Um, but in the aggregate, uh, we're in a good place. Where are we behind? I can't give you the specifics of word behind because what I'm not going to talk about as a vulnerability, I don't want to share with, because I'm sure that camera's being watched by some folks that may be sitting in Moscow and Beijing. I will wave at you. Um, but yeah, but, but there's a host of things out there that exist. So I'll give just a couple of categories which we have to do. Um, we have to watch closely.

Robert Ashley: [23:04](#)

Quantum computing, quantum sensing, and uh, quantum communications are all integral to the way ahead. And kind of the way that I look at this is one thing. It's developing the technology. So if somebody comes in and says, Hey, the Chinese are now ahead just opining the Chinese are now ahead, they have the fastest computer. Okay, what's the context of that? What are the problems that they are trying to solve? Because just having the fastest computer sitting, you know, in a lab

doesn't tell me that they're getting great insights and what's the problem they're trying to solve. So as you look at quantum encryption, which the Chinese are making huge investments, uh, and, and very good at, but quantum computing, these are things that are going to come to maturation over the next 10 years. And there's a good book by Michael O'Hanlon, uh, entitled modern warfare.

Robert Ashley:

[23:58](#)

And if you ever read anything by Peter Singer who's a futurist, I've asked both of them in different panels and say, what does that one disruptive piece of technology that has you most concerned? And both of them kind of said the technology is only going to make you good at something you're already good at doing. Um, so look at that in the context of war fighting. If you understand the complexity of integrating all those domains of fires, air, ground maneuvers, cyber space, that's phd work. And that's something that we didn't have to do during the CT years, which, oh, by the way are still going. And so that's something that the Chinese and the Russians watched us dismantle Saddam's army twice and took note of it and were very, very concerned. And so it led to them to mirror how we were organized in terms of putting in joint commands, joint capabilities focused on brigade and division fight. But we have a lot more experience, a lot more expertise at taking those capabilities and operationally putting them in place. However, we're seeing a level of rigor in the Chinese and the Russian training that we have not seen in the past because a lot of times it was kind of a road exercise. Um, kind of went through the motions and now we're seeing that it really is rigorous. And how they're going through and during their training,

Jim Sciutto:

[25:23](#)

if you read David Ignatius, his book, the quantity, which is a novel, but it sounds like it was a very well briefed novel, you get the impression that on that front, China may have the lead, but I won't press you cause I know the Chinese are watching here when, when, and the rest, when you look at China and Russia, who is the bigger threat today?

Robert Ashley:

[25:40](#)

So there's a temporal piece of that. I would tell you that the near term, uh, is Russia. And, uh, I don't know if dr and is still with us. So Dr and I wrote a great piece talking about, uh, Vladimir Putin and the Russians as a spoiler. Uh, in the panel yesterday. He made great points in terms of when you have somebody that's kind of backed into a corner, they're how they, you know, lash out in some cases, may not always, always be predictable. The other part is, at the end of the day, when you have several thousands nuclear nuclear weapons, uh, then you are an existential threat. The Chinese or leading economically.

And that is the longterm and what you see with Shujing Ping is that they want to have a modernized military by 2035 and they want to be appear with us, uh, by the middle of the century by 2050.

Jim Sciotto: [26:29](#) The way you describe Russia there as being more dangerous in the near term because it is backed into a corner would also, it strikes me describe where Iran is today.

Robert Ashley: [26:41](#) There's always the possibility of miscalculation. And so one of the things that that we have to do from the children's community as we advise senior leaders is as best we can understand intent and decision making, uh, inside those capitals. And in some cases you may have some pretty good insights on that at the classified level. In some cases you may not, but you can never take a western perspective and go, well, this is how I would look at it. Right? What's really got to do is if I were sitting in Moscow and I'm watching this, how do I see it? What does it look like if I'm sitting in Beijing and I'm looking at this, what are my assessments? And so we've gotta be able to put ourselves in the positions of those leaders to understand how they see risk, what do they see as the red lines, what do they see as our red lines? Cause in some cases there may be a misperception of what those are. And so that's absolutely critical to how you advise senior leaders to understand. Because when you think about a threat threat is it's a formula. There's capability plus intent that gives you a threat. And the hard part you can, you can see capabilities all day. There's so many observables, uh, but sometimes the, the, the hard part to really understand is decision, calculus, risk and intent.

Jim Sciotto: [27:58](#) Put yourself in Tara then today for a moment.

Speaker 1: [28:03](#) Okay. Unclass

Robert Ashley: [28:05](#) at the unclassified level. Yep. Then I'm probably going to go visit a mosque or something else like that.

Speaker 1: [28:10](#) Okay. Does Iran, does Iran want war? No. Hmm.

Robert Ashley: [28:19](#) Ron Doesn't want war. China doesn't want war. Russia doesn't want war. I think everybody has a good rationalization that, um, and I can't remember you said it in one of the panels this morning. It might might've been Wendy Sherman that the outcome I would very horrific for all [inaudible]. There's a great quote from President, uh, Eisenhower, and he said the best way to win world war three is to prevent it.

Jim Sciotto: [28:40](#) Yeah. Joel Biden will often say [inaudible] and just repeat the war warning about the war that you don't want. Right? Yeah. And that's it. Is that not a primary concern with Russia and China and great power because you have increasingly capable weaponry deployed in closer proximity often. Now, if you look at, for instance, Russian operations in the med, right, or u s and Russian subs up in the Arctic, uh, China has got a base of Sir Lanka, but also now the situation, the Persian Gulf, I mean, that's a lot of stuff in very close proximity. And we saw in Syria, for instance, when you have us and Russian forces close to each other, sometimes people die, right?

Robert Ashley: [29:22](#) So there's gotta be a level of deconfliction and you've gotta be dialog at the military level. And we work hard to make sure that those, those communications are, are in place as best we can.

Jim Sciotto: [29:32](#) Understood. Uh, I was want to get to the audience because I know there are a lot of smart people here, so, so why don't we, uh, get some questions from you guys, uh, and begin again right here and I imagine they'll bring a microphone your way.

Speaker 1: [29:48](#) Yeah.

Audience Member: [29:52](#) Thank you very much general for sharing your insights with us. And what episode was EDF Jovan TV? I'm wondering the Strait of Hormuz probably is one of the most watched, surveyed and recorded taped waterway in the entire world. So I was wondering what happened a couple of weeks ago when we had this incident with the Olympic mine's in the dispute about it that, um, in the end, first there were some pictures released then by the u s military by the navy. Um, that didn't seem to satisfy as some people. So then they had a second release that didn't SRE sway some people either. And also in the last couple of days, there was another incident with NOI tanker last weekend and we learned about it from the IOTC yesterday. Now there's a new incident today and that seems to be a dispute, uh, on the, on the strong seeing also going on. So I was wondering, do you have much more than you have shown us about one and I guess so you have, but why not put out a little more to make sure once and for that Iran doesn't get away in the propaganda with Kane?

Robert Ashley: [31:06](#) Yeah. So thanks for the question that the decision to do that, uh, is not mine really. That's kind of at the, at the policy level of what they want to disclose and there's an intel game loss piece of that. So you have to balance depending on what you have and the information you may compromise a source, uh, and access. So you have to balance that, um, with the larger

strategic impact of maybe compromising a source. That's probably not the best example I know cause those were, uh, you know, tactical events that we could see. You're right. I mean there are assets that are, that are operating in that region. Uh, it's interesting that you know, people are going to spin the narratives in different ways in terms of the level of convincing and you're going to get a different narrative from the Iranians, um, instrument enough, not bound by the truth as they, they put that information out.

Robert Ashley: [31:54](#)

But a lot of times, depending on how sensitive the information is within the intelligence community, there's, there's this Intel gain loss and, and this is really a bear with me kind of an educational piece for the public as a consumer. The Intel gain loss of, okay, how important is it to just have iron clad, you know, showing information that this in fact can be attributable or maybe you provided a little bit of information but you may lose access to some information in the longterm that may be strategically more important down the road. So that's kind of the decisions you have to make. And in some cases decisions were, are made to be more forthcoming. Um, but there's, there's no intent to, to hide things from the mirror. Public. American public is making sure we look at um, sources and means, and then how much is, is proven forced to, uh, to ensure that we can get, um, attribution out.

Jim Sciotto: [32:52](#)

Just a brief follow to that question and you're going to hate me for this question by the way, but I'll ask it anyway. There is dispute over intelligence in the international realm, but as you know, there's dispute over the intelligence in the country. There, there are concerns about it being politicized or certain intelligence being released to suit one agenda or another agenda. I just want to ask you as, as an intelligence professional who works his darnedest with your team and, and the thousands of folks that work for you every day to get it right and send it up the chain, does that phenomenon worry you?

Robert Ashley: [33:26](#)

So W I won't say whether it worries me. What I'd like to do is talk to the point of, um, the information that we put together. You know, we put information in decision makers hands. We're not the decision maker in that context. What I'd like to really have everybody walk away from is it's your neighbors that your sons, your daughters, your friends that are coming in every day with the task of being apolitical, agnostic, and the Intel is the Intel, the assessment is the assessment. Now, senior leaders will weigh that with other empirical data that they have. I'll give you an example. I mean when, when I was a two at Centcom, you know we had assessments that we would give to General

Maddis sometimes in the morning update and we'd have a young animals that we'd prepare and we'd murder boredom and they get up and say, you know, here's, here's where we are as a, as a j too and secretary Mattis who is just the quintessential engager with our young animals and with our two shop goes, don't exactly see it that way.

Robert Ashley: [34:26](#)

And then he would make his point. So decision makers are always going to take information that they have and sometimes they may have some insights that are just based on relationships. But I am very confident in the information and the rigor and the apolitical nature of what the IC does. On a daily basis. And, and I give you that based on 35 years of doing this and could not be more proud of, of all the guys and gals that I work with, not only in the defense intelligence agency but across all the IC. Um, and if I could just bare with me, it's kind of the y if you ever read Simon Sinek book, start with why. Because people don't care how or what you do. They want to know why you do it. And for me, my wife starts with my kids every morning when I get up. It's about a, what can I do to make sure that the next generation, you know, as Reagan said, um, gets to enjoy what we enjoyed. And everybody in the IC, I tell you, they are rowing hard to do that for you every single day. And so there are, why is your hopes and dreams? So did you, you can go to a ballgame

Robert Ashley: [35:38](#)

and not worry about somebody flying a drone over or an airplane into it. And that's a, that's a, that's a great reason to get out of bed everyday.

Jim Sciotto: [35:45](#)

Yeah, I met it just in my own experience. The access had been provided in India, Intel agencies. That was the answer I get and I certainly hear that and I think it's backed up by practice. Uh, other folks in the audience here, um, gentleman here, the white truck.

Audience Member: [36:06](#)

Thank you. Uh, General Ashley, uh, in your assets and the work and the, Oh, the, the material and everything that you have. What do you do if you find some commercial or private sector hacking? Do you coordinate with anybody? I'm talking about Microsoft and Marriott visa. Uh, you have the capacity to find some of those things. Do, is there a reporting mechanism to somebody run, uh, that occurs between the military and the private sector? Yes, sir. He said if we find a hacking or some, yeah, correct. So let me expand that a little bit because the answer short answer is yes. So we in really a journal Nakasone and an escrowed agency has a huge part of that. One of the things we do for the defense intelligence agency is we're

involved in the committee on foreign investment in the u s the [inaudible] process. And we also have a very rigorous effort that looks at supply chain risk management.

- Robert Ashley: [37:06](#) And so if it turns out, you know, Ashley software does a subcontract a, you know, to Jim's company and he turns out that, that he's got a relationship with Walway, you know, we look for those relationships and whether it may be very two or three tiers down or an individual. So we get a chance to look at what's in the public domain and we get a chance to look at a classified traffic so that we look for those relationships if there is a nefarious actor, if, if somebody had a subcontract Kaspersky labs to do the industrial control system software. So we look for all of that and then we report all that back up, uh, to our charter leadership so that if it's necessary, um, a company comes off the journal, Senate journals, uh, services administration list they don't do business with anymore and they report it and they borrow them. Or if it's a major corporation, then you know, through our leadership they will go back to that company and go, hey, we found the following. So there's, we're, we're always looking for those vulnerabilities from a counter children's standpoint, supply chain risk management investments in the u s uh, that, that is a, uh, that is a constant drum beat for us. And, and it's only growing.
- Speaker 1: [38:14](#) Okay.
- Jim Sciutto: [38:16](#) Oftentimes the, at the line between commercial and national security is blurred because, you know, commercial entities supplying key national security interest in products. Julian,
- Robert Ashley: [38:34](#) thank you very much Julian. A New York
- Audience Member: [38:36](#) Times. Uh, I wanted to follow up on Jim's, uh, space question to you and I wanted to see if you could talk a little bit more about that and what you see the threat picture from China, Russia, potential other potential adversaries. Is this only in the context of a actual conflict between the United States and another adversary? Or could this threat emerge in this gray zone, the hybrid zone in a, in a sort of set of tension, short of a, a military conflict in, in what, in what scenarios are our space assets in danger.
- Robert Ashley: [39:13](#) So you could have something that's non-kinetic you have the ability to take a laser, uh, from the ground they could go after and let their optical sensor and just blind out when it was making a Passover given geographic area. You're not, you're not, you know, you're not permanently damaging it, but there's

ways to do things along those lines so that that kind of activity could take place on the kinetic side. And one of the things I wanted to allude to in Jim puts the sentence book, which is a great read by the way. I made sure I had a chance to read it before we sat down and had a chat, which she talks about the risk of the debris that you create in space. And it's not just for utilization in the low earth orbit or the Geo belt, but just further exploration, getting out past that.

Robert Ashley: [39:57](#) Uh, one of the things that we put in the challenges in space was the highlight there. Right now I think it's in a, across the, the main nations, there's nine different nations that can watch satellites and they can launch satellites for other people. Uh, but if there's nine nations, there's about 1800 spacecraft. Uh, they're up there float floating around and there's some decommissions, uh, aircraft that are floating around. But at the size of 10 centimeters or larger debris that we track, there are 21,000 pieces of stuff that's at least tens of meters or larger that's floating around the earth. Matter of fact, um, I think it was the space station we were talking about over a period about a 20 year period. They've actually had to get out of the way about 25 times.

Jim Sciotto: [40:50](#) Yeah, the, I remember that and I was not a physics student but, but one thing that fascinated me was you, you take a a nut, say it all loose nut around in space at 17 and a half thousand miles an hour, uh, is the equivalent of an SUV hitting used so that the destructive impact of even very small pieces of debris and then you render those orbits useless for for many years. Yeah.

Robert Ashley: [41:10](#) And not all that stuff is um, de orbiting. Obviously as quickly as we were like you know, the Indians, there was earlier this year, uh, launch launched, any set hit it hit a spacecraft. Um, I'll have to check but I don't think all of that is d orbited. So we've got to be really responsible in that space. No Pun intended.

Jim Sciotto: [41:30](#) We have five minutes ago. Would love to squeeze in a couple quick ones if we can. Gentlemen in the back of your blue shirt, low speed and then then over to you here. If we could do it in the interest of time, if you don't mind giving a quick, quick question and then you, and then I'll ask the general to answer them in succession.

Audience Member: [41:45](#) Sure. General Ashley, I want wanted to ask you about, uh, the story that broke this morning from the ft that uh, NSO, these Reiley Intel company is now selling a service that can effectively steal all the cloud data held by users. They already offer a service for called Pegasus, which could hack your iPhone. A lot



of these technologies are being developed by US personnel using, I see people using ex US technology housed in some of our allied countries. Should the U S is it in our interest that private companies are selling effectively taxpayer created technology and knowhow and do need more export controls to make sure this technology and ex official knowledge is going overseas.

Jim Sciotto: [42:28](#)

Tell you what, why don't there's a lot in that one against that and then we'll come to you just so I can get all lost in the mix.

Robert Ashley: [42:37](#)

Well, while you're looking for the next guy real quick. Yeah, I mean I, I can't unpack that in detail. Obviously the senior policy maker there, their decision to be made to what degree of a risk we're willing to absorb. But you put, you're bringing up a good point and understand that that is in fact happening. So senior decision makers need to embrace that and make it easy and have a possible determination on the way ahead over here. Thanks. Hi, I'm calling bell, I'm a former US ambassador to Hungary. And my question for you is how do we balance the need to share intelligence with our allies with unfortunately some kind of malign influence from some of our adversaries within those countries. How, how are, how do we best balance that threat? So man, thanks for the question and that's a good one cause I haven't really talked about the relationships with partners.

Robert Ashley: [43:24](#)

So if you go to the national defense strategy, there's three major lines of effort. Secretary Mattis talked about being more lethal, fixing our business practices become more efficient. And one was we have to expand the space for allies and partners beyond really the traditional and the defense intelligence agency has done that in a lot of ways with non traditional bilateral relationships. Uh, they get into intelligence operations and sharing. What we have to do in every one of those situations is understanding what is the risk, what is the counterintelligence risk to the information that we're sharing, irrespective of whatever that that country is. So we do our homework and in many cases are reciprocating the sharing of information is they have to demonstrate to us their ability to secure it. And then you can have a degree of reciprocity and then depending on the ability to secure it, how we assessed the counterintelligence threat gets into the level of sensitivity of information that we can share with them.

Jim Sciotto: [44:17](#)

I think we actually have time for one more quick one. I don't want to waste any time anybody [inaudible] all right. Yeah.

Robert Ashley: [44:24](#) And those decisions are national policy,

Jim Sciutto: [44:28](#) uh, Damn gentlemen right here. Do you know it was,

Audience Member: [44:33](#) um, what's your thoughts as we're getting ready to deploy in excess of 10,000 Leo comm satellites with space ex and everybody else running behind them could be 20,000. What's your thought about all that

Robert Ashley: [44:49](#) lying around? It's going to be very busy. Um, so one of the things, and it's, and, and this is the capability that I think collectively across, uh, great powers, great nations and our scientists, we need to figure out how do we police up that debris? Yeah. You know, that's not a wicked problem. It's a, it's a math problem. And so as, as it gets more, you know, the, the, the small cube sats and everything that goes up there know, part of that is buying a strategy of having resilience in redundancy, uh, in addition to what NRO does to be able to have a capability in the commercial space. But it is not impossible. It will be something that I'm sure we can solve. But we have to dedicate, um, assets and resources to figure out how we actually go up and police start policing up those 21,000 various pieces of debris that existing.

Audience Member: [45:44](#) Hello. Okay. So there was an article about this six, eight years ago highlighting that there should be a destruction in the sense of non-kinetic, but putting them back into the atmosphere to force them to put that onto those birds so that they can decommission them and move them out of space never happened.

Robert Ashley: [46:03](#) Yeah, I mean, there's, again, there's no logical ways to iterate that clutter and the decommission in the deorbit.

Jim Sciutto: [46:12](#) All right, well, I think that just leaves the guitar Solo. I think if, uh, we squeeze that in now with sincerity. Thank you. Because you're taking an undue burden here because they, we're kind of throwing all policy and Admin and news questions on your shoulders, but, but thanks for, thanks for taking the time. Thanks for taking quest.

Speaker 7: [46:41](#) We will, we will now

Jim Sciutto: [46:43](#) take a 10 minute break and restart at two 30 promptly.