

National Security Leaders Underscore Need to Move at the Speed of Technology

For 11th Year, Defense Innovation Days Fosters Increased Collaboration in the Defense Industry

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NEWPORT, R.I. – SENEDIA, the Alliance for Defense Tech, Talent, and Innovation, yesterday concluded Defense Innovation Days, a signature national event that attracted nearly 400 of the most important decisionmakers and innovators in the defense industry.

“It is more important today than any time in our history that we have the capacity and skills to not only be competitive with other countries, but to far exceed them,” said Senator Jack Reed (RI), Ranking Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Reed called on the defense industry leaders in attendance to continue to advance American innovation and security. “What you do ultimately ensures the safety and security of our men and women in uniform across the world. This is a common purpose we share.”

Distinguished speakers at the 11th annual sold-out event represented decades of experience across Navy, Army, Marine Corps, and private sector service, including RDML Peter Small, Chief Engineer and Commander of NAVSEA Warfare Centers; Dr. Andrew Erickson, Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute; Dr. Michael Winter, Chief Scientist, RTX; COL David Brown (ret.), Naval War College Center for Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups; LtGen Eric E. Austin, Deputy Commander, Combat Development and Integration, US Marine Corps Combat Development Command, and BG Chris Hackler, Deputy Commanding General, US Army Combat Capabilities Development Command.

Panels included “Future of the Surface Navy and Hybrid Fleet” and “Mastering the Depths: Navigating the Engineering Battlespace.”

Key takeaways from this year’s event are:

- The threat landscape is rapidly evolving, including the unprecedented acceleration of China’s military capabilities and a global rise in authoritarianism.
- Innovation in autonomous vehicles and undersea technology is essential to stay competitive and has redefined traditional warfare.
- The foundation for increased collaboration and innovation exists, and equally important must be the focus on scaling and speed to execution. The priority is a nimble and responsive defense ecosystem that can quickly get new and interoperable technologies into the hands of warfighters.

“More than a decade after we hosted the first Defense Innovation Days, SENEDIA continues to see the critical need to bring together industry and government, civilian and military leaders to connect, collaborate with one another, and ultimately innovate in service of our national security,” said Molly Donohue Magee, Chief Executive Officer of SENEDIA. “Investing in defense is an economic, workforce, and national security imperative.”

More from Defense Innovation Days

An Increasingly Challenging and Complex Environment

Rapid advancements in technology have made internal research and development processes more challenging and increased

external and geopolitical pressures have likewise made the warfighting landscape more complex. A rise in authoritarianism around the globe represents a threat to American democracy – including from China.

Returning to Defense Innovation Days, Dr. Erickson provided a deep dive into changes in the Chinese military. He said that Chinese leader Xi Jinping has removed large numbers of military, defense, and political officials, but warned that it does not signal a slowdown. To the contrary, Erickson called it “the most dramatic military build-up since World War II.”

“China’s military capabilities development and operational readiness are clearly advancing rapidly across the board,” he said. “The speed and scope are breathtaking. That is what needs to inform our dedication, our sense of purpose, and the missions to which we are directed.”

Several speakers noted the importance of the workforce to maintain American dominance.

“The Navy faces an urgent imperative to increase our capabilities, and our people are our biggest asset,” said RDML Small. “It’s not just the trades we need to strengthen. We need to rebuild the national maritime engineering workforce. A tremendous national effort to rebuild this workforce is underway.”

The Unmanned and Undersea Advantage

The United States submarine program is widely viewed as the greatest deterrent to American adversaries, and two panel discussions focused on undersea challenges and opportunities in an ever-changing maritime landscape. Several speakers used the ongoing conflict in the Black Sea as an illustration of how maritime strategy is changing, where Ukraine has used naval drones to stave off a strong Russian Navy.

The Mastering the Depths panel was moderated by Marie

Bussiere, the Technical Director of the Naval Undersea Warfare Center, Division Newport. She was joined on the stage by NUWC colleagues Mark Vacarro, Director of the Subsea and Seabed Warfare SSTM; Steve Plunkett, Next Generation Weapons and Defensive Systems SSTM; Steve Lamb, Chief of the Contracting Office, and CDR Shawn Stelzel of the Undersea Warfighting Development Center.

Collectively, they urged industry leaders – especially those who have yet to engage with NUWC – to consider delivering their best-in-class tools and technology for defense applications.

“To maintain the undersea advantage, we need to get solutions into the hands of the fleet faster,” Bussiere said.

On the Future of the Surface Navy and Hybrid Fleet panel, CAPT Colin Corridan (ret.), the former leader of Task Force 59, the Navy’s first maritime robotics and AI task force, moderated a panel that included Commander David Brannighan, Royal Navy, British Defence Staff USA, and Austin Gray, Co-Founder and CSO, Blue Water Autonomy.

One takeaway of the panel included a charge to industry to apply their solutions to national security and help ensure a high-low procurement strategy that is diversified between advanced yet expensive high-end systems and cheaper, more flexible low-end systems.

Moving at the Speed of Technology

Across all three days, multiple speakers talked about the need to move faster – from harnessing AI and new technology to developing and quickly scaling new capabilities – to ensure our warfighters have the systems and tools they need when they need them.

Just as undersea technology has changed the maritime landscape, COL Brown (ret.) pointed to drones as a comparable

example of how airpower has been democratized. Beyond weapons, he also warned about disinformation as a weapon of war and how increasingly convincing deepfakes are making it difficult for military leaders and civilians alike to distinguish the truth.

“We are entering an era of breathtaking technological advancement,” he said. “The warning of history is clear: Unless we adapt, the upheavals of the last century may pale in comparison to what lies ahead.”

LtGen Austin and BG Hackler agreed on the importance of government and industry collaboration.

Speed to execution must consider future changes in technology. Dr. Winter shared that RTX has introduced a new military engine nearly every decade over the last century. Looking forward, RTX and other Primes – as well as the supply chain companies that support them – must bring together the digital thread, relying on model-based systems engineering that allows for greater efficiency and responsiveness.

“It is critical that we build these tools with enough longevity and enough forethought,” he said.

Other speakers featured at Defense Innovation Days included Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (RI), Congressman Seth Magaziner (RI-02); and Congressman Gabe Amo (RI-01).

Thanks to Our Sponsors

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