Global challenges at forefront of security and defense event

ASU 1 of 3 universities that form Security & Defence PLuS partnership

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
March 3, 2026

It didn't take long Monday for Ian Langford, executive director for Security & Defence PLuS, to explain why his organization's strategic partnership with Arizona State University, King's College London and the University of New South Wales, is vital.

The partnership combines the strengths of the three universities on three continents to help identify and solve global challenges.

"This year, we have lurched from one political crisis to another, whether it's security around Greenland, the idea of European defense in the context of a persistent Russian threat or the resurgence of violence and conflict in the Middle East," said Langford, speaking at the launch of the Emerging Voices Series: Strategy, Security and Defense at ASU.

"We are very much focused on education, research partnerships and increasingly leadership pathways to give the universities not only a platform to be able to support the understanding of problems, but also their solutions."

The one-day event, held at the Fulton Center on Arizona State University's Tempe campus, featured a keynote fireside speech by U.S. Rep. Greg Stanton of Arizona and several panel discussions looking at topics such as international cooperation, infrastructure and national resilience, space and artificial intelligence.

In his speech, Stanton praised ASU, using the semiconductor industry as an example of how the university positively impacts Arizona's economics.

"There's probably no stronger relationship between a single university and the success of a community," he said. "We are the semiconductor leader in the United States of America, the most important industry for the advanced economy and for our military advancement as well. So, we're lucky to have ASU here."

In terms of national security, Stanton said America's leaders need to understand that the U.S.' interconnectedness with the rest of the world is not "a distraction, but an operational reality."

"We are now four years into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine," Stanton said. "And the lessons for U.S. national security are profound. (Our) alliance with NATO has proven indispensable. Our partners have stepped up, new members have joined the collective defense and, in many ways, that has mattered."

Stanton said congressional Democrats and Republicans often "disagree sharply" on world issues but the goal of creating a strong security environment is shared by each political party.

"As long as important global institutions like ASU, Kings College and the University of New South Wales keep producing the kind of sharp, creative, multidisciplinary thinkers that this moment demands … we have a fighting chance to accomplish that goal," he said.

'Experience, Innovation and Leadership in a Changing Security Environment'

The first panel of the event was moderated by Kristin Lord, ASU's vice president of global strategy and engagement.

"We're talking about geopolitics, we're talking about national security policy and national interests," Lord said. "I'm sure everyone's favorite letters, AI, will come up today.

"But this also is about the human factors, about leadership, about organizational culture, and how do we actually form the kinds of leaders and organizational culture that will allow us to be innovative, to be adaptive and to really meet these challenges as they're evolving."

Mariam Kvaratskhelia, research associate in the Future Security Scenarios Lab of New America, said continuing advances in technology — and not knowing for sure what technology will look like in the future — have created challenges for policymakers.

"I think crafting sound strategy requires us to really master the skill of imagination, to be able to confront futures that feel impossible or unimaginable," Kvaratskhelia said. "Arguably, the ability to imagine matters much more today than it did at any other point in the past because I think if there's one word that describes today's strategic environment, it's certainly speed."

Lord asked the panelists what advice they would give leaders who are trying to deal with the "rapidly changing environment." Retired United States Air Force Lt. Gen. Jen Short said humility and adaptability are vital.

"Things are happening so fast and things are so de-centralized that we're not going to be able to just rely on folks to be following a checklist," Short said. "Events are going to change so fast that you may not necessarily get that precise step-by-step guidance that you were used to. So we need thinkers out there.

"I think you also need to show up with intellectual humility in the sense that you show up to have a conversation. You have to show folks that you're willing to listen and willing to change course if they have a better idea. Are you humble enough to say, 'Hey, maybe I have this wrong?'"

Fireside chat

Chris Howard, ASU's executive vice president and chief operating officer, moderated a discussion on AUKUS, the 2021 defense partnership between the U.S., Australia and the United Kingdom that aims to counter China's growing influence and military strength in the Indo-Pacific by providing Australia with nuclear-powered, conventionally armed submarines.

"To be doing this right now, when people are openly engaged in combat (in the Middle East), it's a big deal," Howard said. "I think the importance of national security objectives, a national military strategy, a national defense strategy, a day-two strategy, comes from places like this.

"It emanates from people that are deeply, deeply rooted in the discipline of national security."

Abraham Denmark, partner in the strategic advisory firm Asia Group and former senior advisor to the secretary of defense, said agreements like AUKUS are necessary to address strategic challenges and noted that China's opposition to AUKUS is telling.

"There's no better endorsement of the deterrent effect that AUKUS is going to have than the robust opposition that we've seen to it," he said. "What (China) has tried to do to sow disinformation about what AUKUS is and isn't should give us some degree of comfort that we're moving in the right direction."

Denmark said that as companies, factories and eventually shipyards are created in Australia, they can contribute to the U.S. supply chain.

"And that is when you really start cooking with gas in terms of enhancing the capacity of all three countries to meet the demand requirements that we have," he said.

'Critical Infrastructure and Natural Resilience'

Another panel, moderated by Alicia Ellis, director of the Master of Arts in ASU's global security program, focused on infrastructure — a topic that often isn't talked about as being important to national security.

"I'm really excited to host this because we talk a lot about how the front lines of contemporary conflict and competition isn't always, or even often, the military," Ellis said. "It's supply chain disruptions. It's economic warfare. It's control of information and narrative. It's people who build energy systems and the critical materials around which our economy and way of life is based."

One of those front lines, said Deniz Berfin Karakoc, assistant professor in the School of Computing and Augmented Intelligence, is food.

"For national defense, our national well-being and economic stability, we can not go without a resilient agriculture and food system," Karakoc said. "We've seen with the Russia and Ukraine war that food has been mechanized during war times, not just as a human need but to also have an economic impact on your country."

Ali Torabi, CEO of the Tempe-based firm Lawrence Semi-Conductors, said semiconductor technology and infrastructure is “not just adjacent to defense technology. It is defense technology.”

ASU is a major hub for semiconductor research, education and industry collaboration, featuring specialized facilities like MacroTechnology Works and NanoFab.

“Companies and countries and ecosystems that control the most advanced AI and quantum technology are going to be able to dominate the economic hemisphere but also leverage all that capability on the battlefield,” Torabi said.

‘Strategic Frontiers: Space, AI and the Future of Defense’

Nadya Bliss, executive director of the Advanced Capabilities for National Security Institute at ASU and moderator of a panel on space and defense, noted the university’s role in national security.

“Fun fact about ASU,” Bliss said. “Our Pentagon portfolio is only second to the National Science Foundation portfolio in terms of size.”

Bliss asked panelist Laurie Leshin, former director of NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory and now a University Professor for Space Futures, how ASU’s role in civilian space exploration could intersect with national security priorities.

“Civil space and defense space need to be aligned. Not integrated, but aligned,” Leshin said. “And they need to be talking about common goals.”

Leshin added that universities like ASU that do everything from research to workforce development to “big thinking” can play a critical role in that alignment.

Lynndy Smith, president and CEO of the Arizona Defense and Industry Coalition, said one issue that needs to be addressed is how to take the technologies and innovations being produced by universities and prototype them to actual development and scale.

“One of the things I hear from a lot of our smaller startup companies is that they may have had an initial win to develop a prototype or test it, but to get to scaled manufacturing is where they tend to get lost,” Smith said. “That’s an area where I think partnerships with universities could really be beneficial in educating startups on how to go to that next level.”

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image

Kristin Lord (far left), ASU vice president of global strategy and engagement, moderates a panel titled "Experience, Innovation and Leadership in a Changing Security Environment" with (from left): retired Lt. Gen. Jennifer Short, U.S. Air Force; James Carouso, Center for Strategic and International Studies senior advisor and senior U.S. diplomat; Mariam Kvaratskhelia, researcher with the Future Security Scenarios Lab, New America; and Ryan Leavitt, an ASU PhD candidate in political science and lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force. The panel was part of the Emerging Voices Series: Strategy, Security and Defense held at Arizona State University on March 2. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)

U.S. Rep. for Arizona Greg Stanton (right) delivers his remarks during a keynote discussion with Lily McElwee, from the Phoenix Committee on Foreign Relations, moderated by Ian Langford (left), executive director of Security & Defence PLuS. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

From left: Noelle Troutman, assistant professor of political science at the University of Northern Iowa; Chris Howard, ASU executive vice president and COO; and Abraham Denmark, partner in Asia Group and former senior advisor to the secretary of defense, take part in the afternoon fireside panel during the Emerging Voices Series: Strategy, Security and Defense event held at ASU on March 2. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Moderator Nadya Bliss (far left), executive director of ASU’s Advanced Capabilities for National Security Institute, leads panelists Laurie Leshin, ASU’s University Professor for Space Futures and former director of NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory; Assistant Professor Hannah Kerner, from the School of Computing and Augmented Intelligence; Myke Cohen, an ASU PhD student in human systems engineering and an associate scientist at Aptima Inc.; and Lynndy Smith, president and CEO of the Arizona Defense and Industry Coalition, as they discuss "Strategic Frontiers: Space, AI, and the Future of Defense" at the Emerging Voices Series event held at ASU on March 2. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News