Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, speaking to the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, laid out a ‘Robust’ AI development strategy: “We’re going to compete to win, but we’re going to do it the right way. We’re not going to cut corners on safety, security or ethics.”

Austin noted that the Defense Department’s data and calculations are the most complex in the world, and that artificial intelligence, or AI, has the potential to help the department “lead the department into and through the AI revolution.”

Enabling warfighters will mean getting the right people on board to make it happen, Austin said. That’s not just civilian experts on the topic; it means enabling warfighters to think analytically and predict outcomes.

The department’s “responsible AI” effort, Austin said, is at the center of this strategy. We need to more vigorously recruit talented people and not scare them away. DOD is going to have to do a lot better at recruiting, training, and retaining talented people — which are often young people — who can help lead the department into and through the AI revolution. That means creating new career paths and new incentives. And it means including tech skills as a part of basic-training programs. That added training is an algorithm-driven system to help the department better defend our privacy.

Also included in the current AI efforts is the Pathfinder Project, which allows the department to incorporate real-world feedback on AI’s performance in almost real time. Also included there is Project Salus, which began in March 2020 in the midst of the COVID pandemic. This project helped the Defense Department use AI to rapidly identify and target COVID-19 hot spots, allocate medical supplies, and determine vaccine doses.

Austin said, “The Defense Department’s use of AI, will enhance its military operations, which is why those efforts are being pursued.”

Austin said there are three elements to the department’s AI approach: a strong understanding of the limitations of AI; the commitment to doing the right thing; and ensuring the DOD does AI the right way. We’re not going to cut corners on safety, security or ethics. We’re going to compete to win, but we’re going to do it the right way. We’re not going to sacrifice our future force to the laws of war.

Austin said, “We need a responsible AI approach.” To that end, the department is focusing on developing better ethical principles. He said “We want to innovate, but we have to innovate the right way.”

Austin noted that China is pacing the U.S. and other countries. The U.S. military has its sights on the same target, Austin said. But its approach is going to be different. Austin said that the Department of Defense’s use of AI is an algorithm-driven system that helps the department better defend our privacy.