

US politics & policy

Pete Hegseth's sudden military summit stirs concern and speculation

US defence secretary calls top brass to Virginia for highly unusual meeting



US defence secretary Pete Hegseth will be addressing his senior military leaders early next week, according to the Pentagon © AP

Steff Chávez in Washington

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US defence secretary Pete Hegseth has sparked widespread concern among defence experts and military officers with an abrupt decision to summon hundreds of generals and admirals to Virginia next week.

The highly unusual meeting has been shrouded in mystery and intrigue given the invitees are unclear of the agenda.

It has also prompted alarm over the risks to active operations and the military's ability to respond to any attacks that come with calling so many senior officers away from their commands simultaneously.

Hundreds of general and flag officers — generals and admirals with one to four stars — have been ordered to assemble in Virginia, along with their top enlisted advisers, according to a US defence official. There were 838 active duty general and flag officers — including 446 of the higher-ranking two-, three- and four-stars — as of June,

according to the Pentagon, though the exact number called for Hegseth's meeting was unclear.

[Hegseth](#) “will be addressing his senior military leaders early next week”, said chief Pentagon spokesperson Sean Parnell. The Pentagon did not give any more details about the meeting, which was first reported by the Washington Post.

A congressional aide said: “We understand this will be like a pep rally to talk culture.”

“I’m hearing it’s a flex by [Hegseth], showing he can call them all to heel,” said Kori Schake, a former director for defence strategy on the National Security Council, now at the American Enterprise Institute.

“Since it’s all commanders and their sergeants major, it’s likelier about the secretary’s obsession with a warrior ethos and grooming standards” than strategy, she added.

Other theories for its purpose range from the unveiling of the highly anticipated national defence strategy, to a demand for loyalty to President Donald Trump or a purge of the military’s top ranks, according to former defence officials.

After lawmakers on Capitol Hill asked for details about the September 30 meeting, the Pentagon wrote to Congress to say Hegseth “will use this engagement to provide DoD’s most senior service members his intent for the department”, according to the congressional aide.

He also intends to give the gathered officers guidance about implementing equal opportunity reform, fitness standards and other topics. The Pentagon also told lawmakers the meeting would have no effect on current operations or disrupt the armed forces.

Ben Hodges, the former commanding general of US Army Europe, wrote on X on Friday that in “July 1935 German generals were called to a surprise assembly in Berlin and informed that their previous oath to the Weimar constitution was void and that they would be required to swear a personal oath to the Führer. Most generals took the new oath to keep their positions.”

A couple of hours later, Hegseth responded: “cool story, general”.

The meeting was “reckless” and “obviously extremely dramatic”, said Michael O’Hanlon, a defence strategy expert at the Brookings Institution think-tank who served on the Pentagon’s defence policy board.

Mark Cancian, a former Pentagon official now at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think-tank, said: “I think a big thing is that [Hegseth] is going to exhort his senior officers . . . tell them that he expects loyalty” and for “them to carry out the president’s programme, without dissension and that if they can’t do that, they should retire.”

Such a meeting would “be very uncomfortable for the senior officers, because on the one hand, they swore an oath to the constitution [and] on the other hand, they are under the command” of the president, Cancian added.

The meeting comes after Hegseth in May ordered a 20 per cent reduction in four-star generals and a 10 per cent cut in all general and flag officers.

The Trump administration has also fired 14 top military officers during the president’s second term as part of a wider national security purge.

Hegseth has sacked the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, General CQ Brown, chief of naval operations Admiral Lisa Franchetti and coastguard commandant Admiral Linda Fagan.

The administration also fired General Timothy Haugh, the National Security Agency director, and his deputy, along with Defense Intelligence Agency director Lieutenant General Jeffrey Kruse.

The gathering was “jeopardising the potential for proper command and control when you have no idea if a crisis will erupt, and now our potential adversaries have five days to plan whatever shenanigans they may want to attempt”, said O’Hanlon, though he was not predicting an attack would occur.

As for the meeting itself, “it seems like theatre more than anything else”, he added.

US vice-president JD Vance dismissed the hype over the meeting on Thursday, saying, “It’s not particularly unusual that generals . . . are coming to speak with” Hegseth. Next to him, Trump wondered, “is it a big story?”

While combatant commanders come to Washington twice a year, this particular meeting was “very unusual”, said Cancian. The size, limited preparation time and lack of set agenda made it “unprecedented”.

The meeting could be about the national defence strategy, which is widely expected to be released soon and to shift the priority to the homeland and western hemisphere and away from China and Russia. Hegseth could also talk about organisational changes such as combining the European and Africa commands.

One former defence official said pulling so many senior officers away from their duties highlighted a “growing frustration” among the military’s senior leaders that “red tape and inefficiency is getting worse”, despite the administration’s goal to slash bureaucracy.

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