

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Smart Women, Smart Power
“The 2022 National Defense Strategy”

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FEATURING

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Kathleen
McInnis: This is Smart Women, Smart Power, a podcast that features conversations with some of the world's most powerful women.

Hon. Mara
Karlin: The focus of this National Defense Strategy, the kind of central premise, if you will, is the urgent need to sustain and strengthen deterrence with the People's Republic of China as the pacing challenge.

Kathleen
McInnis: We feature thought leaders at all career levels, where we explore, among other things, the many contributions that women make to the fields of international business, national security, foreign policy, and international development. Does having women in positions of power influence the outcomes of decisions in these fields? Why or why not? Join me, Dr. Kathleen McInnis, director of the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies for these incredible conversations.

Today, I am honored to welcome Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities. Dr. Mara Karlin on the Smart Women, Smart Power podcast.

In her current role in the Pentagon, Dr. Mara Karlin ensures that the Department of Defense's program and budget decisions support and advanced senior DoD leaders strategic direction, especially as articulated in things like defense planning guidance. Prior to being the assistant secretary of defense, she served in a variety of different capacities across the national security community as a civil servant in the Department of Defense as a deputy assistant secretary, and also as a director of one of the key programs at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

With all of that background and experience, she's had an enormous hand in the recent publication of the 2022 National Defense Strategy, which we're going to be diving into in this conversation. Mara, thank you so much for being here today. I can't tell you how thrilled we are to have you.

Hon. Mara
Karlin: Thank you! It is such a treat to be here, and always to see another OSD policy alum.

Kathleen
McInnis: So, here at the Smart Women, Smart Power podcast, we love to start with people's origin stories. So first question is, what got you into this field of national security? What drew you to this wacky world?

Hon. Mara
Karlin: Gosh, I would love to tell you that there's this very linear story that makes a lot of sense, but it is pretty circuitous, to be frank.

I grew up in Wisconsin. I didn't know anyone who did anything in the U.S. government, who did anything with international relations, that wasn't even really in my schema, but I was always pretty interested in the world. My family is originally from Iran, so I was always just kind of intrigued by the Middle East, in particular. And when I was in college, I spent a year studying abroad, and it was a pretty fascinating year where I spent a bunch of time going around Asia and the Middle East. And what was notable is it was the height of the peace process in the Middle East. And, so, I was sitting in all my classes and learning from all these smart folks about this trajectory that the Middle East was on.

And then I came home and it turned out they were totally wrong. The Middle East was not on that trajectory at all. The Second Intifada erupted, and for a whole bunch of reasons, we actually saw the Middle East go into a very different place, and I couldn't understand why or what was going on. I decided that I wanted to learn more. And I came to Washington and I started getting pretty interested in security issues, as they relate to the Middle East, based on that first hook. And then the more I learned, the more I realized, "Wow, there is so much out there to discover." There's other regions that I find fascinating. There's defense strategy and force development, which is fascinating. And I've kind of just been into it ever since.

Kathleen
McInnis:

That's so interesting. That the fact that the theory didn't comport with expectations, that it was just like totally, actually no, everything was wrong.

Hon. Mara
Karlín:

And in quite a spectacular way. I mean that's what was just so astonishing. This was, if you've spent any time kind of looking in, in Middle East peace processes, I mean, I left right before what was going to be like the final moment where all of the decisions would be made and, you know, not to be too butterflies and unicorns about it, but there was sort of this view by some folks in the region of such a different vision. And again, for a whole bunch of reasons that spectacularly failed. And yeah, it was just that curiosity of why? And what does it mean? And also what does it mean for the United States? September 11th attacks happened about a year and a half after that. And so that only kind of furthered my fascination with trying to understand how, and in what ways, do we have like a sustainable and effective approach to Middle East security?

Kathleen
McInnis:

To move over to the National Defense Strategy, and your role in it. For those listeners who don't know what the NDS is, it's the major strategy document for the Department of Defense that's released -- give or take -- every four years and acts as the overall framework for which the defense budget and defense priorities are articulated and managed

across the Pentagon. So the first question is, what are the key takeaways that you hope people reading this, you know, the NDS have?

Hon. Mara
Karlin:

Thanks for that. You know, I would probably highlight two key takeaways. First of all, you mentioned kind of what the National Defense Strategy is, and so Congress of course requires the Department of Defense every four years to step back and say, what are we trying to do? And ideally, how do we tie our resources to it? So that's the National Defense Strategy.

We also end up having to do a bunch of other strategies, and two of the big ones are the Nuclear Posture Review, right? How in what ways do we think about nuclear weapons? And then the Missile Defense Review, which is as the name makes it sound. So take away number one: for the very first time in Department of Defense history, all the major reviews were done together. It was one cohort of folks that was working on the National Defense Strategy, the Nuclear Posture Review, and the Missile Defense Review.

Kathleen
McInnis:

That's no small feat. (Laughs.) Right? Getting the Pentagon to do anything at the same time is hard. So—

Hon. Mara
Karlin:

It's a really big deal. But when you step back, of course it's how we should do it, right? Of course, intellectually we should have that consistency. We should have that approach to resources that is also consistent when we're thinking about the tools in the U.S. Department of Defense's toolkit, of course, you would want to look at them all together. And yet what often happens is that they're done in these stovepipes, right? So a review happens then after some period of time, another review happens, et cetera, et cetera. So that wasn't the case here, and that is a really big deal, as you note. The fact that that was integrated, it really did mean that we were able to step back and help the secretary understand across the board how, in what ways do we see the security landscape changing, and what are the tools that we can bring to bear to deal with that landscape?

So key takeaway number one: all of the major reviews were done together. Key takeaway number two is really the focus of this National Defense Strategy. The kind of central premise, if you will, is the urgent need to sustain and strengthen deterrence with the People's Republic of China as the pacing challenge. And so what you see in this strategy is some serious prioritization that is really focused on the People's Republic of China.

And I can get into kind of the different approaches that we have to try and trying to get at that. But the bottom line is no other country in the

world has the intent, and increasingly the capability, to systematically challenge the United States across the board and to reshape the international security environment. And that's militarily, economically, technologically, and diplomatically.

So those are really two big key takeaways. I would emphasize, though, we know Russia is an acute threat, and I use that word acute pretty deliberately. It's immediate, it's sharp. Unlike the People's Republic of China, Russia cannot systematically challenge the United States over the long term, but we can absolutely see how Russian aggression threatens U.S. interests. We are of course, unfortunately, seeing this with its irresponsible and reckless war against Ukraine. And we have also seen in that war the tremendous capabilities of the Department of Defense, the U.S. interagency, and our allies and partners, and the support that Ukraine has gotten, and I suspect this really resonates with you as someone who used to work on Europe issues here, the support that Ukraine has gotten across that board is just frankly nothing short of extraordinary. And it is why we are able to sit here so many months into this conflict and see just their tremendous capabilities.

Kathleen
McInnis:

Now, returning to the integrated nature of the review process, because I just want to make one further comment or, and draw your insights out on nuclear weapons in particular, have tended to be the sort of intellectual exercise that sort of happens in the abstract and the integration of nuclear capabilities into broader defense thinking. It hasn't really happened, in my view, in a satisfying way in a very long time. So did you find that as part of the conducting of these reviews simultaneously, that the nuclear dimensions of security policy can be better accounted for, integrated into the bloodstream of the Pentagon as opposed to this sort of like add-on this we sort of talk about later?

Hon. Mara
Karlin:

Absolutely. And it's so important, not least because we see how Russia has invested in its nuclear capabilities. We see the People's Republic of China that has invested in its nuclear capabilities and continues to do so. And so this is actually a challenge that hasn't existed historically, where you have two nuclear powers that are investing in, you know, modernizing their nuclear capabilities. And we're really used to thinking of this as much more of a binary game, right? That's what we did during the Cold War, but now you've got a three-party game. So that actually looks a little bit different. And in fact, we all need to do a whole lot of thinking about trying to understand that. I think it was especially useful because as you note, oftentimes nuclear weapons can be just seen in entirely their own bucket. And to be very clear, they're special and they're unique, and yet we nevertheless need to understand how and in what ways they interact with all of the other tools in the toolkit.

So I think it was important to do these together because of the changes that we see, particularly in terms of the investments made by our challengers, but also because we need to ensure we have a holistic understanding of all of the capabilities that the U.S. military brings to bare in conflict and crisis.

Kathleen
McInnis:

Well, you mentioned that China is the pacing challenge and, and the need to sustain and strengthen U.S. deterrents against China. And you're speaking with, Dr. Bonny Lin, on the CSIS ChinaPower Project podcast. So for our audience, check out the podcast there for the discussion on China.

I would like to ask, particularly as an old Europe hand, what does this emphasis on China mean for U.S. defense priorities in Europe and the Middle East? There's only so much there, there. How are you thinking about the trade-offs between the different theaters?

Hon. Mara
Karin:

Absolutely. As I noted, there's really no other country that's got really that intent in increasingly the capability to reshape that international system, the way the People's Republic of China has.

And I underscore this point on the international system, this is not a story of the United States, it's not the story of the Indo-Pacific. It's actually a global story. And I highlight that because in your question, you had inquired in particular about how in what ways Europe might be involved here or how the Middle East might be involved here. And we see some interesting tying together of two of those regions of Europe and the Indo-Pacific, increasingly. As you know, at the Madrid Summit, for example, we had four Asian allies that came and joined it, a number of our European allies have Indo-Pacific strategies. And so we're starting to see kind of this interesting kind of overlap, if you will, in complementarity among those cohorts.

But let me give you a little bit more of a resource response, in fact, to what you are asking. So I've told you that our pacing challenge is the People's Republic of China, and I also said we recognize that Russia is this acute threat. Interestingly, the ways in which one would invest in a military focused on the pacing challenge of the PRC is overwhelmingly similar to how one would do that if one were concerned about Russia as well. So there are a bunch of different areas where you would build a force, design a force, that actually looks exactly the same, right? So you can imagine a bunch of different domains, right? If we're looking in cyber capabilities, space capabilities, undersea capabilities, I could kind of go on and on. And so I highlight that because as we are looking at prioritization, it's important to understand how do we manage today's

force? How do we build tomorrow's force? And there's a lot more complementarity than one might sort of see at first blush.

Kathleen
McInnis: Oh, interesting. So then, does the question become one of capacity down the road? And size rather than capabilities themselves?

Hon. Mara
Karlin: I think it depends on what sort of contingencies, what are the conflicts that we are worried about? As you know, better than just about anyone, you know, European security is being reshaped at this moment in time.

And trying to understand what are the contingencies one would need to be prepared for. I would also emphasize just what's going on with our allies and our partners. You know, the National Defense Strategy is really a call to action in working with our allies and partners in meaningfully incorporating them at all stages of defense planning. And we have seen -- not least thanks to Russia's irresponsible and aggressive attacks on Ukraine -- we have seen real surge in investments by our European allies, for example.

And so looking at how, and in what ways those capabilities come together, where do those investments go? What do they look like? That's all going to be, I think, really important for how we understand what is our role in crisis? What is the role of our allies and our partners?

Kathleen
McInnis: So that's actually a great segue to my next question, which is, there is so much in my view, very welcome emphasis on allies and partners. And while most national defense strategies, national security strategies articulate the need to work with allies and partners, this has a meaningful difference in tone.

But what does that mean for you, practically speaking, in terms of truly integrating allies and partners? Just as a side note, I remember back in the day working some issues, and I felt like we spent more time coordinating amongst ourselves in the interagency and across the department than actually working and talking with allies. So what's the shift? How are you implementing this priority?

Hon. Mara
Karlin: Absolutely. And look, Kathleen, this is going to be one of these areas where a year from now, it will be an important metric on the extent to which our strategy is being implemented because it is just so crucial. We all know that allies and partners are a center of gravity for how we do our work, right? The U.S. military almost never does anything on its own. And in particular, what was striking to me as we were building the strategy was just reflecting on the deep collaboration we had with allies and partners in the post-9/11 wars, right? Just how intimate those

relationships were. And now we, as we've shifted to dealing with other types of challenges, trying to figure out when you are not in kind of the height of a crisis, how do you normalize that? How do you just make it standard practice that we are working with them on these sensitive issues?

You know, it's been interesting, particularly in the run-up to the Russian war on Ukraine. We were, as you know, able to share information, share intelligence, in I think, almost unprecedented ways with our allies and partners. And it had a strategic impact in terms of the understanding of what was going on, also in the response. And it is hard to really imagine that we'd be sitting here seven, eight months into this war with the conflict looking the way it is, and with our secretary, every single month being able to bring together more than 45 of his counterparts and all saying, "What are we doing to support Ukraine? How are we doing that together?" It's just, it's hard to imagine any of that happening if we hadn't early, early, early, been able to have those open, have those frank conversations, share that information, and intelligence. So it has a strategic impact and it is crucial.

So, how do we do it when we're not in the throes of a crisis? Or about to start a crisis that really is an animating issue. And for that to work, we've got to deal with a bunch of long-standing institutional barriers that inhibit collective planning and interoperability and mutually beneficial procurement.

So improving cybersecurity, breaking down these barriers to sharing information and intelligence, having those frank conversations about one another's strategies and budgets, all of those kinds of things. What I like to think about is in the post-9/11 wars, we found ways to work with our allies and partners when we were out in the field. How do we do that more efficiently and more effectively at headquarters, and between capitals? How do we work one another meaningfully into our defense planning systems? Because my concerns about that future security environment, we're actually not going to successfully get after it absent this sort of collaboration.

Kathleen
McInnis:

So another interesting area in this strategy that's highlighted is this emphasis on campaigning. Could you explain the concept of campaigning to our listeners and why do you believe it's so important to build this campaigning mindset into DoD activities and plans?

Hon. Mara
Karlin:

So, you might recall the 2018 National Defense Strategy, which was an important effort to get the Department of Defense to increasingly focus on strategic competitors like the People's Republic of China and Russia. It had this idea of competition. And the challenge with that idea of

competition, was it really became a little too easy to focus on being involved anywhere. And in any way where one saw the People's Republic of China or Russia. It turns out that makes prioritization really quite difficult. And there are many, many things that they're doing that are not necessarily problematic, right? Where you wouldn't necessarily want to put time, attention, and resources toward. And so we really wanted to reconceptualize what was the right nugget of an idea and focus on campaigning, which we see as sequencing initiatives across the entire department to advance priorities over time. And there's two points I would emphasize here.

First, it is really tailored and deliberate, campaigning is closing war-fighting vulnerabilities, and building war-fighting advantages. So, you've got to tie it in that very kind of tailored way.

The second way in which it's different is campaigning is across the Department of Defense. Now, I know you know this having lived here, but there are parts of the Department of Defense who have this idea kind of in their bloodstream. Our combatant commands, this is what they live and breathe every day. They're just kind of used to it. But to be effective, if you're really trying to build war-fighting advantage and close war-fighting vulnerabilities, you actually want to involve the entire department, right? You want to involve the combatant command, the military department, Office of the Secretary of Defense. If you can synchronize all of these pieces and get them singing from the same piece of music, it actually is a whole lot more deliberate, tailored, and effective.

Kathleen
McInnis:

Another one of the key concepts in the National Defense Strategy is integrated deterrence, and there's been a lot of discussion about this in the public discourse. I'm wondering what exactly integrated deterrence is. So what is it to you? And why is it so central to the National Defense Strategy?

Hon. Mara
Karlin:

Absolutely. So integrated deterrence involves three cohorts of folks: inside the Department of Defense, across the interagency, and allies and partners. And it's really each of those three building on their comparative advantage. So inside the Department of Defense, it means are we building a combat credible force? Can we operate across the spectrum of conflict? Are we looking across domains when we are dealing with challenges? That's kind of our job. Across the interagency: it means each department and agency really does need to do what it is best at, right? So we see what our Treasury colleagues do in the sanctions world, or what our State Department colleagues do in the diplomacy world, all of that being knitted together, and then our allies and partners, right? This really unparalleled network of allies and

partners and making sure that they are all showing up, that they're investing in their own forces, and that together we are all operating in concert.

So the idea is you have these three cohorts inside the Department of Defense, across the interagency, and with our allies and partners all working to deter and to deter in ways that we're pretty familiar with, right? Like deterrence by denial of benefits. So make it really hard for folks to achieve their goals or deterrents by cost imposition, while you can try to achieve your goals, but it's going to be really, really painful and hurt. And also this idea of deterrence by resilience, which is our effort to evolve this concept of deterrence, a bit, and to really think about how we're one to be in some sort of crisis, one could absorb that shock and then you get to escalate or not on your own terms, right? Because you've been able to have that shot kind of bounce off and then move forward accordingly. So what you're really hearing here, I hope on integrated deterrence is it's trying to use the tools of the toolkit in the ways in which they're most appropriate. And it is trying to do so in, again, a deliberate and tailored way. And for that to work, of course, we've got to have effective feedback loops so we can understand when this has been effective, why it's been effective, or if it hasn't, why not, and what do we do about it?

Kathleen
McInnis:

Right, right. Right now another big part of the conversation is on supply chain and other industry issues. So my question from here is, what do you think defense industry partners should be taking away from the National Defense Strategy?

Hon. Mara
Karlin:

What should our industry partners be taking away? You know, we have an emphasis on what we call building enduring advantage, being really a key way in the National Defense Strategy. It means that we've got to accelerate our force development, we've got to make sure we've got the latest technology, and then of course, invest in people. And I think that all really does tie into how our defense industry operates and is effective.

We have seen through the Russian war on Ukraine just, in real time, how crucial our defense industrial base is. And we have seen how important it is for it to surge and in key areas. And so I'm sure that our colleagues in defense industry are spending a lot of time doing lessons learned exercises from that, what's worked and what hasn't worked. And one point I would just really emphasize along those lines is that crucial role of allies and partners. They are, as I've noted, fundamental to this National Defense Strategy. And I think when we look at whether it's the Russian war on Ukraine, as one example, or other challenges that we could conceivably face in the future security environment,

having capable, competent allies and partners, that's going to be crucial. And I hope our industry is looking hard at that piece as well.

Kathleen
McInnis:

Fantastic. Well, this National Defense Strategy, in my view, represents an extraordinarily important shift of mindset on how the department approaches its activities, how it manages its operations, and how it thinks about the world. So congratulations on such a remarkable effort and looking forward to seeing the other work that you guys do. It's really quite impressive.

Hon. Mara
Karlin:

Thank you so much. It was a real treat, and I appreciate your interest and your listeners' interest as well.

Kathleen
McInnis:

Thank you.

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