Online Event

“A Conversation with Representative Adam Smith on Nuclear Modernization and Arms Control in 2021”

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FEATURING:
Representative Adam Smith (D-WA),
Chairman,
House Armed Services Committee

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Transcript By
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John J. Hamre: Good afternoon, everybody. This is John Hamre. I’m the president at CSIS.

And delighted to welcome you today for what I think is going to be a very important conversation with the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Chairman Adam Smith. And it’s a real privilege that we have this opportunity to talk with him. He’s – (laughs) – he’s involved in the mighty efforts of trying to get the National Defense Authorization Act through the Congress. And so he’s given us this window. And I’m very grateful that he found time to be able to do that.

And special thanks to Rebecca Hersman, who’s been guiding this along the way from our end and bringing us together. And so she will be leading the conversation with the chairman.

I would just like to begin by saying Chairman Smith has thought about these issues more deeply than any other member of Congress that I know right now. I mean, he’s – this has been something – and I’ve had numerous conversations with him – because we’re confronting a wide range of issues now. And they’re – in many ways they’re more fresh than ever. Yes, the role of nuclear weapons – that they play in international security has changed a lot, but there is still an enormous role that they play in national security calculations for us, for our primary competitors, and now for many other countries that we worry about. We are seeing a rise of some significant investments in nuclear systems. And of course, that always has controversy attached with it. There is – and I know in the NDAA that’s soon to be approved, you know, there’s calling for increased oversight over the NNSA, the National Nuclear Security Administration, over pit production. So there’s a whole range of issues that are important here.

And we’re also literally – I think probably two weeks after the inauguration we see the expiration of a major – probably the last arms control agreement with the Russians. And, you know, we’ve – and they have undertaken enormously impressive, worrying investments over the last five to six years.

So there’s a huge set of issues that Chairman Smith has been wrestling with and trying to help guide the Congress to think about. And it’s our privilege today to be able to hear his thinking about this.

I’m going to – I just want to say, everyone knows Adam Smith. But it’s under his tenure that the committee has developed new vigor and new energy. And it’s been very impressive to watch his stewardship.

So I think we should turn right now to you, Chairman Smith. But let me get – Rebecca, you’re going to formally launch the conversation. And you know best what we’re doing from here. Let me turn it to you, and thank you.

Rebecca Hersman: Thank you so much, Dr. Hamre; much appreciated.

And welcome to everyone who’s with us today. My name is Rebecca Hersman. I am the director of the Project on Nuclear Issues here at CSIS. And we are really thrilled to have you here with us, Chairman Smith, to talk through a whole range of nuclear issues.
One minute of housekeeping for all of those who are participating today. First of all, the conversation is on the record. A recording will be made and will be available at the Event page in the coming days. But to have sort of the best viewer experience, we encourage you to use the Gallery view.

We will be taking questions, in addition to some of the questions that were posted ahead of time. Remember to submit your questions via the Q&A function in the webinar. That’s the best way for me to get them and see them and pull them into the conversation when we turn to that. I’ll ask that you please include your name and affiliation with your question. I try to identify the questioner wherever I possibly can. So we will – we’ll kind of work it that way.

So really thrilled to have you all here, and especially you, Mr. Chairman.

If you don’t mind, we’ll just dive right in.

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA):

Absolutely.

Rebecca Hersman:

Having such a big week. The House passed the NDAA this week with 335 votes and is awaiting final action in the Senate.

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA):

My staff just texted me, actually. And if it’s to be accurate, it says the Senate passed it, 84 to 13. So –

Rebecca Hersman:

Well, that’s (inaudible).

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA):

Yeah.

Rebecca Hersman:

We’re a good omen for you, sir.

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA):

Yeah – (inaudible) – start to the morning.

Rebecca Hersman:

Yeah. That is good news indeed.

Well, my understanding is the bill fully authorizes funding for the Trump administration’s request for nuclear-modernization funding, including the ground-based strategic deterrent, the replacement for our current land leg of the nuclear triad.

You have in the past raised some reservations about the GBSD program. So I wanted to ask you about this. You know, as we move squarely into the bow-wave stage of nuclear modernization, what is your take on the future of the triad as the basis for our nuclear posture? Where do you see consensus? Where do you see disagreement, and in particular with our ground-based strategic deterrent?

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA):

Well, I think there’s a couple of broad ways to separate out this issue as we move into the Biden administration. You know, first of all, there is considerable disagreement within the Democratic Party about the future of what our, you know, military national-security policy ought to be, going forward.
And there is a growing – and this is, frankly, you know, part of what was reflected on the right as well, within Trump supporters, but also within the Democratic Party. Part of the angst that’s out there amongst, I guess, you know, sort of left-leaning activists in the Democratic Party is that they see the Biden national-security team, the so-called – the blob is back, if you will, which is, of course, horribly unfair – but sort of the consensus of our foreign-policy approach.

There’s a strong feeling amongst Democrats that that consensus has led us to rely too much on the military, both in terms of how the military is engaged in the world and the number of places. You know, as is pointed out, I mean, the Obama administration did a lot more drone strikes than the Bush administration did. They were much more active in, you know, in doing missions against terrorists in far-flung places of the world even than the Bush administration, and then on the size of the defense budget, on the degree to which – when we look at the global challenges of peace, security, you know, there is, you know, strong opinions amongst Democrats and many on the right as well that too much of that goes into the military; that, you know, when you look at the pandemic issues, when you look at climate change, alliances, that we are focused too much on the military. And then that comes down to the nuclear issues as being part of that, and a general feeling that the size of the U.S. military and the aggressive engagement of the U.S. military is making the world a more dangerous place, and we need to – we need to pull back. And that has a whole bunch of implications in terms of, well, the global war on terror – as we stopped calling it a while ago, but that’s basically what it is – number one. And then number two, great-power competition.

You know, the folks who are concerned about excessive use of the military are not comforted by the fact that we’ve decided that we’ve focused too much on terrorism, that we need to pivot to great-power competition. Because they see us pivoting to a new Cold War, a dangerous arms race that could lead to a conflict. And that plays out in a whole bunch of areas. Within nuclear weapons, the concern is the more we build, the more we get into an arms race, the more dangerous and likely it is that we will come into conflict with China and Russia, and the danger that that conflict becomes nuclear. That’s the concern, and it’s a very legitimate concern.

So how do we mitigate that? Now, I think sometimes the mitigation of that is, well, the U.S. just needs to build less nuclear weapons. Yeah, I don’t – I mean, obviously if there was no such thing as nuclear weapons, that would be great. They’d be gone from the world, and we wouldn’t have to worry about it. But you can’t un-ring the bell. So the way to look at our nuclear posture, I think, is we have to have an adequate deterrent. The goal of our nuclear weapons policy should be one thing and one thing only: To make sure there never is a nuclear conflict. And part of that requires us having a sufficient deterrent that Russia and China don’t think that they can launch nuclear weapons and get away with it.

Now, the arms control aspect of this is incredibly important because you – new technologies are changing the game here. Hypersonics. There are all kinds of new developments, you know, missile defense. How effective is missile defense? Because when you’re trying to calculate I need to have this many weapons to guarantee that we can deter someone from attacking us. If they attack us, no
matter how badly they hit us, we’ll hit them just as bad, and they won’t want to do it.

You get into command and control in cyber. If somebody develops, you know, a cyber technique where they can flick a switch and shut off our ability to launch any nuclear weapons, then they’re going to think they can get away with it. And what this means is we have to enter into robust discussions with China and with Russia to try to prevent that outcome. It’s a major shift in all of that. In my humble opinion, we’re building more weapons than we need. And we need to look at ways to have a robust deterrent in a more cost-effective manner. And that’s what we’re going to work towards.

Final thing I’ll say on this is, that’s my vision. It is not a vision that is supported by a majority of members of the House or the Senate, or a majority of the American people at this point. You know, the American people are painfully easy to scare, let’s just put it that way. And one thing they’re scared of is Russia and China, you know, outdoing us in nuclear weapons and being able to get an upper hand, and obliterating us. So when people come along and say – you know, it’s John F. Kennedy’s fictional missile gap all over again. If we don’t have an adequate deterrent we’re vulnerable, so we have to do a low-yield nuclear weapon. We have to replace the ICBM. We have to build more bombers. So that argument right now is carrying the day. And what I want to try to do is start a more robust argument about what a more cost-effective, safer approach might look like.

Rebecca Hersman: Thank you.

Do you have any particular areas there that you think are most promising, where you would like to see focused – you know, more examination of where those productions could be made?

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA): Well, I think the most promising aspect is just the fact that, you know, people don’t want to spend more money than we have to. We had a massive – had a massive deficit. Frankly, even within DOD – now, like I said, you’ve got this broad argument where people want to spend less on defense. But even the people who don’t necessarily want to spend less on defense, they want to build more ships, they want to build planes. And the more money you’re spending on nuclear weapons the less money you have for this other stuff. So the most promising aspect is the cost-effective approach, is to make the case that we can meet our needs in nuclear weapons in an affordable way that frees up more money for other things.

Now, you know, people will get into an epic food fight over what – you know, where to spend that extra money. But as a starting point, there are a lot of people who would like to have it. And I guess that’s the most promising. As far as the individual weapons systems right now, nothing’s terribly promising because, again, the overarching opinion that has carried the day – I mean, it was Obama’s Nuclear Posture Review that launched us on this road. You know, President Trump enhanced it, to be sure, but it was a bipartisan consensus that said we need to build what we’re planning on building. So at the moment I don’t see any aspect of that that’s promising in terms of being able to convince people...
you don’t need to do it. We got to build the argument. You got to make the
argument and you got to build support for it.

Rebecca Hersman: OK, great.

So there's – and you talked a little bit about the hardware side of things. There's
kind of a software – or what we think about declaratory policy in other things.
That's a really important area getting a lot of attention. The Trump
administration's NPR seemed to kind of open the aperture a little bit on the
range of circumstances under which nuclear weapons could be considered. You
and Senator Warren had previously introduced legislation on a no-first-use
policy for nuclear weapons. And the Democratic platform and some statements
by the president-elect suggest a desired movement to a sole-purpose doctrine.

I do other work working with our European allies and partners and some in Asia.
There's quite a bit of angst about this direction and concern about – amongst
some of the allies in its implications for extended deterrence. So I'm just
wondering, you know, what do you – you know, what does your crystal ball tell
you there? How do you see that part of our policy going forward? And how do
you think we could navigate that with partners and allies?

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA): Yeah, I think there is opportunity there.

By the way, I should say I think on that Senate vote I was telling you about – the
Senate always confuses me – I think that was the vote to have the vote. They
haven't actually taken the vote yet. The Senate's a weird place. So that was the
vote, basically, to block the filibuster and move forward, so apparently, they're
going to vote here shortly.

And I think this is an area of promise because I think we should have a no-first-
use policy. And I'm sorry, I know that the basic doctrine on weapons is, you
know, don't tell your enemies what you're not going to use, and by and large I
kind of agree with that. You keep all options on the table, you know, make sure
that you keep your enemies off – you know, off balance. I think nuclear weapons
are a special case. I think they are a weapon unlike any other weapon, and I
don't think that's actually debatable. They're the one weapon that could
absolutely destroy the planet.

So you know, I – you know, I think we should have a clear policy on nuclear
weapons, and it's what I stated at the outset. We have the nuclear weapons we
have to make sure that nobody ever uses them. And if that is your message – if
that is the basis of our interactions with other nuclear powers like Russia and
China and North Korea and, you know, Pakistan and India for that matter – if
that is our clear policy, then it doesn't make sense to say, but we're going to keep
our options open; eh, who knows, maybe if something happens we'll be the first
ones to use nukes. I just – I think we should fight that battle and make it clear
why that policy is important.

Rebecca Hersman: OK. Thank you.

Well, I'll go to a slightly different direction. You know, in terms of how might the
next administration come to making some of these decisions or
recommendations to Congress, you know, it seems likely – hard to imagine that a
Biden administration would not want to undertake its own review of nuclear
weapons policy and posture, much like the last four administrations. But there
have been some questions about how best to do that, whether a kind of
singularly focused Nuclear Posture Review is the way to do that. On the one
hand, those reviews tend to take a while, usually over a year, and the budget
process is moving much more quickly than that. There have been questions
about how to shorten that timeline so that you could have a policy informed
budget, including into the next cycle, but hard to do in a traditional posture
review. There’s also been a concern raised about, you know, how many different
reviews, and how to do missile threats here and cyber here and space there and
nuclear weapons there, and then broad security and strategy overall. So there’s
been some consideration of perhaps a much more integrated approach. Do you
have any views on that, what recommendations you might give to kind of
prioritize that process and make sure that budgets and policies and – kind of
come together with that sort of review and guidance?

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA):

Yeah, I think that’s a very tricky, tricky set of issues to deal with. But I think the
way the president-elect has to deal with that is right now he has to issue, if you
will, preliminary findings, all right? Because like you said, he’s rolling into a
budget, things are happening, and frankly much of the impact that he could have,
as we know, is in the first couple of years before, you know, the next election
starts coming around.

So I think, you know, both in terms of our National Security Strategy and in
terms of our Nuclear Posture Review, there should be initial opinions expressed
by the Biden administration, by his incoming national security team. And I think
they should state as their goal some of those basic shifts that I just described.

And then he has to also put in place the process to go through – hopefully, we
can do it in six months instead of a year – a broader review. And I think
personally it starts with the National Defense Strategy. You can’t just do the
Nuclear Posture Review; you got to look at the whole picture. And that gets into
the budget – what our goals/objectives are, how we’re going to make some
fundamental shifts.

So I think the most important thing that the Biden administration needs to do –
well, two things. One that’s short-term: Here’s how we’re going to
fundamentally shift some of our ideas on nuclear posture and on the National
Defense Strategy, and put in place the system to get a comprehensive look at it
done in the first six to nine months of his administration. I think there is a pretty
strong appetite out there for, you know, moving away from our excessive
militarization of our foreign policy, and I think there’s a lot of opportunity for
President-elect Biden to, you know, come up with a new National Defense
Strategy that makes sense on that front.

And I mean, that gets me to a long thing about, you know, the budget (effect ?) of
this. And I just think – and this is my great hope for the new administration, is
that we can get off of this idea that the more money we spend, the better off we
are. The more ships we build, the more planes we build – you know, it just
drives me absolutely insane. Like when they came out with the 500-ship Navy, I
literally laughed in their face when they told me that because what the hell does
that mean? I mean, 500 ships for what purpose? What is the capability of what you're trying to do? And the big thing, I think, going forward is to focus on not being able to beat our adversaries in an all-out war, but to deter them from walking into that all-out war in the first place.

And frankly, when you look at the conflicts that have happened, you know, where, you know, Russia has been involved in the Crimea, eastern Ukraine, others were involved in the Armenia and Azerbaijan fight, it's really less-expensive technology that's the key to winning. Essentially, the key is you have to be able to find your opponent before they find you, shut down their systems before they shut yours down. I mean, you can have 75 aircraft carriers, and if someone can flick a switch and shut them down it doesn't really matter. So we can shift our focus in that way and have a more cost-effective, less-belligerent military that makes the world a safer place, in my view.

Now, that takes a fundamental shift because, as you know, the Pentagon and the whole national security establishment, they are built to just do more, build more. And it's like, you know, I mean, the Air Force came out with a study at the start of this year saying that we need 25 percent more air wings. And again, I'm like, OK, wonderful; you're not getting 25 percent more air wings, not on this planet. So what exactly is the point of you saying that you, quote/unquote, “need” them? You'd better not need them or we're all screwed. So let's figure out a way to actually do a national security policy that fits within a budget (and ?) makes sense.

That's the vision that has to be developed over time. In the short term, I think the administration needs to put out a couple quick markers: You know, we're going to – we're going to reengage with the world. We're going to build more partnerships. We're going to focus more on diplomacy, more on development. And we're going to get off of the idea of winning a nuclear war and declare a no-first-use policy. I think there are some things they can do in the short term as they build to that larger narrative.

Rebecca Hersman: Terrific. Thank you so much.

I've got a couple more areas I'm going to open up some questions on. I'm encouraging people to put their questions in the chat. I'll try to bring those in as we go. And some of the questions we got ahead of time, so I have a few of those.

But I want to make sure we go ahead and dive into some of the arms control questions. I know it's such an important area. Without an extension New START, the last bilateral arms control treaty between the United States and Russia, will expire on the 5th of February. And it, you know, appears that any immediate negotiations under the current administration have stalled. The incoming administration will have only a couple of weeks to come to an agreement. What do you see as the way ahead? And do you expect that the administration will encounter any rough spots within Congress if they pursue an extension, perhaps a full five-year extension, without a lot of preconditions or other issues, more of a clean extension? Do you think that will run into problems, or do you think that that seems like a strong possibility?
Representative Adam Smith (D-WA):

Well, it’s guaranteed to run into problems. The question is, are those problems significant enough to derail the plan? Look, I mean, it’s not going to come as any surprise to anybody that there are going to be a fair number of Republicans in the Senate and the House who are going to oppose absolutely every word that comes out of Joe Biden’s mouth from now until he ceases to be president. That is their overarching strategy. So, yeah, I would think there would be some problems in building the sufficient bipartisan support on this. How big those problems grow to I don’t know, but let’s not underestimate the power of the extremists within the Republican Party. I mean, we’ve just got like – what was it, 107 members of Congress just signed onto ending our democracy as we know it because President Trump asked them to. That’s a little frightening. I’m referring to the lawsuit, you know, that basically says, you know, you four states, you didn’t vote the way we wanted to, we want our guy to win, so we’re going to toss out your elections. A hundred and seven members of Congress said, yeah, I’m up for that. So, yeah, I think there’s going to be a bit of a problem with whatever President Biden tries to do. And if he tries to extend START, they’re going to come up with some argument as to why it’s unilateral surrender and the end of the world as we know it, and it’s terrible and we can’t have it.

Ultimately, I would think that if he presents it as something’s better than nothing, we’re going to reengage in negotiations. And the Trump administration, as you know, was actively engaged in negotiations right up to the very end to try and get a New START extension. So I think, you know, the correct plan at this point is extend it; go into negotiations.

Now, negotiations are very tough right now because, you know, Russia is in – (inaudible) – and China’s not at the table. And I think that’s a legitimate point. I mean, China is a rising power. Their nuclear arsenal, their missiles, are a huge factor in what we’re going to do. And if you do an agreement with Russia, but how does that affect our relationship with China?

I think we should make efforts to try to pull them all into it. But none of that’s going to be easy. But it’s certainly easier if we have an agreement on the books than if we just let it go. So I would push for short-term extension and get back and try to negotiate a longer-term deal.

Rebecca Hersman:

You know, one of the things that’s been challenging with arms control generally is, you know, everybody sort of wants to make connections, conditions, linkages. There’s been a traditional one over the last, you know, 10 years or so about linking nuclear modernization with arms control, you know, and whether or not that has been a positive or a negative linkage I’d like to ask you about. But relatedly, there’s been a new one that’s been kind of brought in by the current administration on the extent to which we really have to directly link arms control with China to arms control with Russia; a lot of views on that in terms of whether that is a constructive way forward. Any views on those two types of linkages there?

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA):

Yeah. I mean, obviously, I think they both make sense. But then the question is, I mean, if China says thanks but no thanks, does that mean we just – (inaudible) – from the table with Russia? You know, no, I don’t think so, but I think it does bring in that complication. That’s it. I mean, the two big complications are, one, you know, China is now, you know, part of – should be part of this discussion...
because of how they've grown as both a military and an economic power. But then the second thing is the new technologies.

Again, all of this, you know, is based on the (premise ?) that, you know, you have nuclear weapons because you're afraid that the other side could overwhelm you. And if you don't have an adequate deterrent, that's how we stumble into nuclear war if one side starts to mistakenly think that they can win it.

And new technologies change the equation. This is why Russia was rightfully so paranoid about our development of missile defense. You know, if you can build a system that theoretically can knock out the incoming missiles – and, by the way, I don't – I'm not a technological expert in this area, but everything I've seen about it, (I'm not ?) banking on that, all right, because, you know, there's all kinds of different ways of – even when we do the tests, when we know it's coming, when we're prepared for it, you know, our hit ratio is not a hundred percent. So you've got to – (inaudible). I wouldn't rely on that.

You know, and then there's the idea of, you know, low-yield nuclear weapons and (short-range weapons ?), the idea – (inaudible) – do a, quote, “tactical nuclear weapon,” and how does that change the equation?

So all those things have to be on the table. We have to think about this in one straightforward way, one we negotiate between each other where we are both guaranteed that we have an adequate nuclear deterrent so that any side launching a nuclear weapon is signing their own death warrant; mutually assured destruction. Terrifying as it is, that's the goal.

But technology has changed that. You know, hypersonic weapons – you know, can they get there so quick that you don't have an adequate – how do we ensure that there is that balance? And I think that is the spirit of the negotiations that we need to enter into. China should be part of that and we should keep pushing for that, but we should not do it if they're not involved.

Rebecca Hersman: OK, thank you.

One more question from me, and I'm going to start pulling in questions from the audience. I wanted to ask about the JCPOA. That will also be on the new administration's agenda. Trying to reset a policy regarding JCPOA withdrawal will be tricky. The role of sanctions will be a major topic in the next administration. That one is also very thorny on Capitol Hill. Do you have any advice for navigating that space and how that might best be dealt with?

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA): Yeah. I mean, I think, in a very straightforward way, we should reinstitute the JCPOA. And it's not that I'm unmindful of how, you know, bad Iran is. But when you look at the big picture, the main reason that we got out of the JCPOA is because of the concerns – well, in terms of, like, a substantive argument, aside from the politics of Obama did it therefore it's bad, the substantive argument was that it didn't address Iran's other bad behavior. You know, Iran's is messing around in Yemen, they're messing around in Lebanon, and Iraq, and Syria. You know, and they are a bad actor all the way around, and we just let that go. There was also a bunch of arguments about – that frankly were just 100 percent
dishonest – about how the JCPOA didn’t really stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. It absolutely did. There’s just a lot of lies that were told about that.

So for all that stuff going on, we’re better off if Iran’s not pursuing a nuclear weapon. And that’s what the JCPOA accomplished. As far as their regional bad behavior, their regional bad behind is bad. Is it worth letting Iran become a nuclear power to try to address it? No. No, it is not. And by the way, since we pulled out of the JCPOA it’s not like Iran has stopped all that other stuff either. I mean, killing Soleimani set them back a little bit, but it hasn’t stopped them. I’m very involved in what’s going on in Yemen. They’re still pumping weapons and people into Yemen, you know, backing up the Houthis to keep that fight going. They’re still screwing around with Lebanon and Syria. They’re still so it ain’t changing that behavior. So us pulling out of the JCPOA isn’t going to stop that. The only thing that’s going to stop that is if the people in the region put the pressure on them to make it contrary to their best interests.

And frankly, that’s starting to happen. The alliance that is building between the Arab states and Israel to confront Iran is going to make it more difficult for Iran to be a bad actor in the region. And we should be supportive of that. I think we should work to build alliances with the UAE, hopefully get Saudi Arabia to a better place where we can work with them, you know, encourage the relationships that are developing between Israel and the Gulf states as a deterrence on Iran’s bad behavior. None of that should get us out of the JCPOA.

OK, so if we go back to the JCPOA does it make Iran – Iran will have more money. It’s absolutely true, OK? And that will enable them a little bit more to do a little bit more of that bad behavior in the region. I don’t think it is an order of magnitude worth going the other way. It’s just not. They’re still going to be doing it. They’re going to be doing it with a little bit more money. They got all kinds of economic problems at home that they’re going to have to deal with. I just think focusing on can we get a deal that makes sure that Iran isn’t developing a nuclear weapon is more than worth it, regardless of what else is going on.

Rebecca Hersman: OK. Thank you. Makes sense.

So I’m going to go to some questions that have been coming in. And I’m going to be grouping them as the best I can as I, you know, for those of you out there in the internet land here, trying to link some of them together so we can get through as many as possible. We actually had three questions that are all pretty similar moving to another part of the world, North Korea. And Liz Kim from VOA Korea Service, Soyoung Kim from Radio Free Asia, Jess Martin, graduate student, all asked about North Korea’s growing missile threat and continued nuclear weapons development. And want to know, how worried are you about this? What do you think are the most important next steps? How do we try to kind of, you know, right the course here in some ways better than the situation we find ourselves in today?

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA): Yeah. I’m very worried about it. And there’s no pithy solution to this. I mean, we’ve got, what, five presidents now that we’ve tried. And if it was easy, one of them would have figured it out. And it’s – I mean, the end result that we want is we want a denuclearized North Korea. That’s what we want. I don’t personally
see a path towards that at the moment. Kim Jong-un is, you know, not walking away from power. The regime that he has, even if he dies, he’s not walking away from power. Got to respect the guy’s ability to fake his own death and get international attention, by the way.

So yeah. It’s a fact that we’re going to have to deal with. So the question, how do we handle it as it is? And nobody likes the word “containment.” I don’t know. You know, I don’t know, I’m more modest in my expectations of the world that I’m living in than most but, you know, the idea that accepting something other than total victory is nuts, that’s the way the world works sometimes, you know? Sometimes you do the best you can. The best we can right now is to try to contain the threat out of North Korea. So how do we do that?

Number one, the alliance with South Korea is really important. I am deeply worried about all of this talk about, you know, pulling troops out of South Korea, insisting that they pay more. That partnership is enormously important as a deterrent to North Korea doing anything. Now, you know, they may build more missiles, they may advance their nuclear technology, but whether or not they actually engage in armed conflict, that is a huge point of demarcation that we want to try to stop. And one of the ways we stop that is by showing a strong alliance with South Korea that shows that if North Korea does anything, they’re done. They’re gone.

They can go ahead and rattle all the sabers they want, but if they start swinging them around they’re out of business. And I think maintaining that relationship with Korea is crucial. You know, building and strengthening alliances throughout the region. It’s a complicated place. Now, Japan and South Korea have some – many differences, in addition to many, you know, common threats. So how do we continue to work with them? And just building a strong alliance down there that shows North Korea that we’re not walking away, we’re not budging, and they’re not going to get away with any actual mil activity is going to be important.

And then, you know, there’s – that gets into a long conversation about China, which I won’t get into. But, you know, we need to deal – we need to deal with our relationship with China in a way that helps to encourage them to see containing the North Korean threat as in their interests as well.

Rebecca Hersman:

There’s a lot of questions that are coming in over the chat, and some that came earlier, that have a lot to do with the NNSA part of the nuclear weapons enterprise. I’m actually going to try to link a few of them together just so that you can respond to several in turn. Of course, there’s the issue of the WMD threat, which is a new – I think it’s the first in quite a long time new number designated warhead, that was proposed by the Trump administration and which is also quite linked to the U.K. program and has raised a lot of concerns with them. I have a question in from Jessica Bland relatedly looking at posture and the life extension-type programs, and how that works. So if you could comment on that, my understanding is that it’s fully funded in terms of the authorization bill but has run into some bumps with the appropriators.

Similar questions have come in from a couple of people on the pit production question, including Tom Clements from the Savannah River Site Watch, who
wants to ask you about the two-stop plutonium pit production and whether or not that – how you feel about that, and whether you see that going forward. So two of sort of the programmatic elements. And then I’ll come back to a comment from Dan Leone (sp), who’s asking about more of the bureaucratic structures between DOD and NNSA and oversight. So there’s a lot there.

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA):

There’s a ton of ground to cover here. And let me do my best. First of all, we need to modernize our nuclear weapons. So you know, there’s no question about that. I mean, they’ve been around for a long time. We have to make sure they work. Pit production is a huge part of this. NNSA plays a huge role in this. You know, even in my more modest view of how our nuclear weapon structure should be, there is no question that we need to modernize our nuclear weapons. That is incredibly important.

I am highly skeptical of the level of competence within the NNSA. Now, I could be wrong about that. You know, I’ve been to Savannah River. I’ve been to Los Alamos. I’ve talked with them a lot. It just – it seems to me that over the last 30 or 40 years – 30 years, I mean, starting with the whole pit production thing falling apart in Colorado, which is a long, complicated, Byzantine story of how that came to be – there’s just been a series of somewhat incompetent missteps within the way the NNSA has modernized this stuff.

Now, I will temper those comments – because I know people – (laughs) – I will get letters over that one. But to say that it is possible Congress did not play the most productive role on this. Because the thing that really sticks in my craw on this basic competency issue is the Savannah River Site and the MOX facility. OK, that is pretty close to white collar crime, all right? You know, we came up with this idea that – you know, and look, I think Savannah River is enormously important, and I think maintaining these sites and the expertise that they have is important.

Their mission shifted. They were looking at losing a lot of jobs. So how can we keep them going? One of the ideas was – you know, and also we have all this plutonium floating around that we’d like to do something with. So wouldn’t it be great if we could convert it into fuel for nuclear reactors. Cool. And I confess, you know, I was on the committee. I didn’t know a lot about this until I sort of figured it out later. Only problem is the fuel they were talking about creating doesn’t work in any nuclear reactors that we have in the United States, or quite frankly that we were ever going to build. And this became obvious at some point.

And it also became equally obvious that even if we were able to do this, even if you were able to repurpose this facility in such a way that it could make this fuel, there was no place to send it. It was – it just wasn’t going to – (inaudible) – long after we knew that we spent somewhere in the neighborhood of $5-6 billion essentially digging a hole and then refilling it and then digging it again and then refilling it. And I went and visited the building. And it’s a pretty cool looking building. It’s not done yet, obviously. But, you know, and we really don’t have $5 or 6 billion in the nuclear enterprise to just go flinging around for no particular purpose.
So now they come to me and they say: Look, here's what we're going to do. We're going to take the MOX facility and we're going to turn it into a place that builds pits, OK, you know, like it used to be a bowling alley but now it's going to be a restaurant. And the problem is, when you're talking about nuclear material it's a little bit more complicated than the analogy I just described. So I am highly skeptical that they're going to be able to turn that building into an effective pit production facility – highly skeptical.

And we need the pits, OK? And this is, again, where – and this is, I think, a pretty good summary of my great frustration within DOD. We say, in the case of pits, or in the case of ships, pick your number, we need 30 pits a year. OK. And we got – then it turns out that we're having a devil of a time making 30 pits a year. We're not sure we're going to hit that goal. So what's our solution? We're going to do 80 pits a year. I'm like, are you – (inaudible) – kidding me, OK?

Why don't you figure out how to make the first 30 before then you say is, well, the way we're going to do it is we're going to blow the whole damn thing up and start over again, so you're not going to be able to really see that we didn't figure out how to do the first thing. We're going to set a much bigger, larger goal and then say, well, you know, now that we need this many more it's going to take us another few years, another billion dollars. Isn't that just logical, because we're building more? Ugh, OK.

You know, let's us get something done, all right? Let's just build 300 ships that freaking work, OK, instead of saying, well, we got to have 300. Don't know how to do it. Well, let's do this LCS thing. It'll do – it'll be three in one. It'll do all these other things. You know, and we'll do the DDG-1000, and all that other stuff. So now we have all these ships that don't actually fricking work. And then we come back and say: Well, the solution to this is not to build more effectively. Let's say we're going to build 500, OK? You're sensing my frustration with all of this.

And I understand where it's coming from, but it's idiotic. And also it is dangerous, because we need the pits. We need to be able to effectively do things. So I am deeply concerned about the NNSA – now, it may not be the NNSA's fault. Let me just say that. I understand the politics of this. Everyone's got their interests. And if I'm representing Savannah River, I'm not sure I'm going to walk in there and say, yeah, we're going to lose 2,000 jobs and that's just the way – that's just the way things bounce, OK? Now, personally, I think we could have figured out something more productive to do out of that, but anyway. We got major, major problems in that area.

We have to figure out, OK, what can we do realistically to modernize our nuclear weapons effectively. Now, if we can sift through all of that insanity, you know, look, I think there is a legitimate question to be had as to whether or not we need to build the GBSD, all right? And it's a – you know, we were working on it. We've been building towards it. People have – you know, is the third leg of the triad absolutely necessary? I'm highly skeptical of this. And right now we haven't really gotten into that conversation because, again, of the politics.

I mean, there's a ton of money involved in that weapon system. There's a ton of jobs. You know, the people who have the nuclear – you know, the upper
Midwest, South Dakota, North Dakota, wherever the hell it is. I mean, they don’t want to lose all those jobs. You know, they like being a nuclear target, apparently. And I get all of that. But if we’re trying to build a nuclear system within a tight budget, does it make sense? These are some of the questions we have to start to answer. And in the last 30 years, the politics has triumphed over any sort of competent policy. And I think we need to work on that.

As far as the NNSA budget thing, with whether they report to the Department of Energy, the Department of Defense, who gets to say when and how we send it up to OMB, I mean, that’s fine and fully appropriate that the NNSA has a little bit of a say in it before it goes to OMB. But if they’re going to have that say, they’d better not use that say to take $6 billion and dump it down a rathole in South Carolina. That’s what I would argue.

Rebecca Hersman: Let me move to a couple of other – a couple of other topics there. There are so many. I’m trying to pull them all in the best I can.

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA): Covered a lot of ground with that last one, so that’s –

Rebecca Hersman: Yeah, I did. Trying to knit that together, although we didn’t totally cover that W93.

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA): Oh, sorry. On the W93, I should – I missed that point. It’s a tough call, but I think we do need to build it because we do need to modernize the weapons systems. It is – it is a – it is a submarine-based system. It’s the most survivable. I’d rather build the W93 than the GBSD. Let me just put it that way. It’s on the most survivable platform we have, which gives us that credible deterrent. And yes, it is an added bonus that it is enormously (important to ?) one of our crucial partners in Great Britain. So I do understand the value of it. We may arguably be a little bit ahead of need on that. So I think the appropriators’ problem: Do we need the money right now? I think the U.K. is pushing a lot of that. Do they need it right now? We need to do it. Do we need to do it right now? That’s a tougher question.

Rebecca Hersman: OK. Thank you. Thanks for – thanks for hitting on that.

You know, there are several questions that – you know, questioners that want to ask you about sort of other types of emerging technologies and how they’re coming into play. One of our questioners wants to know how you feel about the rise of hypersonics, and how much we should invest, and how much of a threat it poses. There’s another question from Michael Clare (sp) about AI-empowered autonomy and thinking about autonomous weapons. So there’s several of these that touch on this. Perhaps you, you know, kind of think about a couple of those pieces coming together.

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA): Yeah, I think that’s one of the most critical questions that we face in defense policy going forward. New technology is very, very difficult. And it’s – you know, it’s as simple as sort of the way – I am not an early adapter because I get used to how I do things, and if it works this way, you give me something else and then it’s like – you know, in fact – (laughs) – just to give you one moronic example, so I still have an iPhone 7 that has that handy-dandy little button right down there. As you know, the new iPhones don’t have a button because I guess
they just have to mess with us and they didn’t like the button, so you got to just swipe, all right? So I had to get this new phone to vote in our caucus elections, and I couldn’t swipe the damn thing. And then finally somebody showed me, no, you got to start at the bottom. You have to swipe it this way in order to make – (inaudible). Now, once I figured that out, I mean, it’s OK, but I don’t really want to adapt to a new technology that’s going to stop me from being able to tie my shoes, all right? OK, once I figure it out then I’ll be able to do all this other fancy stuff. But in that gap, you know, it’s like, well, I had this – I’m sorry, I will – I will directly get to the point because technology’s important – this makes the point.

I’ve been working with Microsoft around this new heads-up display for an infantryman. So basically, you put this thing on and you can see – you can see the satellite images, you can do all this other – (inaudible). And me, you know, I can’t even – (inaudible) – video games that my kids have because they got too many buttons and, you know, it’s too confusing. And I was like, the only thing I worry about is, OK, so you’re out there, you know, on patrol, and you know, OK, great, I can see over the ridge, and it’s 58 degrees, and where I’m going it looks like it might be raining; and, oh my God, the guy in front of me just shot me in the head. So that’s probably not a good thing. You know, you can be distracted by all (this ?) stuff and forget the essential mission.

And this is what I think is the problem with technology and why the way we approach AI and hypersonics is so important. The Eric Clapton song, “It’s in The Way That You Use It,” all right? It’s great technology. It’s wonderful. It’s beautiful. Are you going to do something with it that actually helps you, or are you going to get buried, OK?

This is what we have got to get better at at DOD. We’ve got to rebuild a more solid relationship with entrepreneurial tech companies, new technology. What I’m thinking about here in all this is the Navy-Marine Corps Intranet, you know, to give you a more – you know, the new technology then was we were able to – you know, big data was going to come together. We can make all of our systems talk to each other. When they talk to each other, they’re going to be better. So, great, let’s do the Navy-Marine Corps Intranet. Oh my gosh, $12 billion later, yeah, that doesn’t really work.

So when we use AI, when we’re going to use hypersonics, we have got to be smart about how we use it. Do we use it in a way that advances our interests? And it’s – and we don’t have a choice not to, OK? If we stick with the 7s because we can’t figure out how to swipe, we’re dead, OK? You know, these new technologies are going to be used by somebody, all right? They’re going to be implemented in a good way. And if it’s not us, we’re in serious trouble. But what I want to do is I want to learn from the mistakes of the last 20 years. I mean, look at – I mentioned the Navy-Marine Corps intranet. But I’ve also mentioned the LCS, you know, the expeditionary fighting vehicle, the Zumwalt-class destroyer, the DDG-1000. You know, we’ve got all these things. Wow, that looks really cool. But, you know, billions of dollars later, it’s not helping us.

We cannot afford that, which is why I’m – (inaudible) – with the Armed Services Committee – we haven’t done this; and I’m getting some pushback, so I won’t officially announce it – to really have us focus on exactly that question, OK. How do we use these technologies in a cost-effective way to meet our national-
security needs, instead of just making some fun toys that are kind of cool to look at? Because I'll tell you, you know, I went up and saw the DDG-1000 up in Bath about 10 years ago. It's wicked cool. I mean, it just – it looks awesome, all right. It just doesn't really do anything for us. And that's not good.

So that's what I want to – (inaudible) – why the Pentagon is so important – (inaudible). It's the main reason I was pushing Michele Flournoy as I was. She understands this stuff and the Pentagon bureaucracy in a way that very few other people do. And this is going to be crucial if we're going to make whatever systems we build – (inaudible) – going to be effective. Are they – are we going to – you know, F-35, you know, 20-some-odd years later, I mean, I guess it's going to work to some level. But the amount of money we spent on that, you know, we can't afford to do that. We've got to be better about implementing technology.

Rebecca Hersman:

All right. Well, and, you know, we're seeing so much in the area of nuclear weapons where we have to think more broadly than nuclear weapons and be thinking about hypersonics, AI. We have to be technologists across the board, and even as – and I think a really new challenge that you have in that is how do we adapt these technologies that will be critical to the military going forward while also processing and thinking through and working internationally on arms control in those areas at the same time.

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA):

Right. And one key aspect – and the way to think about this is we – (inaudible) – thinking about what we are trying to achieve. You know, I think a lot of times you get lost in the whiz-bang, you know – so it's like, what's the goal, OK? And that's the way I always think about things. What do I want? OK, what is the goal? What is the objective? And then you can go, OK, what are the tools that are going to help me get there?

All right, you know, that's a long, complicated story that I tend to tell about my first election campaign when I thought I was going to have a whole bunch of money and I didn't. Then I thought, OK, I refuse to quit. So it's like, OK, money doesn't actually decide the election. All right, it's nice to have, but you don't win just because you have more money. Ask a lot of Democratic House candidates about that right now. You win if you get more votes. So then that's what I focused on. OK, money helps you get more votes, but there are other things. There are other ways to get votes that aren't really that expensive.

That's the way we need to think about (that ?). What's the goal? What's the objective, OK? And then how can that technology help us achieve that objective? You know, you've got DARPA and some other folks that can do technology for technology's sake, and that's fine. But you also need somebody up there going this is what I want to achieve. What are the tools? Ah, you know what, I think that could be helpful to what I'm trying to do here. (That's the way ?) we need to think about it, to make sure (we do it ?) in the most cost-effective way possible.

Rebecca Hersman:

Well, we're starting to work in – we have about, I think, seven minutes left, because I know we need to end on time. And I continue to try to pull together these questions.

You know, one that comes across amongst several of our participants is you kind of eloquently talked a bit earlier about how we need to rely on more nonmilitary
tools of influence to kind of shape the security environment in a positive way.
And I think there’s a few people who would like to know whether it's from an
arms-control perspective or in other ways. What would be the vision for that?
In other words, the – if not military, then what? What – how should we go about
doing that? What should we be prioritizing? Where should we be investing to
realize the vision for a world that looks like that a U.S. security policy that would,
you know, kind of fulfill that dream?

Representative Adam
Smith (D-WA):
I think we need to do a lot more study on this. But the two things that I would
say is, number one, (focusing ?) on what I've just talked about, what's the goal?
What's the objective? What are we trying to achieve in national-security policy?
You know, it's not to beat China in a war, OK. You know, it's not like we've got a
football game this weekend and one's going to win and one's going to lose, so our
objective – I mean, that's pretty straightforward. The Seahawks are playing the
Jets. Their objective is to score more points than the Jets on Sunday. So let's go
try to figure out how to do it – not to be taken for granted, by the way.

But are we trying to do? And what we’re trying to do, I think – and this needs to
be fleshed out more – is we're trying to deter our adversaries from destructive
behavior. We want – we don't want China to take over Taiwan. We don't want
China to gobble up territory that doesn't belong to them in the South China Sea.
And we don’t want them to force kleptocratic, autocratic government on places
in Africa and elsewhere, OK.

Now, you know, one way to do that is to shoot them so that they don’t do it
anymore. But that’s got a whole lot of risk and a whole lot of problems. So are
there other ways that we could deter them from doing that? Yes – alliances, OK,
partnerships. One example, and there are – I just happened to be in Tunisia last
February before the pandemic set in. You know, and Tunisia kind of likes us.
You know, we get along reasonably well. We’ve helped them with a couple of
things. China is trying to get in there. China would love to be able to long-term,
I'm sure, build a navy base on the Mediterranean.

All right, so we can defeat China by saying that we're going to build a massive
military so they feel they can't threaten us, or we can build a better relationship
with Tunisia so Tunisia decides it's not in their best interest to piss us off and let
China have a naval base in the Mediterranean, OK. So if you invest in a
diplomatic relationship – it's about persuading people.

I mean, to me it's like counting votes. It's like getting the votes that I've gotten.
I'm not going to tell you these stories because we're in the middle of it right now,
and I've got to get the votes for an override. So I do not want to reveal my
secrets at the moment. But, you know, when you're trying to get someone to do
something, there's a lot of different ways to get them to do that, OK. Who do they
listen to? What are their interests? What are they concerned about? What's
going to motivate them?

You know, yeah, every once in a while you get backed into a corner and brute
strength is your only option. It's not a particularly good option, actually. It's far,
far better to understand – (inaudible) – people want upfront, and how you can
get to a mutually agreeable position where you can get just enough of what you
want and they can get enough of what they want to do – (inaudible). And that’s diplomacy. So that’s the investment in diplomacy. That’s relationships.

You know, I mean, it is a bit of a problem that China and Russia have become expansionist in their outlook. But at the end of the day they are still driven by interests, all right? China’s got 1.4 billion people to feed. They want to make sure that their economy is clicking. How can we find ways to work with them on those interests and to build partnerships around the world?

Frankly, I think that is vastly more effective than getting into an arms race. An arms race is really just a brute-strength fight. You know, it’s like you can’t talk to this person anymore so all of a sudden you’re in the middle of a bar fight. But let’s figure out how to talk to each other so that we don’t have to get to that point, because in the modern world, with the weaponry that we have, we can’t afford it. And there are plenty of other ways to deter our adversaries and get a more peaceful, prosperous world than simply relying on the military.

Rebecca Hersman:

Well, thank you. You know, I think that actually is a great note for us to draw the conversation to a close. I really want to thank you for just a terrific discussion, kind of a tour de force. I threw everything at you, as did the participants. And so it’s really been a great conversation.

Before we close, is there anything else that you would want to touch on? You know, anything we missed that you would like to talk about?

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA):

No. Just the big thing I want to emphasize, this is an incredibly exciting time, I mean, as we move into a new administration and we move into, you know, a new world when you think of all the technologies available where it’s taking us. And I think what we’ve seen a lot in the last year is sort of the downside to that; you know, the conflict we’ve had in our own country, the spread of a pandemic that we’ve been unable to control.

But the upside is, you know, all the technology that is out there and all the really, really smart people that we have. I think if we start thinking about the problems the right way, we have a ton of resources to bring to bear. And, you know, I mean, the whole Trump delusion – and, I mean, I sort of – I understand where that came from.

But I think what we should be optimistic about is, once we finally – you know, it’s like the old Saturday Night Live skit, the thing that wouldn’t leave – once he eventually does, on January 20th, I think there’s an enormous opportunity, in a bipartisan way – there are just – there are a ton of Republicans as well and Democrats who are anxious to get past the vitriol and say what can we work on?

I’m not, you know, Pollyannaish here. I know there’s still going to be a bunch of people, you know, biting at our ankles. But I also think that there’s a lot of people on both sides of the aisle, all across the political spectrum, who are anxious for the chance to start thinking about this in a logical, practical, cooperative way to address the problems that we’re facing. And I am optimistic about that.
Rebecca Hersman: Well, that’s a good charge to all of us to, you know, keep working hard on these issues, and everyone on the line as well.

On behalf of CSIS, I want to thank you for taking so much time and talking through the issues with us today, and for your tremendous leadership here. Good luck on the bill. Hopefully, it all comes together and you can move into the holiday season with that behind you. Fingers crossed.

So thank you, also, to all the participants and everyone who’s been so helpful here. We’ve really had tremendous support. And I just want to highlight, before we totally wrap, Louis Lauter and the team, all of your staff who made it possible – Maddy Clough, Suzy Claeys, and for sure the whole AV team.

So, with those thank-yous, sir, appreciate your time and hope to see you again soon.

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA):
Rebecca Hersman: Absolutely. Thank you for doing this. I really appreciate it.

All right. Take care. Thank you.

(END)