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**“The Democratic Debate over Defense, Part 1”**

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Kathleen Hicks: I'm Kathleen Hicks, senior vice president and director of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). This is Defense 2020, a CSIS podcast examining critical defense issues in the 2020 US election cycle. We bring in defense experts from across the political spectrum to survey the debate over the US military's strategy, missions, and funding. This podcast is made possible by contributions from BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and the Thales Group

Kathleen Hicks: In this episode of Defense 2020, I'll be speaking with three Democratic experts on defense. My colleague Andrew Hunter, director of the Defense Industrial Initiatives Group and senior fellow in international security here at CSIS. Dr. Adam Mount, a senior fellow and the director of the Defense Posture Project at the Federation of American Scientists. And Kelly Magsamen, the vice president for national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress. We discuss views within the Democratic party on key defense issues heading into the 2020 election.

Kathleen Hicks: Thanks to everybody for joining me today on this inaugural episode of Defense 2020, and we're going to dive right in with Democrats in this first and second episode to get a little more understanding of what's happening inside the party on issues of defense. We'll follow that with a few episodes highlighting the same kind of internal discussions happening among Republicans. Let's start today with the party that's involved in the primary season, and much of that primary season we've been focused on the debates. The debates to date have not highlighted many issues on defense, foreign policy, only a little bit defense, almost not at all. But perhaps maybe we start with Kelly and ask, is there a common view of defense policy among Democrats? If so, what are those common themes? And if not, what do you think are the big cleavages among Democrats today?

Kelly Magsamen: Thanks Kath. Great to be here. I would say I think there are a few common themes that are emerging among Democrats on defense issues. I think first is the overall sense that we have over prioritized the military as the main tool of our national security and foreign policy. I think that generally Democrats feel that we've invested far too much on military responses to major global challenges as opposed to diplomatic responses. I think that's one big theme. I think the second one is a sense of re-establishing some level of predictability and reliability with our allies.

Kelly Magsamen: I think that many of us have been watching the Trump Administration with much angst in terms of how the president treats our defense allies and our defense relationships abroad, which are so critical to advancing our objectives. The final thing I think it unifies Democrats is I think an overall sense among Democratic defense thinkers, maybe even the candidates themselves, that our defense is kind of a legacy defense structure as opposed to really being focused on the threats of the century that we're in. So whether

it's legacy systems, whether it's capabilities, et cetera, or how we do operational concepts, or how we're postured around the world, it's a sense that we've living in a Cold War-era defense strategy. I think those are would be the main unifying themes that I see.

Kathleen Hicks: Andrew, what are your thoughts?

Andrew Hunter: Well, let me just step back one second and talk about who do we mean when we talk about Democrats, because there are the candidates running for president, there are the Democrats in Congress who engage on this topic episodically, and then there's sort of the broader community of Democrats in the nation. One thing that may unify all of them is that defense is usually not at the top of their priority list, it's somewhere further down. I tend to find that it's really hard to come up with overarching themes that you can get consensus on. But there are what I would call loadstones and fault lines. By loadstones, I mean I think there are clusters of concern and support around issues that many Democrats feel very passionately about, and those are often tied to organizations that focus on those, so issues around reducing nuclear weapons and nonproliferation would kind of fall in that category. I think climate change increasingly is also a major driver for that on the security side.

Andrew Hunter: Then there's the fault lines, which is areas where Democrats have a really hard time uniting and tend to be the areas where they run into traffic, especially on Capitol Hill as amendments are brought up, that fracture of the party, and those are traditionally been issues like detainees and torture issues. In the past, issues of expanding service to LGBTQ individuals, although that has really been something Democrats have gotten much more united over in recent years.

Andrew Hunter: Interestingly enough, issues like a usage of fossil fuels by the military has been something that has been something that fractured Democrats because you had Democrats from states that were energy states who could be broken off from the rest of the party, and so that tends to be what I see more so than common themes.

Andrew Hunter: I'd like to say two [trends] actually that are common that I see. Yes, alliances absolutely is one that I think there's very few Democrats who have any sense that they want to pull back from a lot of these alliances, at least in the elected official category. The second one I would say is pretty much everyone hates waste and corruption, and there are a lot of Democrats who perceive that there's a lot of waste in the Pentagon in particular. Corruption is something some folks see a lot of, others less so, but everyone's against it, so that's another one where issues like the Pentagon audit has always been wildly popular with Democrats because of this perception that they can get after waste and corruption.

Kathleen Hicks: Great. Adam, what are your thoughts?

Adam Mount: Part of what strikes me most about defense issues currently is how much agreement there is between the parties. Democrats have, as Kelly expertly laid out, a handful of different emphases, different propositions about the proper use of force, about how we should structure our relationship with allies. But by and large, Democrats have not presented a distinct theory about how our forces should be postured, how they should operate, what the sort of overall level of defense spending should look like. Democrats on the Hill have been largely willing to, well they're concerned about defense budgeting issues, has to do with the relative balance between domestic and defense issues. That's a fair way to look at it, but there really hasn't been a major effort in the Democratic party to draw a serious distinction with Republicans about how much is enough, where should our forces be positioned, what are the missions that are critical and what are the kinds of capabilities that we need to meet those requirements and missions. So there really hasn't been a leader on defense in the Democratic party on the order of a Sam Nunn for several years.

Adam Mount: And so there are, I think, some very strong arguments being made about nuclear weapons issues, the role in priority in the funding for nuclear weapons issues, about process issues like AUMF, which are sort of critical-

Kathleen Hicks: That's the use of military force?

Adam Mount: Yeah. Pardon me. That are critical to sort of getting a hand on, a handle on, how we use force abroad to prevent a further overextension. There are major debates going on about whether and how to end certain military commitments around the world that are grouped under ending the "Forever Wars." But what strikes me is that as a branch of the party moves left towards the sort of Elizabeth Warren's, the Bernie Sanders, the more progressive end of the party, and you've seen Adam Smith, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, move in that direction as well. There's going to be some serious questions that have to be raised about the role of the US military in the world. What are the critical missions and how do we meet them? What's required by way of force structure to meet those missions? There's some major questions coming up for Democrats that I think we really haven't tackled yet.

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah. Because there's so much in that opening conversation to pick up on, let me start with alliances because that came up and on from all three of you. We're at this interesting period where the [Trump] administration's policy is as put forward from the National Defense Strategy, National Security Strategy are very strongly pro-alliance. The president's personal hot takes or statements have been less crystal clear, and we have now Chicago Council polling from this year that 75% of the public polls say the US military alliances with other countries are net contributors to us safety and security. But maybe start with Andrew. Democrats actually have not always been crystal clear on this burden sharing question. In the 90s, they were the party pushing hard on the peace dividend. Obviously, President Obama not using the kind of bombastic language that President Trump has used, nevertheless was concerned about us over commitment and issues of burden sharing.

How would you characterize where Democrats today are placing themselves? Is it just because President Trump frankly has been so extreme on this issue that they're reacting to that or do you think there's something deeper going on?

Andrew Hunter: Well, you're right. Burden sharing has always been kind of one of those fault lines that has caused people to kind of bifurcate or vote in different directions. I would argue that that hasn't fundamentally been a sign of alliances aren't worth it, just a sense of we've just been a little too generous. Again, from my perspective, a lot of that focus on burden sharing was about if we can get the Europeans in particular to do more, than we can reduce the defense budget and do the things we really want to do, which is more spending on the domestic side. I think it's kind of been fundamentally driven by that sense that here's an opportunity for savings that we can then rededicate resources in a different direction, rather than any sense that the alliances are in some way a bad deal in the way that President Trump would characterize them.

Andrew Hunter: I think you're exactly right that Trump's trashing of alliances instantly generates Democratic support for alliances irrespective of any other dynamic that's out there. But I think especially with the use of force issues that have come around, where a lot of Democrats I think have settled on distinguishing between just use of military force and unjust use of military force, is if the United Nations or some other organization of democratic partners and allies is able to rally behind something, that that's sort of a good signifier that this is something that's actually a just use of force.

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah, that's great. Kelly, picking up where Andrew left off, another big piece of this that I hear a lot among Democrats is sort of who are the allies to back, if you will, our treaty allies, and then where our Democrats may be a little less comfortable. Of course, the Yemen conflict often comes up in that context of how the US uses its military in support of other countries. I'd love to just hear your thoughts on alliances from where you're sitting at CAP [Center for American Progress].

Kelly Magsamen: Yeah, I see a couple of things. I mean, to your point on the Yemen example, I think a lot of Democrats are coming to the realization, and I think even a lot of Republicans are coming to this realization, that some of our alliances need to be reevaluated because they're not necessarily grounded in the values that we originally thought they were.

Kelly Magsamen: Whether it's a relationship with Turkey, or Saudi Arabia, and others, Thailand, you can add to the mix of the Philippines, Hungary. There's a lot of questions about what to do with the bad apples, right in the context.

Kathleen Hicks: Right. And these are authoritarian states basically is the conversation.

Kelly Magsamen: Right. More essentially a liberal democracy is moving towards authoritarianism. I do think Democrats want to basically readjust some of

our alliances, tilting more towards prioritizing those that we share democratic values with. I think that's one big theme that's emerging.

Kelly Magsamen: On the burden sharing question. I actually think Democrats do support burden sharing. We've talked about that in the Obama Administration many times. I do think that people are starting to think differently about burden sharing though, so less quantitative and maybe work more qualitative approach to burden sharing, where it's what is a country's ability to contribute to the global challenge. It may not be with 2% or 3% defense spending, right, but maybe it's a really great investment in police, or rule of law, or things that we actually need to solve some of the major challenges that we face. I think there will be a very healthy re-evaluation in a new administration, assuming a Democrat is elected, about what our alliance relationships should be doing in the context of the world we face and how should we basically try to get them to reflect the values that we all share.

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah. Adam, just to add another layer to this, I certainly invite your thoughts in general, but the arms sales pieces and the security cooperation, the defense aspects of this have always been particularly tricky, I think, for Democrats around issues of values. I'd love if you could kind of weave in how you see the party or members of the party thinking through that.

Adam Mount: I think it's right to say that it's a question of values. On the one hand, you've seen, as Kelly says, not only Democrats, but also Republicans, appalled at the specter of a US-made weapons and US support operations contributing to atrocities in Yemen. There've been sort of major concerns about how Donald Trump's activity has sort of contributed to this really catastrophic events in Syria over the last week that many Democrats have said are tantamount to ethnic cleansing. There's a deep sort of revulsion that Americans were a part of that. That's something that I think a Democratic administration will have to not just reevaluate but seriously rethink and develop a new way forward.

Adam Mount: But the other half of the values issue is that Democrats, I think, have to recognize and do recognize that we have a duty to help defend free societies from aggression. Democrats by and large recognize that, and that will require in some cases some arm sales. We'll want to be more careful about to whom we sell arms, the technologies that are being transmitted. The Obama Administration, I think, and especially in his second term, came to a very real realization that American weapons were sort of fueling conflict, especially in the Middle East, and tried to take a step back to put on some more strict controls on those activities.

Adam Mount: That's going to have to go further in a second Democratic administration, but we really shouldn't lose sight of the fact that we're in it with our allies. We don't have to win a war ourselves. Given declining power in the world, it's by and large not going to be possible for us to defend allies that don't want to defend themselves. There's going to have to be a real look at how do you balance sort of overextension of arm sales but still defending the societies where arm sales are necessary and productive at doing so.

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah. Adam, you also had mentioned in your opening comments, the issues around Authorization for the Use of Military Force, which I henceforth allow everyone to call AUMF so we'll save ourselves some time. But you know, the United States is operating under these two legal provisions, statutory provisions from 2001, 2002 in the immediate post 9/11 era and the run up to the US invasion of Iraq. There have been efforts, bipartisan in nature, over many years, including during the Obama Administration that have failed to garner sufficient support in administrations and inside on Capitol Hill. Where do we go on this issue of how we think about the legal and policy ramifications of the use of military force in an era, where you know, there are these challenges that don't look like traditional conflict, we have ongoing issues around counter terrorism on top of that, we have state use, whether it's China or Russia, use of proxy forces. It's just a new world in which we're trying to think about the use of force. I welcome your thoughts.

Adam Mount: Yeah. Issues regarding the use of military force and authorization are not getting easier, they're getting harder with every passing year. You've seen centrist Democrats and Republicans on the hill, very skeptical of sort of stretching existing AUMFs into new roles, new regions, new missions. I think that there's a sort of bipartisan frustration with these forever wars. Congress understands that it's its duty to help set standards on the use of military force, that it's their constitutional duty to authorize war. It is an area where you've seen progressives leading.

Adam Mount: You've seen progressives be more outspoken, more indignant, and more ready to restrict practical activities, specific missions, and specific operations. You've seen a number of progressive Democrats put down marker bills, or for example, Elizabeth Warren in public speeches, start to sort of think creatively about how their administration, how a Democratic administration, would confine themselves or try to reform how AUMFs are produced. Whether it's by saying I will not go to war without an AUMF from Congress, which is sort of another way of trying to be more disciplined about our commitments abroad or other creative solutions. It's a conversation that's critical. It's one I'm glad progressives are leading. I hope it doesn't get lost in the shuffle and it remains a primary issue.

Kelly Magsamen: I agree with Adam. I think it's a really important issue and many of us in the Democratic defense world are kind of waiting with bated breath for that debate question about how would you think about the use of military force? Well, we're going to have to probably keep waiting, because as much as I agree with Adam and I think that there is a consensus emerging about the importance of reestablishing article one authority over the use of military force-

Kathleen Hicks: -which is the role of Congress Article One, Article One being the role of Congress.

Kelly Magsamen: Sorry, Article One, role of Congress for all of you constitutional folks out there. I do think though that I think many candidates are going to resist getting too specific about some of the conditions around which they would

use military force, in part because when you get into the Oval Office and you're in the Situation Room, things are hard. The decisions are tough about, about some of these matters, whether it's UAV strikes, alleged UAV strikes around the world, or other areas around counter terrorism.

Kelly Magsamen: I think the bigger question, I think AUMF has been kind of the leading piece for this debate, but I actually think it's really important to have the AUMF conversation grounded in a review of our counter terrorism strategy, because I think at the end of the day how we use military force in the context of these, these forever wars or CT [counter terrorism] Wars is going to be derivative of what we're actually trying to achieve through them and whether the use of military force is actually helping or hurting our national security cause with respect to terrorism.

Kathleen Hicks: You know, the candidates have talked variously on AUMF. I have in front of me a Pete Buttigieg quote, which is, "The time has come for Congress repeal and replace that blank check on the use of force, AUMF, and ensure a robust debate on future operations." Do you sort of agree with, Kelly, that we're going to have to wait longer on that debate or do you think there is some momentum on the Hill? How are you thinking through the Hill piece of that?

Andrew Hunter: Well, I think the candidate's statement is clever because on the issue of everyone disliking the current AUMFs, there's almost complete consensus. I have not seen any Democrat who says, "Yeah, this is really ... We've got it exactly right. This is wonderful." And many of them didn't vote for it to begin with, even though they've kind of tolerated their existence for a long time. The question really is how do you replace them. I have not seen a lot of ability to build a consensus around that. Now, there have been serious efforts made, and very appropriately so by many to try and find that common ground, but I don't see us being that close. To me, stepping back for a second and you're thinking back to the 1990s.

Andrew Hunter: Okay, coming out of the Cold War experience where the idea was use of military force could always lead to conflict with the Russians, and there was a high bar, right, a high threshold. One often crossed, but nonetheless and then after the Cold War, that threshold has really come down to the point where now when the president authorizes some kind of a strike somewhere on the world, people kind of don't think twice about it. And so, a sense of recalibrating the threshold back up. I definitely think there's consensus.

Andrew Hunter: But it's complicated because kind of what goes into the use of force is, is becoming a much broader category. We're seeing President Trump using essentially trade policy as an instrument of national power to tie it in with a national security perspective. I wouldn't call it a strategy so much. But nonetheless on connecting these things, and information operations, the whole gray zone hybrid warfare space, where so much of what's going on is a use of military power to try and achieve national security objectives, not with the use of hard military power, but other forms of power, but ones that could escalate, could spiral into military conflict. I think it's getting even

more murky about how we want to think about this space, but it's definitely ripe for reevaluation.

Kathleen Hicks: You know, I think this whole conversation to this point leads you to the Syria theater, right? Because I think if you ask any Democrat should the United States have invaded Iraq, the answer is no. If you ask any Democrat, should the United States have aided the UN mission to end genocide in Rwanda, the answer is yes. And if you ask any Democrat what the US policy should be on a place like Syria, any individual Democrat is going to possibly have a different position or be not quite sure how they combine all these things we've just talked about into a coherent strategy. I think that's probably the area where it's hardest for Democrats, so just welcome thoughts from all of you on how we should be thinking Democrats might react in this. Is it just going to be a reaction because it's a political season to whatever the president's position is? Do you think there is a consensus forming around how the United States should be thinking about places like Syria and how do they reflect on the Obama Administration's strategy there?

Kelly Magsamen: With respect to Syria, I think the one thing that I feel, because I can't speak for all Democrats of course, is that I always had sort of questions around what the mission of our folks on the ground is and was in the context of Syria. I felt that the mission was never very clear. It was during the counter ISIS campaign, but in the last maybe year or so, it's become less clear in terms of is it protecting the Kurds? Is it basically creating this little buffer area? Or whether or not it's still a CT mission. I think that lack of clarity is something that I think most Democrats didn't like.

Kelly Magsamen: That said, I think what the president [President Trump] did, his sort of impetuous decision making around in a phone call to pull our troops out in a very unorderly way, not giving any allies a heads up, basically caving to Erdoğan's every demand is also not where Democrats think we should be going. I think that there is certainly a discomfort with some of these broader missions that don't necessarily have clarity around them, policy clarity, and strategy clarity, and how they fit into a bigger picture, but certainly doing what the president did this past week is something that I could not imagine any future Democratic president doing.

Adam Mount: I think it's completely fair to criticize the president's actions over the last two weeks in with regard to Syria as catastrophic, as poorly reasoned, as counterproductive, as just morally important. But you're right, there's some very serious questions here. Kath raised the issue of humanitarian intervention. That's a difficult issue for Democrats because it's an area where it's going to be morally unavoidable or morally intolerable for Democrats to sit by and watch Darfur happen. You might also include the rise of ISIS into that category in some ways. The issue about Libya is an area where we've, with Samantha Power's wonderful memoir, we've had a fair amount of reevaluation about what was the right way to think about that intervention, even if it was done for the right reasons, how did it turn out so terribly? How do we avoid making it an error like that in the future? It's an area where it's always going to be a constant struggle with Democrats.

Adam Mount: This ambiguity about when and how to use force for moral concerns to protect innocent and vulnerable populations has always existed on the political left in the United States. It's not going to go away. But I think the crucial thing is that we know which direction the debate needs to go. In terms of the AUMF debate a couple of years ago, we heard Senator Graham expressed surprise that there were American forces in Niger. You know, that's just unacceptable. It's just obviously ridiculous that that's how the country is operating. It's obviously ridiculous that not only did Donald Trump withdrew from Syria in such a haphazard in such a destructive way, but also that we were there without a mission to begin with. There's some strong principles that Democrats have here.

Adam Mount: But again, I just return to the point where there's a much deeper conversation that has to be had, not just among wonks and experts, but also within campaigns, within senate offices about how to address issues like this in the future, and Democrats just have not wanted to take on these hard questions on defense, and they really need to.

Andrew Hunter: Yeah, I do feel like even I struggle with the term "Forever War" because to me it's sort of a bit of a misnomer or maybe it's just a shortcut. A forever war seems like something that's clearly bad, so anything I can label that I don't want to be involved with, that's a bad thing.

Kathleen Hicks: The Korean conflict, for instance, is forever under that kind of things.

Andrew Hunter: Yeah, it is a "Forever War." Yeah. There is a war in Afghanistan. The US today plays a pretty small role in it, but arguably an important one. But if the US pulls its troops out, there will still be a war in Afghanistan. We're not going to end the forever war there by withdrawing. To me, it's a way of kind of avoiding the real conversation, which really is what are the objectives that we want and can realistically achieve in a lot of these conflicts, and what is the best way to do that. I don't know if it helps us, because again, we don't have a lot of consensus on these issues, but I think there is some consensus. What was so evocative and I think built some consensus against the precedent on Syria was at the outcome of all these Kurds having to flee their homes, and women and children being refugees, and all the deaths that occurred is clearly that is not the objective anyone was going for that. That's an objective. That's something that should have been avoided, and there's a lot of consensus around that. Similar situation with Darfur.

Andrew Hunter: Now having said that, look, in Syria when President Obama asked for the authority to strike in the aftermath of the chemical weapons attack, I can't think of a more morally defensible objective to forestall that, and yet he could not get the votes for it.

Kathleen Hicks: Couldn't get Republican votes in particular.

Andrew Hunter: Couldn't get any Republican votes but didn't have unity on the Democratic side, either.

Kathleen Hicks: Democratic side. Yeah. We could go probably all day. Just on that topic. I do want to turn to something else, Andrew, that you raised, which was the transgender service members issues and maybe draw that out a little bit into the issues of if you will, military and society, because Democrats have traditionally prioritized some of these issues. The Trump Administration in a way prioritize them as well. It was to change policy that had been established by the Obama Administration. But what are your thoughts on how important that set of issues is likely to be over the coming year and in a new administration if it's a Democratic administration?

Andrew Hunter: Well, I think it'll be very important because these issues of who can serve, is there some sort of social engineering happening at the Pentagon? You know, these are kind of the arguments that have been made against opening up service to a greater group of people. That's just always been a point of friction. Let's face it, when there's a Democrat in the white house, the relationship with the Department of Defense is always complicated, and in many cases it's been, quote-unquote, outsourced by having a Republican serve as Secretary of Defense to sort of defend against some of these arguments that there's a Democratic agenda that would be in some way in consonant with national security. I think inherently, it's a pressure, it's a fault line, as I mentioned earlier.

Andrew Hunter: Secondly, it's also critical because this issue of getting the right people in with the right skill sets, the right mix of worldviews and perspectives on national security is I think one of the fundamental issues of national security of our time, because the increasing importance of other instruments of national power, information operations, new technologies that require the skill sets that you may not find in the typical prototypical a military service member of the past. That is one of the most fundamental challenges we face. This week's Association of the United States Army meeting, the new Chief of Staff of the Army, Jim McConville, really made a case with talent management as his top priority, how to get the right mix of skills and the right people into the Army. So it's, it really is one of the fundamental that any administration will have to confront in the next several years.

Kathleen Hicks: Fascinating. First conversation with Adam Mount, Andrew Hunter, and Kelly Magsamen. Thank you so much for joining me. We look forward to the next episode and continuing the conversation.

Kelly Magsamen: Thank you.

Adam Mount: Thank you.

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