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“The Democratic Debate over Defense, Part 2”

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Kathleen Hicks: Hi, 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 United States' 2020 election cycle. We bring in defense experts from across the political spectrum to survey the debates over the US military strategy, missions and funding. This podcast is made possible by contributions from BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and the Thales Group.

Kathleen Hicks: Thanks for joining us again for Defense 2020, and we're going to continue the conversation today with our Democratic experts [Andrew Hunter, director, Defense-Industrial Initiatives Group and senior fellow, International Security Program at CSIS, Adam Mount, senior fellow and the director of the Defense Posture Project at the Federation of American Scientists, and Kelly Magsamen, vice president, National Security and International Policy at the Center for American Progress] looking at the range of issues that are facing the party as it looks ahead to this primary season, the general election season, and the possibility of governing in 2021.

Kathleen Hicks: Let's turn now to a debate that we've seen written about over what one author Van Jackson has called military sufficiency as a rule of thumb rather than military supremacy. This is in a description of what a progressive US military or defense approach would be.

Kathleen Hicks: I mentioned the Chicago Council in our last episode as a great source of polling and there's a poll that they've had out in 2019 that 70% of Americans that they surveyed see maintaining US military superiority as making the United States safer. I think one of the key questions Democrats are facing is what constitutes superiority? What constitutes sufficiency and what do these terms even really mean when you're trying to design a defense policy or strategy? And Kelly, I'm going to put you in the hot seat on that.

Kelly Magsamen: Yeah. I think this debate is really interesting, but I actually think the context is really going to matter. If you have a new administration under a Democratic president, we're going to be confronting a very different world after [President] Trump. I think we need to acknowledge that we're in a completely different universe. There are going to be a lot of nervous allies. There's going to be a lot of massive distrust of American intentions, strategic or otherwise that's going to make a new administration's defense strategy even harder to implement.

Kelly Magsamen: So on the question of military sufficiency versus superiority, I actually think there's a tension between this idea that we have to be out there, reassuring allies with presence operations and capabilities, investments and engagements and exercises, there's going to be that kind of stream. Then there's going to be the, oh, we should only do things that are about lethality. And there's a tradeoff between reassurance and lethality and sufficiency and deterrence.

- Kelly Magsamen: I think the context is going to matter. I think we need to be realistic and I think many Democrats are realistic that we're going to live in a world where our military power is going to be contested. It's going to be contested in the Pacific. It's going to be contested in Europe. It's already being contested in both places. I think that we need to basically reevaluate what we think of in terms of what is a successful deterrent strategy in both theaters.
- Kathleen Hicks: Yeah. Adam, you've actually written quite a bit in this general area. I'd love to get your thoughts on how we should think about the nesting of the defense policy and strategy in military in that larger toolkit of national security and what's enough?
- Adam Mount: Yeah, I think that's the crucial question. I think there are two major trends happening at the same time. One is the military. And many civilian military analysts are coming to recognize that we cannot fight wars the same way that we planned to in the past. It's not going to work effectively. Rapidly advancing Chinese, North Korean, Russian missile arsenals are just going to make it very difficult for the United States to flow forces into a region, marshal and then to apply it to a conflict in time to have a decisive effect. You've seen, for example, the Marine Corps Commandant release some thinking that's very, very thoughtful, very considerate about how to meet this challenge.
- Adam Mount: The other thing that's happening is the United States is spending 55% of every discretionary dollar on defense spending. If you think about it, there's really no way that the United States has had over the past several decades, certainly since the end of the Cold War, to evaluate different kinds of priorities. How much is enough? How much should we be spending on defense as a society?
- Adam Mount: As you see the Democratic primary raise issues of healthcare, inequality, poverty and homelessness, these require money. Medicare for all requires a huge amount of money. There's got to be some real questions about how much should we spend on defense spending? How much is too much? There has to be some number that's too much.
- Adam Mount: The critical thing is these two debates have to go hand in hand. You can't just have a list of cuts for what you want to cut. It needs to be married to a strategy to help meet our crucial deterrents commitments.
- Adam Mount: The military is still hooked on this idea of dominance in all domains. That means sort of preserving the ability to fight and win sometimes very close to adversaries' borders to achieve air dominance and then to fight on their own terms. They're sort of hooked on this strategy that's frankly outdated and totally implausible, buying a whole generation of things to sort of replicate the military so that it looks like it did in the past. A new generation of aircraft carriers, large surface combatants, marine dock ships, and expeditionary forces, penetrating stealth fighters that we think ... that don't have the range or can't generate the sortie rate to really make a difference in conflicts over the South China Sea for example, or in other theaters maybe over the Baltics.

Adam Mount: The two-bit debates have to be had at the same time. How can we rely more on allies to defend themselves? Because allies are increasingly capable, by the way. And how can we sort of shift our procurement priorities so that we're taking advantage of these capabilities that are very, very good at denying access and defending territory rather than trying to overcome those capabilities by spending more and more and more. It's critical to have the two debates together and that's frankly where Democrats need to go.

Kathleen Hicks: Andrew, he set that up so beautifully for your expertise on modernization and capabilities, so welcome your thoughts.

Andrew Hunter: Yeah, well sufficiency, I find utility in that term, but I also find that it's hard for me to address it analytically because it's very qualitative. And so from my perspective, I could look and say, "Well, if I believe that superiority is necessary to achieve mission outcome, then superiority is what's sufficient to achieve the mission objective." So I'm not sure I can fully carefully distinguish between a concept of superiority and a concept of sufficiency.

Andrew Hunter: I do agree actually, I have long frankly felt that our discussion about supremacy and dominance is a wildly fantastical. We're never going to achieve supremacy in all regimes and all domains and even if we have been dominant, it hasn't always allowed us to achieve our objective. So personally I welcome us moving away from use of those terms as somehow ways in which we think about sizing the defense budget or developing capabilities.

Andrew Hunter: But I'm not sure we've necessarily hit on something that can fully replace it. In the modernization context, I can't think of how it would help me design a system to think I want the system to be sufficient rather than dominant. Of course that rolls much more up into the concept of operations than it does into the equipment. And concepts of operations don't always lend themselves to an easy understanding of how do I change the budget, then that's my concept of operations, although you can obviously accept or reject different systems based on whether they play in that concept or not.

Andrew Hunter: I think we're still kind of struggling to come up with a way of talking about what kind of systems will work best in future conflicts. I definitely think that when we look at some of the, what I think of as more far-fetched ideas that seem to recur over time, we're going to have space lasers that can shoot down anything anywhere on the planet and then we'll have dominance and then we won't have any problems. I think a move away from or ability to argue against those approaches is useful.

Andrew Hunter: Honestly, the biggest way in which we've been able to address those concerns historically is just on cost, on budget. And that when the Republican revolution came in in 1994 and they had their "Contract with America", 10 bills, the one that didn't make it was the national security one. It failed because they wanted space-based missile defenses and the cost, according to the CBO [Congressional Budget Office] of that was \$60 billion, which doesn't seem like a shocking number now, but was a shocking number at that time and they couldn't pass it.

Kathleen Hicks: What's so interesting to me about that conversation you all just had is the tension between the desire that Democrats have for supporting allies, for demonstrating it's a force for good in the world, if you will. These are probably caricatures, but you hear a lot of that kind of framing, particularly if it's a post-Trump Administration thinking through how to establish the values piece, seems to be important in everything you all have said. So how do you balance then what it is the allies value and the role of the military in that, and I would hazard a guess that that includes arm sales, security cooperation, agreements, exercises, presence of US forces, probably some amount of conventional 20th century style or even early 21st century style weaponry against the picture you're painting of how different the way of war may be in this next century?

Kelly Magsamen: You hit the nail on the head Kat.

Kathleen Hicks: And we're done. Thank you for playing.

Kelly Magsamen: I think that's exactly right. There is going to be an impulse in a new administration to do a big kind of showing of reassurance to all our allies and partners around the world, and that is going to be a tension with a restraint approach on the defense side. So I think there's going to be some really early decision making tradeoffs that are going to happen with a new team.

Kelly Magsamen: I also think though, getting to something you raised earlier, thinking about how we compete with China or Russia and more importantly China, I think is, I think Democrats have a broader view of that competition and I think that part of that is going to be the economic piece of that. That's going to be way more about the investments we're making in infrastructure at home and research and development and education and things like that, and I think the military tool set is going to become increasingly actually less useful in the context of competition. I know that's a controversial statement. I'm sure I'll get lots of emails about that.

Kelly Magsamen: But I do think that at the end of the day, the competition we're really going to have to be most effective is going to be the economic side. And so thinking about competition and where the military piece lands in that I think is important.

Kelly Magsamen: And back to operational concepts because I am obsessed with this idea. I know you are too Kat.

Kathleen Hicks: Yes.

Kelly Magsamen: We need new operational concepts; bottom line. I think part of that is going to be how do we create strategic dilemmas for our adversaries so that they don't take the steps either in a gray zone space or otherwise or even maybe pushing back against an ally of ours in the first place. So how do we create that dilemma for Beijing to make that decision, oh should I build that Island in the South China Sea because something else might happen to me on trade

or I might lose a partnership here or there? I think we need to be thinking differently and that is also important to the non-military context as well.

Kelly Magsamen: I think all of this is, that was a long winded way of saying that I think we need to completely reevaluate it. I think there's going to be a lot of tradeoffs I think early on about some of these decisions.

Adam Mount: This is an area where I think Van Jackson's principle on military sufficiency is really helpful. I think you're right. It's not a force sizing construct; it's deeply ambiguous. But I think what it was Van Jackson, just to clarify, proposed this sort of standard or concept in a Texas National Security Review roundtable on a progressive foreign policy. I think it's helpful because it tries to transition us away from fighting and winning everywhere, from meeting every mission, everything that the military can possibly do, toward a concept that picks and chooses specific missions that we need the military to meet.

Adam Mount: We need the military to be able to shorten a conflict with North Korea, prevent them from carrying out mass casualty attacks on the South. We need to prevent the Russians from taking the Baltics. There are a handful of critical missions. Rather than structure our forces for what could they potentially do that is beneficial to America, perfect security to defend against any ballistic missile that's fired anywhere in the world, countering or preventing any kind of gray zone aggression or operation, may not be a feasible objective.

Adam Mount: Part of what it means to say that we might not win the next war is that we sort of can't be engaged and we can't sort of put American credibility and American forces on the line for every possible objective. So we need to think seriously about what our objectives in the Pacific, for example. They're relatively limited.

Kathleen Hicks: How would you define those? Just to follow through on the example, or a few of those.

Adam Mount: Yeah. Well, it's a tough conversation because you want to defend South Korea against North Korean aggression. You don't want territorial encroachment into core South Korean or Japanese interests. But the South China Sea for example, it's a lost cause; that ship's sailed. There's no amount of military force or commitment or threats that the United States can make to roll back Chinese island building activities. I think we just need to be realistic about that.

Adam Mount: So what military sufficiency helps us do is to say what are the forces that are required to defend these core interests rather than all the nice to haves in terms of dominance or supremacy or superiority that wouldn't necessarily help us accomplish our core objectives, and to really reevaluate the role of the American military in the world, what it can accomplish and what it never will be able to without any additional funding.

Kelly Magsamen: 15:10 Just picking up on that. I think Adam's right. It's about what we're actually trying to achieve. So is the goal in the Pacific, for example, to have complete military superiority or not? Is it to be completely economically dominant or not? In my view, our goal in the Asia Pacific should be ... and/or Indo-Pacific now, which is on trend ... should be ensuring that all countries have the ability to make their own security and economic decisions. That's a very different objective.

Kelly Magsamen: 15:43 And so aligning a military instrument to that objective looks very different than dominating and surrounding China with lots of bases and the access agreements and things like that. But you want to make sure that the countries in the region feel that they have a choice and that they can make that choice free of coercion.

Andrew Hunter: 15:58 Yeah. I actually think this connection, if you will, between economic and military objectives and power may help us understand better or clarify what we're trying to achieve. Because if, for example, if we were to say our goal with China economically is to completely defeat them, that's absurd. First of all, in terms of achieving it, and secondly, it wouldn't even be a US interest. If they're a billion and a half Chinese people living in desperate poverty, that would not in any way enhance the United States as an economic position in the world or help us. It's much easier to then come back and say so actually an economically prosperous China is in the US interests, but as long as it's not one that's-

Kathleen Hicks: Just to be clear for the listener because it's a market, is that your point?

Andrew Hunter: Yeah, because it's a market and because them having some degree of economic prosperity forestalls lots of things like refugee crises and other things that would not be in US interests. But what we don't want is for them to dominate the economic structure of world trade and to impose a disadvantageous terms of trade on their neighbors and or any other part of the world, to set the rules of the world economic activity in a way that disadvantages either us or any other nation in a significant way.

Andrew Hunter: I think we can articulate a set of pretty clear interests in the economic space. And I think those do largely align, and hopefully if we're being clever, almost fully align with related national security interests about China again, not imposing its will militarily on its neighbors or other parts of the world as well.

Andrew Hunter: I think we can start to work towards a definition of US national interests, both economic and national security, which can help us figure out how do we then act with our national power of, which military is one component to achieve those objectives.

Kathleen Hicks: Andrew, I'm going to stick with you for a moment as we shift to budget because budget obviously is already implicit in much we've talked about. FY 2020 we have a \$738 billion defense budget. That's the base budget, not including overseas contingency accounts as I recall. You have in general

support on Capitol Hill from Democrats in general, as I said, to keep roughly where we are and among the American public, the polling looks about right. Gallup's latest polling in 2019 says 25% of Americans say spending's too low, 29% say too high, and the Goldilocks scenario of 43% say it is just fine.

Kathleen Hicks: So we could keep just trucking along if you will. And yet there is this significant conversation to the extent that there's any conversation happening in the Democratic primaries on defense is around spending. For instance, I have a quote here from Elizabeth Warren. "How do we responsibly cut back? We can start by ending the stranglehold of defense contractors on our military policy. It's clear that the Pentagon is captured by the so called big five defense contractors and taxpayers are picking up the bill."

Kathleen Hicks: If in general Democrats definitely don't want to go up in defense spending, [they] at least want to maintain or possibly go down, what are those-is she right or is that the place we go? Are there other areas we should be looking at in order to constrain defense spending while achieving these goals we've all just talked about?

Andrew Hunter: Yeah. Again, I think the statement is carefully crafted to appeal to something that is some level of consensus, which is big defense companies maybe aren't the most popular things in the world with the Democrats broadly, but it gets really complicated as soon as you dip even just one level below. Democrats from Washington state sort of think fondly about the Boeing company. Maybe they would be less concerned about one of the other big five companies that isn't so present in their state. But then you go to Democrats in Texas and they actually think Lockheed Martin's a pretty good company but they're not so sure about the rest of them.

Andrew Hunter: I think the consensus there to the extent there is any, breakdowns almost instantaneously when you move off of that very high level talking point. And the same is true in the budget. If you focus on the big five companies, you're really talking largely about the procurement and R&D budgets because that's where they get the vast majority of their revenues-

Kathleen Hicks: 20:14 Because they're building capital-

Andrew Hunter: ... because they're building equipment. Yeah. Well of course it's an important and non-insignificant part of the budget. It's a large part of the budget. But the budget is much, much, much bigger than what we're spending on modernization and R&D. So if one truly wants to go after the major cost drivers within the budget, you've got to think more broadly than that.

Andrew Hunter: One of the things that came out of the very much maligned effort in the Obama Administration in the wake of sequestration to think strategically about how we might make choices and cut the budget was two things. One is force structure; drives a huge amount of where the money in the budget goes, and that's true even on the equipment side because much of what we buy is simply to equip these forces that we've decided to-

- Kathleen Hicks: Just to break that down. Force structure in this case equaling and strength, so number of personnel plus the equipment that they have to use.
- Andrew Hunter: Yeah, yeah, and the sorts of formations that they're organized into; brigade combat teams and fighter squadrons and those things. You really have to affect those things in order to change substantial the budget picture.
- Andrew Hunter: The second thing coming out of that is it doesn't happen overnight. That in fact usually if you want to make reductions to the budget it may cost you in the near term in order to get savings in the long term. Which was the major reason why that effort essentially was completely ignored before the ink was dry was because we didn't have the time. Sequestration was in effect and we couldn't make strategic choices to cut things because we needed the money right away and so we had to do very un-strategic things to get that.
- Andrew Hunter: I think the new administration is going to have to wrestle with these questions and figure out if fundamentally if we want to change the scale of the defense budget, that will mean taking on force structure.
- Kathleen Hicks: Kelly, in addition to structure, which is again people, just to be clear are a big piece of that who are employed and also installations, which exist in districts and health benefits. All these are really hard areas to go after. How do you think about getting it, the defense budget?
- Kelly Magsamen: Yeah. It's very difficult and I think there are very significant fixed costs on personnel that are increasing and not decreasing are going to increase over time. That's our biggest cost in the defense budget is personnel. So I do think looking at strength and force structure is really important. I happen to believe for example, that the Army is far too big. I think there are a lot of people who believe that as well.
- Kelly Magsamen: I think there are going to be some decisions about what we want the military to look like that are going to drive cost. What we want the military to be able to do, which I think is the most important question that Democrats face, which will drive the budget. For example, the military was very engaged in the Ebola response, I remember back in the [Obama] Administration. And it was because they had the capacity to get on the ground and set up and run the effort. And so do we want our military to be able to do those kinds of missions? Well, that requires in some cases capabilities. It requires presence in many places. I think starting with first and foremost of what we actually want the military to do is going to be the most important question.
- Kelly Magsamen: Also I do think there is a desire among Democrats to get to a more sustainable defense spending level. Now what that looks like, we're at 3.4% right now, so could we get to a 3% rate? I know the percentage is not a useful measure some times, but I do think getting to a more sustainable level over time that's also predictable for the Pentagon to plan around, I think are going to be the two most important elements of the budget approach.

Adam Mount: The argument about any corruption about efficiencies and waste, that's the easy argument to have and it's an absolutely as far as I'm concerned, ironclad argument. You mentioned that Americans tend to like defense contractors where they live. I think the more Americans knew about just how much waste there is, just how much outrageous overcharging there is ... over the last couple of weeks there was a Yahoo news report, the diagram, just the sheer quantity of regular consistent overcharging and fraud amongst defense contractors, I think the American people would be infuriated if they knew more about that. So if a Democrat wanted to raise that issue, I think it could gain a lot of traction.

Adam Mount: Will defense spending be a major issue in the campaign? Elizabeth Warren wrote in Foreign Affairs and made this claim in a couple of speeches that we need to take out a sharp knife and make some cuts. If she puts forward a plan to do that, I think it could become a major issue, but otherwise it's likely to sort of get lost in the shuffle.

Adam Mount: But the critical thing is waste, fraud, any corruption; that's the easy answer. We should get serious about it. It takes a lot more leverage. It takes a lot more political will. It'll be a huge fight to cut fat within the defense budget that frankly the Pentagon identified but hasn't been forced to cut.

Adam Mount: The really hard question, as Kelly and Kat say, is about force structure. It's incredibly difficult to save large amounts of money or significant percentages of defense spending without seriously downsizing the force. This is why it has to be coupled with a new concept of operational concepts and strategic objectives. It's not just a cuts list, it's not just a list of planes that you think don't work quite well enough or you're worried about the aircraft carrier catapult. You need some theory about what are the objectives that's crucial for the United States military and how we can meet them with less. I think that there's an available argument there. It's just got to be articulated.

Kathleen Hicks: Let's do a quick round on areas we should be investing. I think there's tends to be a lot of skepticism that Democrats are thinking, if you will, in this space. So I'd love to hear you three talk about where the US should be investing its defense dollars. I can start maybe with Kelly if that's okay? I'll just go around.

Kelly Magsamen: Okay. For me it comes down to human capital actually. I think that the investments we need to be making for an effective force are in our people. We have a very, as you know Kat from experience in the Pentagon, a very sclerotic system when it comes to recruiting, for example, civilians into the defense architecture. Obviously our military recruitment structure is sclerotic as well. We don't invest in the training and education. I mean the military does a decent job at it, but like on the civilian side, we're not that great. We've been cutting on the civilian side for quite some time. We've got a lot of brain drain, especially in the current [Trump] Administration of very senior and effective defense civilians leaving the Pentagon because the military is essentially taking over in many ways.

- Kelly Magsamen: For me it comes down to just first and foremost is going to be the human capital piece.
- Andrew Hunter: I'm going to agree with that. Maybe cutting against type here as the person who focuses on modernization, but just expand the frame a little bit. So I would also say we need to think about what is the human capital we want industry to have as well. I actually would welcome a dialogue of let's look at where the money and industry goes and how it's used and is that what we want?
- Andrew Hunter: At the end of the day there are capabilities that we need that industry will be required to produce and how industry charges the government for those absolutely merits very close examination. But you also have to look at the big picture, which is a lot of these companies do most of their work in defense and their margins and things are public. They're not out setting bonfires of cash in front of corporate headquarters because they've just ripped all that off from the government.
- Andrew Hunter: Now there are cases, many cases where they have overcharged. There are other cases where the rules of the game put them at a little bit of a disadvantage. The government has very strong rules in the defense space that they have to report costs down to the fraction of a penny. And so there's a lot of information out there about where do we want it to go. I think we do need an investment in engineers in the kind of capability it's going to take to make sure that as AI capabilities develop and are used in military conflict, we can control that. We can use it in the ways we want to use it, not have it spiral out of our ability to control either our use or the use of others.
- Andrew Hunter: I would agree that it is about people. There's this sense that well, if we can invest in a weapon system, it's going to solve that problem in the future. It's not. It never has. But if we can invest in people and having kind of that engineering ecosystem that can apply new capabilities where they're required for our national security, that's where we want to be.
- Adam Mount: Yeah, that's absolutely right. People is the clear answer, both in terms of experts and strategists and engineers that are capable of grasping new technological trends, but also qualified people to run, for example, procurement programs, that really have the background to understand what they're dealing with and really execute administrations' objectives.
- Adam Mount: But just to supplement with an answer about force structure; I think the area where you want to prioritize is the high end capabilities that supplement allied forces and their ability to defend themselves. That means coming to grips with the fact that an armored brigade combat team may not be able to get from CONUS [Continental United States] to the Baltics in time to confront the Russians coming over the border. But there's a lot that we can do to enhance those militaries.

Adam Mount: It goes back to operational concepts; enhancing and strengthening and enabling allied forces around the world that are actually on the front lines of many of these conflicts.

Kathleen Hicks: Fascinating two episode tour de force, we have here from Kelly Magsamen, Andrew Hunter and Adam Mount, thank you all for joining me.

Kathleen Hicks: On behalf of CSIS I'd like to thank our sponsors, BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and the Thales Group for contributing to Defense 2020.

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