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“Great Power Competition”

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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. And 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: In this episode of Defense 2020, I'll be speaking with four experts about great power competition. Michael Mazarr, Senior Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation; Oriana Skylar Mastro, Assistant Professor of Security Studies at Georgetown and Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute; Chris Preble, Vice President for Defense and Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute; and Kori Schake, Deputy Director General of the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Kathleen Hicks: Thanks to everybody for joining. We have in the room here today Oriana and Chris and Mike, and we have Kori Schake joining us by phone from London. All of you have been writing on the very topic we're going to talk about today, which is great power competition or strategic competition. These are terms that are very much in the discussion points inside the Washington security establishment and among allies, but I think there's probably a lot to break down in terms of whether those terms have meaning that's universal, whether there's differences of view on the terms themselves or their value. And so maybe Oriana, we can just start with you and get your sense. Is this frame, great power competition, is it meaningful? Is it accurate? Should we be using it?

Oriana Skylar Mastro: So I think this is the best frame that we have right now. If you look historically, every time you have a situation like a rising power like China and you have an established great power like the United States, the dynamics of that relationship are different every single time. The nature of power is different every single time. So what we have is this term that we use to describe when two countries have amassed enough military, political, and economic power such that they can compete with one another. Usually it's globally or in key strategic areas.

Oriana Skylar Mastro: I would say it's difficult to explain the US-China relationship that way, only because we don't have that parity quite yet. China, I think, is more of a rising power than a great power at this point. But I understand the individuals who decided to use this term, it was mainly to signal to the US bureaucracy that the age of "Forever War", as in counterterrorism, and the United States focusing on security threats that might not be so existential, is over. And we have to now think about tradeoffs, prioritization of things that are more important, like dealing with the rise of China.

Kathleen Hicks: And Mike, you and your team at RAND have written about this frame and its historical antecedents. And also about, if you will, the complexity in the

current environment. Do you think we're framing up our security challenges right, right now?

Michael Mazarr: I think that the term great power competition is misleading in a lot of ways. I agree entirely that I think it's in some ways the best we have, and it is symbolic of a shift to competition with major powers. But to me, the historic basis of this is in a world that's a much more of a free for all, with multiple great powers all facing off against one another and trying to develop a policy for that environment. And why that's misleading to me is that that's not the world that we have today. Particularly the US-China relationship, I think, is evolving under the shadow of this postwar order that we put together, where we have a lot of value sharing democracies that we can work with. And to think in terms of great power competition, to me, misses the real structure of international politics now, which is not as it was in those earlier years of great power competition.

Michael Mazarr: 04:04 When we looked at it, even the word competition is used a million times in the IR literature, but it's very undertheorized in terms of what it actually means. I think it's a great point that every one of these cases is unique and contingent. So we should think in terms of a rising and increasingly intense competition across multiple areas with China, with a revisionist Russia in the background, and treat it as it is. And not worry so much about putting it underneath a concept.

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah. Chris, your view.

Christopher Preble: So in addition to the problem with competition that Mike highlighted, and again, what does this mean, the nature of this competition is likely to be different. I hope we get into that. I have two problems with it. First of all, I have a hard time equating or lumping together Russia and China. China is a rising power, Russia is a declining power. I struggle even to think of Russia as a great power with maybe one or two key exceptions. Well, that is, thousands of nuclear weapons and UN Security Council permanent membership. So those are two big exceptions. But I think the differences between these two countries are so dramatic, to lump them together as the National Security Strategy tries to do is a real problem.

Christopher Preble: The other issue I have with... And I think we have to set the historical framework. I think it's important to see this as a different period from what we were coming out of, which is clearly a period of unipolarity or unchallenged primacy. Where there was not a major, or even approaching peer competitor, who was likely to bump up against the United States when we were doing lots of small brush fire wars, from Kosovo to even Iraq and Afghanistan. We didn't bump up against China and Russia in Iraq and Afghanistan until very recently. Now we're bumping up against both the Chinese and the Russians when the United States is exerting power in some of these "Forever Wars" like we're talking about.

Kathleen Hicks: Is there a framework you prefer?

Christopher Preble: International relations, which is to say the nature of international relations is a jockeying for position and power. And so we really should look back on the period from roughly '90 or '91, to pick a date, maybe 2008 around the time of the financial crisis, a period of relative unchallenged American dominance. And to delineate this as a different period, which is more like traditional international relations, and not unipolarity.

Kathleen Hicks: So Kori, you've written an entire book on this topic of transitioning across, I'll just call them great powers. In your case, it was writing about Britain and the US. What do you think is the best way to characterize this debate we're having over, whether it's US-China relations, international relations in a context of a US-China competition, and the role of Russia?

Kori Schake: So I too think great power competition isn't an ideal fit. It's plenty good enough for what we're trying to say, which is we're scared about a revanchist Russia and a rising, aggressive, authoritarian China. But I think it conflates two important elements of the problem. One is the nature of country strong enough to be dangerous to us?

Kori Schake: The second element of it is why we're actually afraid of those countries. And that has to do with normative issues. It has to do with issues of governance. We're not scared of a strong Germany. We're scared of a strong China or a strong Russia because of the nature of governance in those societies and the way domestic governance issues color their international behavior. So I think there's both a type of governance, a piece of what we're talking about when we talk about great power competition. And also an, oh God, these countries are getting strong. Or like Russia, as Chris pointed out, it's not getting strong, but it's got the necessary tools to do a lot of damage to us, and a willingness to do so.

Kathleen Hicks: So what are some of the blind spots, if you think there are any, in having a very focused approach? So the good news it sounds like is that the US is focusing its security attention, as Oriana put it, has a framework in which it's driving attention to this issue in particular, of US-China competition. Mike, Chris, and Kori, you've pointed out some of these other ways in which the US is trying to think through its security beyond the China piece. What might be some of those areas that we are under attending to, or just need to make sure we're capturing?

Oriana Skylar Mastro: So I have a few ideas on this. I would say the great power competition framework is good because it describes to us maybe what these countries want. I think China wants to be dominant in their region, and I don't think they want to have that global dominance in a military sense. I think they think political and economic power is sufficient for them to be able to veto things that aren't in their favor and to have a degree of control over the future of those regions. But one of the main differences today than maybe the Cold War era is I see Asia as being the center of power in the world. So just like the United States or the Soviet Union felt like they had to control Europe to be a superpower, nowadays you have to control Asia to be a

superpower. And so the concept lets us focus on the fact that China does have that ambition.

Oriana Skylar Mastro: But the big blind spot that I see, at least for a lot of individuals who may be focused on great power competition but not China in particular, is they assume China wants what the United States has, and that China is going to try to gain it the same way the United States has gained it. So one of the big problems has to do with how they have focused largely on political and economic power to date to leverage other countries. In the majority of the world, that's the type of power they use. They don't think foreign military intervention is a good tool of power. And they don't have, at this point, plans to have a global military presence in the same way the United States does.

Oriana Skylar Mastro: Now, we're always looking for tools or keys of what their intentions are. We're looking for things like overseas basing. One Belt, One Road will be significant when there's overseas basing. It's significant now because that's not how China does things. And so one of my main concerns when we use some of these analogies, great power competition, when you talk about World War II, the Cold War, those states were very different in how they thought was the most effective means of accumulating power. So the United States didn't seek colonies after World War II. China's not going to seek the same type of global presence we have. And so I think we're preparing for the wrong type of threats because we're preparing to deal with ourselves.

Kathleen Hicks: So intriguing. And you've written before about this as displacing, rather than replacing, the US. Is that what you mean?

Oriana Skylar Mastro: Exactly.

Michael Mazarr: Yeah, I'd say two things. One is I agree entirely that the great power competition frame harks back to eras where armies and political military power and Hans Morgenthau's concepts ruled the world. That's not the main challenge we face today. A second thing is I think that by calling forth this image of a bunch of independent, conflictual countries, to get to what Kori was saying, it causes us to downplay the greatest advantage I think a great power has ever had, which is the alignment of world politics that we've helped to put into place in the last 70 years.

Michael Mazarr: Even apart from whether we believe in the significance of a rules based order, if you just look at US formal alliances and the economic and military power behind them, not that everyone is going fight against any potential threat, but broadly speaking, you have an alignment of world politics that is an enormous advantage for us, that mostly wants what we want, and is certainly not going to come out in support of aggressive military action, or even excessively course of economic action by others. So to the extent that a great power competition frame causes us to think transactionally, bilaterally, unilaterally, it causes us to undermine our greatest competitive advantage.

Christopher Preble: That's really well said. I want to echo that completely. I also want to come back to something Oriana said about prioritization. It was clear that the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy wanted to emphasize this transition away from the "Forever Wars", from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, into a different kind of competition against a rising power and near peer. But in practical terms, that's not what has happened. In fact, even as the Trump Administration claims to be prioritizing China above all else, you also have Trump Administration officials bending over backwards to reassure allies in Europe and in the Middle East that the United States presence and role in those regions is not diminishing at all. And again, the Obama Administration experienced a similar problem when they attempted to pivot to Asia. So unless we are serious about prioritization, it doesn't matter what the documents say. We actually need to follow through, and we need to have a strategic culture here in the United States that believes that we have to pick and choose, that we can't do everything in every part of the world in the same way that we could, or thought we could, when we were the only power in the world that mattered.

Kathleen Hicks: Kori, I want to invite you to comment on this stream, but also I wanted to flag that you've written before about the applicability, roughly, in defense of the applicability of the Cold War analogy as roughly good enough for how we should be thinking about the US-China competition. So love to hear your thoughts on that or any of the conversation.

Kori Schake: Sure. I agree with the challenges that Oriana raised initially about historical precedence of great power competition, and very strongly Chris's concerns about it also very strongly resonated with me. But the Cold War analogy is useful in one way, which connects to my biggest concern about our blind spot, which is the militarization of the issue. It seems to me that during the Cold War, we understood that military force could freeze the competition and channel it into economic and political and cultural and alliance directions in ways that we understood were advantageous to us. That that would play into our strengths to take it out of sheer military direct engagement. I worry that we're not thinking enough that way about China. It's partly the priming of great power competition, which brings to mind the Napoleonic Wars. It's partly the fact that the Defense Department is so much better at planning than any other part of the American government is, that they're always far out ahead in implementation of the strategies.

Kori Schake: What I hope we will understand from any Cold War analogy, or from the framing of great power competition, is that we actually don't want this to be a military confrontation. What we ought to be doing is thinking as creatively, as diabolically, about the ways that we can influence Chinese government behavior the way we did during the Cold War.

Kori Schake: Let me just give you my very favorite example. The Obama Administration, the Ambassador in Beijing, Governor Huntsman, posted on the embassy website the air quality index in Beijing. It cost us no money to do that. It risks no confrontation with the Beijing government. All it did was force the

government of China into accountability about something its own public cared about. Thinking creatively enough about that, not about how to get the Chinese government to agree to the rules that we have established in the international order, but to align lines of operation such that they're forced into it by their own interests and by their own needs. And we're not given nearly enough thought to that kind of small ball activity that is our comparative advantage with authoritarian society.

Oriana Skylar Mastro: I just want to add, I think the situation now between China and the United States is actually more difficult and more complicated than what existed between the United States and the Soviet Union, for a number of reasons. Kori laid out a few of the key differences, and one I would like to add is that the United States doesn't have the advantage in the economic sphere. That is a huge difference. I agree that we don't want to over militarize this issue, but even if the United States does establish itself as the security partner of choice, which I think is a big goal of our military strategy, that's not enough. Most countries in Southeast Asia might think of the United States as a security partner of choice, but still might lean towards China because of the economic power that's there.

Oriana Skylar Mastro: Which brings up another point, which is China doesn't present the same threat to its neighbors in many ways that the Soviet Union did. Now of course, there are territorial disputes, there is a likelihood of conflict. But China doesn't have plans to invade and occupy any of these countries, so we're not really looking at a Chinese presence in Japan that we have to defend against.

Oriana Skylar Mastro: And the last thing I'll say about this is on the military side, China has a local advantage. So Soviet Union and the United States, we were both trying to project power all over the world. And with that power projection and geography came many challenges. We face a China that doesn't have to have those challenges because they're fighting at home. So in a lot of ways, I think we need to shift the conversation a bit. Not just be about United States and China, and Kori is absolutely correct about trying to shape some of Chinese behavior. But in my view, competition is about the rest of the world. All the other countries in the world and how they perceive China, how they perceive the United States, and the United States in ensuring that we are actually an attractive partner across the board.

Oriana Skylar Mastro: I think because of the ideological differences, we'd like to believe that of course we are. Of course people would prefer to be partners with the United States than China. But in my experience in the region and around the world, I think that's a lot of wishful thinking, and we have to work a little bit harder.

Kathleen Hicks: And you think that's mainly due to the economic aspect?

Oriana Skylar Mastro: I used to think it was only the economic aspect. Now, this is a somewhat unformed, but recently I've been spending a lot of time with senior government officials from developing countries in South America and the

Middle East. Their viewpoint is that the United States also engages in equally coercive behaviors, so that there's not a huge difference for the majority of countries relying on China versus relying on the United States. The only difference is they don't have to deal with a lot of the political issues in terms of relying on China. I originally thought of course it would be better to partner with the United States, but now more and more I'm coming to realize that for other countries that assume they have to rely on someone, what's the difference between having Huawei deepen their country versus multinational corporations deepen their country?

Christopher Preble: Look, this is not a pleasant conversation for those of us who are living here in the United States and believe certain things about US foreign policy. We talk about our comparative advantage, our comparative advantage being the attractiveness of our cultural model, our economic model, being a model for others. But the fact is that we have exhibited behavior and practiced behavior that we have said that others cannot engage in. So we are the ultimate hypocrites. The evidence of this is just overwhelming. And so Oriana, it does not surprise me to hear this from others. Perhaps they're being a little bit more vocal for two reasons. One, because they do see an alternative in a way that they didn't see an alternative 15 or 20 years ago. Maybe it's a warning that we should listen to. Maybe we, the United States, should actually adhere to the values that we profess, and maybe then we would be more attractive than we have been in recent years.

Kathleen Hicks: So Mike, we hear this from folks inside the Trump Administration, but more broadly there's this debate about whether what we're really talking about is more ideational, which is authoritarianism versus the free world, if you will, that there's a values competition underway. It sounds like in this conversation that everyone seems to believe there's at least an aspect of that, this is not pure structural elements of a rising China and a Russia trying to go out with a bang, but that there are these underlying aspects. Is that your thought as well?

Michael Mazarr: Yeah, I think so. I think, as I think everybody would agree, that it's very different, the Cold War. It's not a fundamentally ideological situation, and it's not one where the essence of each system implies or demands a fundamental change in the other system. Which gets to the interesting question of, end game of what do we define as success in a competition with another side that is not probably going away, and we cannot have the same vision in the Cold War transiting their system.

Michael Mazarr: But I would say, actually, the last six months to a year have surprised me and have raised a question. I think, as not a China scholar, but they seem to be pretty good at learning lessons and backing off when they overstep. But they are making this into a more ideological competition than it was a year ago. And if they persist in that direction with intervention in politics in other countries, obviously Hong Kong is an issue with lawsuits against various people, bribing people to run for parliament in different countries. If they persist in that, then I think you begin to have a more significant

differentiation beginning to be on the level of the Cold War. But my hunch is that they're too smart to continue toppling down that hill. So I think that in this sense, the fact that it's a competition against an authoritarian government is absolutely a significant part of it. It is not the dominant part as it was in the Cold War.

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah. Kori, we've already touched a little bit on this issue, but love to hear your thoughts on what the US response toolkit looks like. You talked about an over-militarization as a potential blind spot and the advantages of taking low cost approaches in other sectors. What would hit your top list of areas where the US ought to be investing more intellectual thought and dollars?

Kori Schake: So I agree with Oriana and Chris that the United States' hypocrisy, or failing to live to the standards that we established, is a huge way to damage our ability to win this contest. I also agree with Mike's earlier point that our alliances are our comparative advantage, that we're able to play team sports in a way that the Chinese can't attract the same kind of cooperation. I think advancing the rule of law, we tend to focus very much on democracy promotion. But if you advance the rule of law, you will get most of what we want from democracy promotion without creating the anxieties of lots of countries about regime change.

Kori Schake: Rachael Bronson, now at the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, has long made this argument about the Middle East. I think it's true not just for the Middle East, but more broadly advancing the rule of law, helping people craft laws that are enforceable and just. Basically everything that you would read in that magnificent 1958 novel, *The Ugly American*, which was about what would fail and what would succeed as American foreign policy in Vietnam are things we should do. Help local business get started, create opportunities in education. A lot of the steps that NGOs [Non-Governmental Organizations] do, we should also have the government fingerprint on. At least supporting and cheerleading those things, which costs us nothing and creates a vision of the kinds of societies that most people want for themselves. Where there are people who don't want those things, they tend to be corrupt and it tends to not work. So it puts us on the right side of those arguments, both for our own values and for what we're trying to reinforce, or where it doesn't make sense to create internationally.

Kathleen Hicks: Just focusing maybe on China for the moment. Chris, I'm going to put you on the spot and ask you what your perspective is in terms of debates in the US political foreign policy community across the political spectrum, over how we should be thinking about a US-China competition and how this might play out throughout this election cycle.

Christopher Preble: So my colleagues, John Glaser and Trevor Thrall and I, just finished a book. We settled on the disturbing conclusion that the one area of emerging bipartisanship is China is the great enemy and shall define everything that we do for the next generation. And we're troubled by that because what we see is a tendency to want to lump everything together around this frame,

and the way the National Security Strategy does this is China. So pick an issue. Industrial policy, industrial planning, how resources are allocated within the society, the level of taxation, the level of spending on domestic priorities. All of these things can be advanced in the service of getting serious about competing with China. It's the one area where you can find Democrats and Republicans actually agreeing with one another, whereas if you framed it in any other context, they would be opposed.

Christopher Preble: 26:20 There again, among the Republicans, there is at least a lingering anti-state or small state but not really, because of course they just don't want to pay for the state that they support. And among Democrats, there is a traditional reluctance to be outhocked by the Republicans. But they see this as an opportunity, I think, to push a domestic policy agenda as well. Again, to mobilize resources. So that's what really concerns me about this. Again, more as a domestic political matter than it does a strategic matter.

Christopher Preble: But the strategic danger is that we're creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, and we're not actually playing to our strengths. We've all talked about this today. What are the United States' comparative advantage? What I worry about is that we are trading away those comparative advantages. And one of the other ways that we're doing so is, well, we need to be more like China in terms of the way they mobilize resources like Belt and Road, major infrastructure projects. We need to be more like the Chinese in terms of mobilizing resources within the domestic economy. I say no, actually, that's exactly what we should not do, because that's trading way what actually will allow us to, I think, emerge from this competition stronger than if we just follow the Chinese model.

Kathleen Hicks: Can you just walk through a couple of those areas where you think we can emerge stronger?

Christopher Preble: Sure. I think that on rule of law, and I think we should define that quite specifically. From my ideological perspective, candidly, I think things like property rights and human rights and individual liberty and the ability to speak, all of the freedoms that we take for granted here in the United States, advancing those in a non-coercive way as a model, and not one that we're imposing on others. I do think that ultimately, that would lead to us emerging stronger, because I think it is more attractive than the alternative, which is a top down authoritarian model and state driven, and all the inefficiencies that the Soviet Union learned to its chagrin.

Kathleen Hicks: So we're going to conclude around the table with a tough question, and I'm going to start with Mike. And that is for the listener, help them think through how they should think about the US approach right now in great power competition and the state of the international environment, using any pop culture reference you choose.

Michael Mazarr: So what came to my mind was something that doesn't exist yet but should, which is a *Black Mirror* episode where the main character is looking at a

world that existed 20 years ago, but they don't know that they're looking at a world that is 20 years old. They're interacting with the world as if it's still existed 20 years ago, and everybody around them is wondering why they are behaving so oddly, because they just can't see the world as it is.

Kathleen Hicks: Great. Oriana.

Oriana Skylar Mastro: So I would go with a Beyonce song, *The Best Thing I Never Had*, because I think we talk a lot about great power competition, and at the highest levels of our government, they will say that this is a priority. But as someone who also has the pleasure of working at our lower levels of government, I don't see it.

Oriana Skylar Mastro: Obviously I'm here in my civilian capacity speaking on behalf of only myself, but I'm currently in my military PME because I was just promoted, and I have 18 months in which China does not come up so far. I just did a module on national security threats in which I had to spend the whole weekend looking at Somalia, Venezuela, and Afghanistan. They cover every region of the world but East Asia. And so we have a whole military force that, sure, our generals might be at the Pentagon worrying about China, but the rest of the military is still thinking about Afghanistan and Iraq, and there are no parallels between those conflicts. So it concerns me that even though we have to focus on norms and all these other things, we have to have a basic deterrent in place, and unless our military gets its act together, we're not going to have that.

Kathleen Hicks: Great. Chris.

Christopher Preble: So my pop culture reference is one of the only movies that I've actually seen more than once in the movie theater, and that's *Avengers: Endgame*. But it's in a different context. I suspected, I did research today, people, I suspected that the haul for *Avengers: Endgame*, which is the top grossing film in history, again, not inflation adjusted, I suspected that sales in China might've contributed to a considerable share of this. And I was correct. So of the \$2.79 billion in box office receipts, \$1.9 billion of that was outside of North America, and \$629 million was spent by Chinese consumers of *Avengers: Endgame*. That gets to the point that this competition that we're talking about is so fundamentally different than the Cold War competition, because no Soviet citizens were watching American films and no Americans were watching Soviet films.

Christopher Preble: I'm being sort of glib here because, well, I like this movie. But it tells us something about the future that we are in today. This is not the future. This is the here and now. I don't think we should want to unwind ourselves from that kind of economic relationship. I wanted to give an excuse to myself to research more about this film.

Kathleen Hicks: Research the box office.

Christopher Preble: Correct.

Kathleen Hicks: Kori, you get to take us out. I'm curious to know whether you're going to have a sunnier outlook.

Kori Schake: Of course I am going to have a sunnier outlook. I basically think American pop culture, as much as we decry it and are sure that standards continue to fall as they have been falling for the entirety of the Republic, that we sometimes forget how sweet, sunny, and wonderful American pop culture is. Let me offer my favorite example, which is the episode of *Veep* where they go to Silicon Valley, and the precious self-righteousness of the Silicon Valley folks about how they're making the world a better place. They are ascribing no value to someone who could get nationally elected to run the country.

Kori Schake: Their smug sense of superiority is captured so exquisitely, and I keep hearing resonances of it as American tech firms are so excited by the use of big data by the Chinese government and the freedom to experiment with things that results in a million Uighurs in reeducation camps. That the education of our own society, about holding the Chinese government to the same standards we hold our own government to, the moral education of American tech firms is going to be a huge part of our eventual success in the competition to shape the international order in a way that continues to be in our interest, rather than letting the kinds of international changes that Oriana described the Chinese wanting.

Kori Schake: I agree with her as far as she goes, but China may not want more than that now. But traditionally, great powers' appetites increase as their power increases. So the fact that China might not want overseas bases, might not want international influence, might not want to occupy countries the way the Soviet Union did, may not always hold true. Our ability in our own fractious, loud, disputatious, wonderful society to reign in the tools of our own creation so that they don't get used for evil, it's going to be a huge part of our success.

Kathleen Hicks: Great. Well, thanks to everyone, Kori Schake, Mike Mazarr, Oriana Mastro, and Chris Preble. Great conversation.

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. If you enjoyed this podcast, check out some of our other CSIS podcasts, including Smart Women Smart Power; The Truth of the Matter; The Asia Chessboard; and more. You can listen to them all on major streaming platforms like iTunes and Spotify. Visit [csis.org/podcasts](https://www.csis.org/podcasts) to see our full catalog. And for all of CSIS's defense related content, visit [defense360.csis.org](https://www.defense360.csis.org).