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“Military Implications of 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. 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.

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Kathleen Hicks: In this episode of Defense 2020 I'll be speaking with three experts about the military implications of great power competition. My colleague Mark Cancian, Senior Advisor in the International Security Program at CSIS. Mara Karlin, Director of the Strategic Studies Program at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. And Chris Preble, Vice President for Defense and Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute.

Kathleen Hicks: Looking forward to this conversation today around the military implications of great power competition. In large part because the Defense Department is currently defining this strategic competition, or great power competition, as the centerpiece of how the US military ought to be reshaping itself for the future.

Kathleen Hicks: So Mara let me start with you. Do you think there's a settled view and if so what is it, within the Defense Department, about what this competition is and what it means for the military?

Mara Karlin: Definitely not. That said I think it is really positive that we are having these conversations. So over the last few years, as you know better than just about anyone Kath, there has been a real push by a lot of senior folks across the Pentagon to get the military to think about competing with China and competing with Russia. So the mere fact that we're having these debates, where everyone is using the term great power competition, kind of ad infinitum, and occasionally in contradictory manners, is actually a positive view in my mind. It is built into our lexicon. We're still trying to figure out exactly what it means and how it should get manifested, particularly in priority regions like Asian and Europe. Also in places that are, perhaps, of slightly less importance but where competition is real and heated, like across the Middle East.

Kathleen Hicks: Mark what's your impression of how well the idea of competition is penetrating into the services' own ways of thinking about the future of warfare?

Mark Cancian: Yeah. I'm going to disagree with Mara a little, in the sense that I think there are three key things that have taken root. One of them is that it is about China and Russia. That we have moved away from a focus on regional conflicts. The second thing is it's about great powers and peer competitors, so that the kinds of things the military did to prepare for conflicts with

regional competitors, Iraq, in Afghanistan also, are not applicable here. The second thing is that it's long-term. This is not going to go away, that China's on a long arch.

Mark Cancian: You see in the military, rhetorically, some movement in that direction and you see some things in the program but one of the criticisms, of course, has been that the [Defense] Department has not moved quickly enough.

Kathleen Hicks: So Chris, both Mara and Mark hit this point about concern about the speed of adaptation in DoD [Department of Defense], but I suspect there are concerns beyond that, in terms of how the Department is taking this idea of competition. How would you characterize your view on where the Department is at this point, in terms of this focus on China and Russia?

Christopher Preble: Well I make two big points. One has to do with whether or not the Department is serious about moving away from the kinds of wars ... The post-911 wars basically. More importantly whether the political class and the civilian leadership is committed to that. This isn't just the Pentagon. This is National Security Council, this is White House. I think that, notwithstanding what the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy says, there is still a lot of concern in the Middle East. Even the Trump Administration, which claims to be wanting to end the endless wars, is talking about how many troops they've added to the Middle East, for example. What you hear instead from, for example, [Defense] Secretary Esper is that this is like mowing a lawn. That also sounds like a long-term competition. So I would bracket that as one overarching point.

Christopher Preble: The other thing has to do with the nature of traditional military power and how much difference is this? There are certain concepts, in terms of deterrents for example, that are the same or at least could be the same. The nature of deterrents we draw redlines or things that we expect that the Chinese, or whoever we're competing with, will respect. And the deterrents that we practiced against the Soviet Union worked in the Cold War. At least it did in terms of direct threats on US soil, for example. Will the same thing apply in the case of the Chinese?

Christopher Preble: I think that we shouldn't assume that we are completely moving onto another realm, both in terms of what we're actually doing and in terms of the sense of the kinds of military power that we've had in the past. There is, obviously, some relevance to it still and will be into the future.

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah. We talked about this on other podcast episodes before but there is sort of this repeat theme, and The National Defense Strategy Commission also pointed to this, where the US thinks it's going to reorient itself for something akin to great power competition. You can think of the [Former Secretary of Defense] Rumsfeld, the first Rumsfeld QDR [Quadrennial Defense Review] in 2001. You can think about the 2010 Defense Strategic Guidance and of course the NDS.

- Kathleen Hicks: Mark do you think ... You write a lot on this issue of coming out of the conflicts we're in. Do you think we really are at a point where there's a shift and that's realistic?
- Mark Cancian: The short answer is no. If you look at the National Defense Strategy it would clearly have the military reorient itself on China and Russia. Conflicts, great power conflicts, which require high-end very advanced technology, weapons, perhaps a smaller force structure. The problem is that we have all these day to day commitments that it's very hard to pull away from. We're still engaged in the Middle East, for example. We have forces in Eastern Europe to deter the Russians. We continue to have commitments in the Pacific and in the ... With allies and partners. So we've found it very difficult to pull back from these. The [Trump] Administration had wanted to prioritize these commitments and therefore reduce them, but it hasn't had much success in doing that.
- Mark Cancian: When you see what happened when Trump tried to pull forces out of Syria or Europe, the amount of pushback that was involved makes this very difficult.
- Mara Karlin: So a couple things perhaps to think about, as we debate this issue of both lacking our lexicon and then also pulling back. Chris, in particular, talks about how we need to rethink our involvement in the Middle East. I think this hits the point of why we actually need to figure out what great power competition means, because folks will make serious arguments that the Middle East needs to be a priority because it is an arena in which the US is competing with Russia and in which it will soon compete with China as well.
- Mara Karlin: I actually don't think that's what great power competition should look like. I think it should be prioritizing Asia and Europe, but if we don't figure out what we're talking about, and we can drive a truck through it, then those arguments are fair and will only take further hold. I think this also gets to this point you're bringing up Mark, what does it mean to pullback, right? I think it becomes an issue of bias. At the end of the day the US military is going to be doing a lot of things in a lot of places, and we can talk through what those look like, but it will be an issue of how much you are biased towards those sorts of challenges.
- Mara Karlin: What does it mean to take risk in the Middle East? Now maybe it means you don't want a couple hundred folks in Syria. That's a question. My personal view is actually there's a lot of goodness there. I think it definitely means you don't want to send 3,000 troops to go guard the oil in Saudi Arabia. But until we figure out what no kidding means to take risk in the Middle East, and what risks we're willing to take on, I fear it becomes this really superficial discussion of either we're totally out or we're totally in. That's never going to be the case. We're hedging and betting.
- Kathleen Hicks: Yeah. I mean I think there's a similar conversation to be had around this idea of how the Pentagon uses terminology. Mara you're really hitting it on the

nose a pet issue of mine, so I'll talk about it, which is this idea that there's the cultures and institutional interests that drive in a certain direction. Then it intersects with strategic direction from above. Then there's always this question about how genuine that intersection of the strategic intent long standing cultural influence is and thereby you get the defense budget, and program, that we have.

Kathleen Hicks: Mark I'm going to turn back to you because you just put out a report on the forces inside the program. We've had several years now of having the NDS [National Defense Strategy]. We've had, I think, three budgets. We're coming up on our fourth for the Trump Administration, FY 21 being the fourth. [FY] 20 was going to be the masterpiece that implemented the strategy, DoD's backed off of that. Where are we exactly, in this clash, if it is a clash, between the rhetoric of the strategy and what people are willing to say they're doing under the name of the strategy?

Mark Cancian: Let me make a plug for the programmers who connect strategy with budgets because it's easy to say great power competition but if you don't say what you mean by that then the services will write it for you and they'll find that what they were doing fits perfectly with your new buzzword. Programmers, of whom I was one, make that connection between what do you mean by great power conflict? Then can turn that into a budget.

Mark Cancian: I think when you look at what the Defense Department has been doing they have done some things that are different. For instance they put a lot of money into long-range precision munitions and missile defense. They're putting some money into cruise missile defense and that is different. The Navy is doing some interesting things with unmanned surface ships. They're actually buying some. Two a year for five years. Putting them out into the fleet to see how they're used and what they do. They're not sure if that's going to be the ultimate solution but they're getting something out there.

Mark Cancian: A project we did on coping with surprise is that it's very difficult to predict the future. Our track record of doing that is very poor, so it's better to have a large toolbox of capabilities, rather than to focus on a couple and getting a lot of those. So if you have a large toolbox then if some of them don't work out then you can turn to other tools, rather than being limited to a single capability. There are a lot of examples from World War II, for example, where good ideas in peace time just didn't pan out.

Kathleen Hicks: So Chris one of the big issues that we're seeing around the frame of the Trump Administration strategy and budget is, of course, growth of the budget in order to meet the strategy as presented by the Administration. I'd love to get your thoughts on does great power competition mean that we necessarily have to have those kinds of increases? I think many in the defense establishment would probably say we're under spending today to meet those ends. How do we resolve ... Given the financial challenges of the nation sees overall, how do we resolve this strategic goal with this resource base that we have?

Christopher Preble: Well it starts with admitting that we have a resource constraint. I still am frustrated by the strategy documents. That to the extent that they acknowledge a resource constraint they basically say, "Politicians figure it out because we need more resources." I think if you ... A fair minded reading of what the requirements that would flow from the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, would constitute a defense budget 1/3 larger than the one we have today. The one we have today is 750 billion dollars. We're talking about real money, even in the United States, even in Washington D.C. So I'm struggling a little bit with that.

Christopher Preble: But at a more basic level ... I want to come back to something that Mark said and I've ... When I talk ... I'm going to steal his metaphor and use it in a different way, which is I talk about when you have a really big hammer everything looks like a nail. Okay? That's basically the theme of a lot of the work that I've done for many years. Nowhere is this more clear to me today than in the discussion about competition, particularly with China, and the nature of that competition, and trying to square the really big hammer with the nature of that competition.

Christopher Preble: I'll give you an example. I struggle mightily to figure out how a *Ford*-class aircraft carrier will influence Germany's decision about whether to put Huawei into their network. I cannot figure it out. I don't know. That doesn't mean that military power was not once critical important to influencing countries' trading relations. It was you would compel your trading partners not to buy from the people you didn't like or to buy from you. I don't think that's what we're going to do with this giant aircraft carrier.

Christopher Preble: For example, and I'm not just picking on the *Ford*, there's much to pick on but I could pick any other program which costs 10s or 100s of billions of dollars. I think that at this moment we're agreeing that the nature of competition is poorly defined, right? I think it is incumbent upon all of us to ask that hard question, how exactly is the tool that you want to put into the toolbox, the new tool or expanded instrument of power, how does that relate to the nature of this competition, which is not primarily military in nature?

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah. I think this is where every administration, frankly, and every Defense Department struggles with trying to tell this story of how they connect their vision of the environment with the strategy they have with the tools.

Kathleen Hicks: Mara, if you had to pick your list of things DoD could be doing better to get that story across what would be at the top of your list?

Mara Karlin: I think what would be at the top of this list is helping folks understand that if the US military were to engage in a conflict with China or Russia it's going to look a lot different than the conflicts of the last two decades. It may not turn out the way we want it to. I mean we have this really interesting moment where we have the most experienced US military in the history of our country and yet much of that experience is profoundly different than the evolving, and future security environment, right?

Mara Karlin: So we have a military that's used to ... That is largely, I should say, used to operating on large forward operating bases, or used to being able to communicate whenever it wants, or air superiority. If you believe some of the really good research that has come out of places like CSIS and RAND, and you're concerned about this eroding military advantage, then I think it is conceivable the day will come where the US can get pushed into things it may not want to do, and distracted, and detracted from actually taking steps it may want because it is no longer able to be that guarantor of security.

Mara Karlin: While I think Chris is hitting this important point, that not all our tools necessarily match up and I think it's pretty rare that you don't find a defense analyst who doesn't want to give more funding to the State Department, at the end of the day part of the reason we can have that conversation is because the US military has generally been pretty capable for a lot of the threats it's faced. I fear that in the next few years that will become a much uglier story.

Kathleen Hicks: Mark another report you're working on ... We could have an entire segment that's just report Mark has published or is working on, but you are working on one on inflicting surprise. So these comments from Mara really strike me. The US has some eroding advantages. At the same time adversaries aren't themselves 20 feet tall. They have challenges as well. Where do you see military advantages that we ought to be exploiting or advancing?

Mark Cancian: I mean there are a couple, when you look at China and Russia. For example if you look at China they have not fought a conflict for a long time. The last conflict they fought was against Vietnam and they lost. They have not fought a great power conflict, arguably, since the Korean War or even before. So they have some theories about what war looks like but they don't have much experience. They've built a very powerful military on a very thin base of experience and that is something the United States could exploit.

Mark Cancian: The United States has been out there. If you look at naval forces, for example, we have been globally deployed for 70 years. We're in a position a little like the British and the French during the Napoleonic era, where the French built a very powerful fleet but they just never could use it. The British were out there every day. So every time the British and French ran into each other the British would win.

Mark Cancian: The Russians have a very weak demographic and economic base. Can generate a good deal of combat power but can't sustain that. We, by contrast, not only have a lot of economic military power, we have a lot of rich allies who have economic and military power. So we have some significant advantages that we could take advantage of.

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah. And China? Any thoughts on advantages the United States might have against China?

Mark Cancian: Well China, of course, has not fought a war for a long time. So that gives us a huge advantage. China also has this export driven economy. If that were to dry up it might destabilize the state and in fact the [Chinese] Communist Party in a way that the United States is not susceptible to. So I think that is a lever the United States could play.

Christopher Preble: There's one potential vulnerability that China faces, but it also could be our vulnerability depending on how we choose to fight them or at least think about fighting them. That is the geography of Asia. Is the Asian geography one mostly of peace, or mostly of deterrents, or mostly ... This is not Europe. The Chinese actually can't, in the way that Russia march into Poland, the Chinese can't. They marched into Vietnam, it ended badly, right? They can't even march into Taiwan, right? Water still matters. Again, maybe just because I'm a Navy guy I say that but it still matters.

Christopher Preble: The other point is we, the United States, should be leveraging our allies in a much more deliberate way. That means encouraging them to invest in the kinds of technologies and capabilities that take advantage of these geographic advantages. I don't see us doing that. What I see us doing instead is posturing our own forces as though we have to be projecting power into China's strategic backyard. This is why the NDS, in particular, talks so much about the importance of strategic overmatch, right? Well that's costly and it's really hard. As Mara says, it may end badly. Where we have to project power into China's backyard, China's neighbors are already there. They're not projecting power. They're defending their waters. They're defending their territory.

Christopher Preble: Again, I understand this is a complex story. It runs counter to the way the United States has been postured for most of the last 70 years, but I think it recognizes that we are moving into a different strategic context. Both in terms of the level of US power and our ability to, as we've talked about, overmatch these defensive ... I believe that we are moving into a period of defensive dominance but I think that American strategic doctrine is still based on offensive power. In the sense that we are going to ultimately prevail by using an offensive strategy.

Kathleen Hicks: So Mara love to hear your thoughts in general on this, but just specifically following up in addition to Chris' last point. The frame the US has used with regard to an Asia-Pacific contestation, conflict, has been roughly the same frame for 20 plus years, which is something like revolution in military affairs to transformation, to air-sea battle, to third offset, to whatever came after that. Defense innovation initiative to whatever we call it today. Which does actually have this, as Chris is sort of portraying it, does have more of this idea of penetrating into theater in an anti-access area denial environment, in order to achieve US objectives. Do you think that's roughly the right frame? Is that the right way to be thinking about it or do you agree with Chris, that we should be thinking conceptually quite differently?

Mara Karlin: I think I would disagree with Chris. I think when you were asking about advantages Kat, I mean one of our biggest ones is people want to be on our team for now. There's something pretty useful in that, right? We don't have to build islands because countries want our bases and they want our military personnel. They often help contribute to that financially and also by building their own forces. Never to the extent that we want, never as deep as we wanted to of course.

Mara Karlin: This point though you're making, in particular Chris, though that I want to hit on, in terms of China and Taiwan. Look if China decides that it wants to take Taiwan that's not an impossibility, but what's been so interesting to me is to see how they are pretty magnificently disemboweling Taiwan's democracy. I mean obviously this is in-line with the gray zone work you all have done here, but getting ready for Taiwan's election in January. Why focus on an amphibious invasion when you just get to defenestrate a country's democratic system? It's fantastic.

Mara Karlin: I guess on this third point about conceptually how we should approach things. Kath you gave the litany of various acronyms that are generally pretty tech focused that we've had, right? Third offset, revolution in military affairs. I'd like to make two points on that, running back to history.

Mara Karlin: One, when we look at these great tech transformations it was the railroad, rifle, and telegraph. Those were obviously not all focused on supporting militaries. Secondly, part of the reason the railroad, rifle, telegraph revolution ends up being so significant is because what else is happening in that ecosystem? You have democratization, right? You have the agricultural revolution. You have massive changes. So these days when we're focused on what's happening with artificial intelligence, for example, 5G, you name it, I fear we are not pairing those conversations with the other changes in the atmosphere like the decreasing ... Excuse me, the increasing authoritarianism globally.

Kathleen Hicks: Let's do a closing round on what you would really recommend in 2021, whether it's a second Trump Administration coming into do their fifth budget, if you will, in support of the National Defense Strategy, or refining that strategy, or if it's a different administration walking in the door to do their first take on strategy and the capabilities to support it. Two questions. How would you recommend to them they think about this frame of strategic competition? Keep it, reject it, refine it? Given your answer to that, what do you think is most important for them to do, in terms of implementing on that? Mark will start with you.

Mark Cancian: The key think I would say is aligning strategy and resources. That is if you want to keep executing the strategy that the late Obama Administration had and the Trump Administration has, that is engagement in the Middle East and fighting small wars there, deterrents in Eastern Europe, global counter-terrorism, presence in the Pacific, that costs a lot of money. You can't do that strategy for less money. There are other strategies you can do that you can

argue for, and I'm sure Chris will argue for them, but they're different strategies and you have to accept the changes you're going to make. For example you're going to pull US forces out of Eastern Europe, let the Europeans take care of that. It's a defensible position but every time the United States tries to do that the Europeans get very nervous and parts of the United States get very angry. So you can make those changes but they're very hard.

Kathleen Hicks: Mara?

Mara Karlin: I'd say refine the aperture of strategic competition. I think it's largely right. It's interesting I was rereading [US Army] Field Manual 3-24 recently, as torture for my poor students. All of you probably remember that. It came out 15 years ago and it's kind of the military's first attempt at really wrapping its head around counter-insurgency in a few decades. It's kind of terrible, to be honest, but it's notable because it is a start to a conversation. I think that's a little bit where the Department finally is getting after years, and years, and years of pressure by all sorts of folks. So there needs to be some refinement. We need to recognize that it is already getting diluted.

Mara Karlin: So I'm sure you all have started to hear terms like global power competition, which is different, I would argue, than great power competition or actually it's not GPC, it's 2+3 because of course we have to use equations. All of which, I think, is dangerous and dilutes actually this focus on China first and foremost, and then Russia. So need a little bit of refinement.

Mara Karlin: In terms of implementation the number one thing I would say that they need to focus on is, how do you sufficiently take care of the losers so that you get to make progress? I think that we ... If you buy into the National Defense Strategy and the view of great power competition we probably have relatively similar lists of who should win, and who should lose. The challenge is in terms of those investments it's really hard to get the losers to be satiated, and not try to do end runs, and not try to explain why they actually are tied to whatever X, Y, Z strategy. So how do you effectively take care of the losers so the winners actually get to manifest that role?

Kathleen Hicks: Just to be clear when you're talking winners and losers you're talking stakeholders inside the Department?

Mara Karlin: Absolutely. Stakeholders inside the Department, also across. I mean this is exactly Mark's point on the budget. I mean if you're going to implement it not every part of every service will grow.

Christopher Preble: Right.

Kathleen Hicks: Chris?

Christopher Preble: So mostly I want to echo what Mark said, but it also relates to what Mara just said. I mean strategy entails prioritization. Prioritization ultimately means

making hard choices. That means there will be losers, to Mara's point. One approach is just, "Tough deal with it." Not everyone gets to win. But I take Mara's point, you need to think more creatively about that.

Christopher Preble: In a past life I studied how the Kennedy Administration, for example, in the early years of the Kennedy Administration John Kennedy said he was going to invest in huge numbers of rockets to out compete and close the missile gap that he learned didn't exist. So we have a space program. That's how the rocket forces ultimately were made whole, right? Was by sending a man to the Moon. Walter McDougall tells a great story and there's an element of that.

Christopher Preble: I'm not advocating that, for listeners just to be clear. That's not what I'm actually advocating. That's one way you can do it, is you buy them off. You come up with a rationale, even if it's a thin rationale, to buy them off.

Christopher Preble: The other point is ... The one thing I would echo, coming back to something that Mara said near the very beginning, in January of 2021, whether it's the second Trump Administration or a new democratic administration, do not fall victim to the argument that great power competition is everything. Right? That therefore any person coming to you and trying to justify their portion of the budget is, "Well because it's about great power competition." Don't fall victim to that. Be aware that that's what people are going to do and so you need to signal upfront, right away, it's like, "I'm not going to be fooled. That's not" ... Again, this is from the President on down. Make a case for why great power competition, if you believe that is where you believe that is where we should be investing our resources, but don't think that just because you invoke it as some sort of incantation that that means you're going to get what you want.

Kathleen Hicks: Great. Mark Cancian, and Mara Karlin, and Chris Preble thanks so much for joining me today.

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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