Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
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FEATURING:
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Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

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Kathleen Hicks: Our topic is – for this whole conference – is cooperation and conflict in the time of COVID-19. This pandemic not only creates a significant global economic disruption, it is also affecting geopolitics and security. And that's what our panels will be focusing on all this week. Before we begin I want to thank our partners in putting on this conference series. First, the Kissinger Center for Global Affairs at Johns Hopkins University and Dr. Frank Gavin and his team there who have partnered with CSIS on this effort for the past three years. I also want to thank the originators, the cofounders of the Future Strategy Forum, MIT Ph.D. students Sara Plana and Rachel Tecott.

You’ll hear more from Frank, and Sara, and Rachel after we have our keynote conversation this morning, which I have the pleasure of moderating. And our keynote speaker is the honorable Michèle Flournoy. She’s the former undersecretary of defense for policy. And she’s the current cofounder and managing partner of WestExec Advisors. If you have any questions for Michèle, please submit them through the link that’s provided here on the CSIS event page, and we’ll be getting to audience Q&As before the end of the event today. So first, Michèle, thank you so much for joining me this morning for this third conference.

Michele Flournoy: Thanks so much, Kath. Really great to be here.

Kathleen Hicks: This is a massive topic, and I know we only have 30 minutes before we go to the audience to talk through it, but why don’t we start very broad. You know, we have from time to time in history had these global dynamics that really shape how we think about the international system, and for the United States our interests within it. Often those are wars that have caused those disruptions. The question here is, is this pandemic a piece of one of those paradigm changes? Is it really shifting how we think about global affairs? Or is that an overstatement?

Michele Flournoy: Yeah, my own view is I think that we’ve been in a gradual shift of paradigm in the world for a while now, with the rise of China, increasing multipolarity in terms of the balance of power between great powers, technological disruption – even revolution – in terms of the way that things like IT, cyber, AI, other emerging technologies are fundamentally changing both society and our militaries, and how we secure ourselves. And also just the growing tension between authoritarian states and democratic states. So I think, you know, into that comes this pandemic. And what I think it’s largely going to do is both accelerate and deepen or magnify some of what was already happening.

Kathleen Hicks: Much of the security community in the United States has really been focused on the U.S.-China dynamic, obviously, before the pandemic. Given that COVID-19 originated inside China, and there have been a lot of concerns about the way the Chinese government has acted since then, do you think, to your point, that the pandemic is accelerating or shining a light on some of these challenges you’ve named? Is it changing the way that we should be thinking about the U.S.-China framework?
Michele Flournoy: Absolutely. I think that we’ve seen an accelerated decline in the relationship, and increased tensions. Some of which are the inevitable byproduct of an increasingly competitive environment between the two countries, but some of it were unnecessary, I think. And, you know, sort of things that we’ve made – the United States has made missteps; the Chinese have made missteps. We’ve taken steps that have empowered hardliners on both sides. And so I think it’s a mixed bag. But if I could, just for a moment, I think there are several impacts. One is the U.S.-China relationship. I think we can go back to that. Another is accelerating or magnifying perceptions of U.S. decline and a stepping back of the United States in terms of our global leadership role. Another is the increasing inequality, the sharpness of the inequality both between states and within states; and then I think broadening our definition of national security. I mean, when you’ve had a pandemic that has touched the lives of just about every American, people are going to expect, you know, part of national security in the future will be thinking about pandemic prevention and mitigation. And that’s, of course, going to affect our priorities for spending going forward. So there are all of these different areas, U.S.-China included, where I think we’re, again, going to see an accelerating degree of change.

Kathleen Hicks: I want to come back to many of the items you talked about and bring us by the close here certainly to the events of the last week or so inside the United States, because I think you’re picking up on several items there as well, but maybe just to start on this sense of U.S. decline in the world and just coming at this from the perception of others. You talk to a lot of companies. You talk to a lot of allies and partners of the United States in the world. How would you characterize the way in which the U.S. government and the U.S. role in the world is – the perception of that is shifting?

Michele Flournoy: Well, I think most of their expectations have been shaped by past U.S. behavior. So in past international crises, including, you know, epidemics or disease challenges like Ebola or HIV-AIDS, you’ve seen the United States step up and step in to orchestrate an international collaborative response that included everyone. And that has dramatically improved the effectiveness of the response. This time the U.S. did not convene the G-7. The U.S. did not convene the G-20. And rather sort of double down on investing in the WHO and trying to drive that to be a more effective institution, we’re abandoning that. And so this is playing into fears that, frankly, predated Trump but have been dramatically exacerbated by Trump, that the U.S. is no longer willing to play a leadership role. And what that does is, on the part of partners and allies, it creates lots of hedging behavior and lots of uncertainty, because they don’t know that they can count on the U.S. to make good on its security guarantees or its promises in other areas. And it sort of invites adversaries or competitors to test the limits of U.S. resolve and commitment, as we’ve seen Russia do repeatedly in the Middle East, for example, or South – or China in the South China Sea. So it’s a really dangerous situation where we’ve created a vacuum that is sort of strengthening others with interests antithetical to our own.

Kathleen Hicks: Do you think there’s a prospect that, in addition to rivals or potential adversaries having – feeling opportunity, that there’s any sense of other parties, allies – the Europeans, the Japanese, the South Koreans – also finding ways to help fill that vacuum? Or are you more jaundiced, if you will, about the prospects for that?
Michele Flournoy: Well, I think before the pandemic, I thought that that was a possibility that we would see the Europeans stepping up more on defense, for example, and other allies doing more. I still worried about their hedging against, you know, U.S. absence, because that’s not a healthy thing for a transatlantic alliance like NATO. I think with the pandemic now, I worry that all of the bandwidth of their leaders, spending of their treasuries, ministries of finance, will be refocused on the obvious domestic and economic priorities post-pandemic. So I think it just leaves us less united, less coordinated, and less effective as allies, as a democratic community.

Kathleen Hicks: On the private-sector side, the global economy obviously is roiling. We already were projecting significant deficits, for instance, in the United States, and now on top of that with COVID itself and then the stimulus efforts that are being undertaken, and presumably additional efforts to come, will probably worsen that challenge. When you talk to those involved in commerce, how do they look at this global environment, both the United States itself as an area for investment but also the prospects for globalization in terms of trade?

Michele Flournoy: So I think that it really depends on which sector you’re in. There are some companies, frankly, that are doing quite well right now and others that are fighting for their survival or even going out of business. So it really depends. But I think almost everyone expects that this is going to be a multiyear recovery. It’s going to take some time. I think those who have both work with the U.S. government as a customer and who also depend on the Chinese commercial market as a very important source of revenue are finding themselves caught and feeling like they’re walking in a minefield every day – (laughs) – and needing help navigating that. I think there’s also lots of – there are some who are dependent on a very integrated global supply chain that are now looking at ways of diversifying that supply chain to be less dependent on China or expecting, you know, additional U.S. policy and regulatory change that would force that. And then there are some in the financial community that are seeing, you know, fire sales around the world – (laughs) – and looking to invest and buy things – buy up equity in enterprises when the price is quite low. So it’s a really mixed bag. But it’s very uncertain, very tumultuous, and I think most companies are scrambling to try to figure out how to navigate through this period.

Kathleen Hicks: There was already so much pressure on the supply chain issue with regard to China, for instance, from the U.S. both internally and then toward allies. The pandemic, I think, has accelerated – to your point about acceleration – accelerated that. Do you see coming out the other end of this a more nationalistic approach or a more international resurgence, a revival in internationalism around the fragility of supply chains and around the fragility of interdependence?
Michele Flournoy: Yeah. I think, again, it’s going to depend by sector. I mean, we’ve always been worried any sort of, you know, dependence on China, for example, in our defense supply chains. But I think now you’re going to add to that list things like medical equipment, protective equipment, pharma, and so forth. So I think the overall frame is going to be not just what’s the most cost-effective source of supply, but now do I – can I also count on a degree of resilience in a scenario where that’s disrupted. And I think that will move us not necessarily completely to onshoring – in some areas that may make economic sense – but to more of a regional approach. I mean, I think the revised NAFTA agreement, you’ll – you may see a not onshoring to the U.S., but maybe increased dependence on Mexico or Canada. I think you’ll see some potential for regionalization sort of be used, probably looking at this from a similar perspective and saying what can we bring home to the EU. So I do think it’s going to be a difficult period. And the real challenge is – beyond just the business case for all of that – is anticipating how governments are going to respond. You know, will China create this threatened entities list and start putting companies on it if they feel those companies are pulling too much out of China? So we have to think through all of those second- and third-order effects.

Kathleen Hicks: You mentioned earlier the trend to authoritarianism that predates the pandemic itself, but it seems at least anecdotally to date the states that are more authoritarian are really struggling in particular with managing the pandemic itself. And at the same time there is a tick up in disinformation, both in domestic sources here in the United States but also overseas. How do you see this – you know, are we headed to an ideological divide, if you will, between authoritarianism on the one hand of various, you know, forms and democracy on the other? Or is it more complicated than that?

Michele Flournoy: I think it’s more complicated than that, but I do think there’s an opportunity if we had the right leadership in the United States to strengthen the sense of community among the free-market democracies and to try to negotiate mutually beneficial trade deals, go to international fora together to insist on, you know, standards that support free and open commerce. Now, I’m thinking of all of the standard-setting, the rule-setting that’s going to be happening relative to the internet, relative to the free flow of information. Right now, the democracies are not showing up, you know, together in a strong way to try to set those standards, and you leave the door open to countries like China and Russia, which are using those same tools to try to create more of a surveillance state and more of a – you know, a very different sort of set of norms around the internet and use of information. And so I think there is an opportunity for us to come together and be more effective to shape the future rules of the road, if you will. But I also think it’s very – it’s sort of a case-by-case basis. When you look at Iran or Russia or even China, any of these states that are, you know, having their own struggles in terms of both dealing with the pandemic and recovery, it’s not yet clear whether this will cause them to just focus more inwardly or whether, because they’re dealing with huge dissatisfaction from their population and their failure to meet the needs of that population, they will try to create some external distraction or some external enemy to refocus public ire. So I think that is a movie that’s going to play out, and it’s going to play out in different ways in different countries.
Kathleen Hicks: So how do we best shape that dynamic? What you seem to be presenting is there’s – I would think there would be opportunity for cooperation because things like a pandemic demonstrate that we’re interdependent – our economies, our health of our citizens relate to one another, so there’s areas for cooperation. But at the same time, as you’re pointing out, the Chinese and the Russians and the Iranians, for instance, have all used this period to undertake various security-related approaches, whether it’s China in the South China Sea and then Hong Kong or it’s Russia with very close-call military interactions, the Iranians on the nuclear side. You know, so you can see where this could really divide the West between hardline approaches that go at the security angle and approaches that want to lean more to cooperation. How do you wrestle with that?

Michele Flournoy: I think you have to have elements of both. And this is, I think, the biggest failure of U.S. policy right now, is that we are not integrating and leveraging all of the instruments of our national power to get to our strategic objectives. So in my thinking, you need a sort of foundation of deterrence. You need to clearly communicate what our interests are, what we’re willing to defend, and demonstrate resolve. And then you need to back that up by showing – by showing up, first of all, which we’re not doing enough of, and with the clear capabilities to enforce those or – and defend those interests – our interests, those of our allies, and so forth. So deterrence, to me, preventing conflict with a power – a nuclear power like China, has got to be the bedrock. But above and beyond that, then using our diplomatic tools, our economic weight, and our common interests with allies in both Asia and Europe and Latin America and elsewhere, to again show up in these multilateral fora as a group that’s pressing for some of the same issues. I think the biggest mistake we’ve made trying to deal with trade issues with China, you know, the diagnosis of the problem is shared and correct. We have – we have shown up bilaterally, we have – and focused on things like tariffs. You know, many of our allies are having the same issues with China; and we should have showed up with them, whether it’s in the WTO or elsewhere, to press the case collectively. Historically when we’ve been able to rally our partners and allies, say in the ASEAN context for example, we have had some success in pushing back on China. But I think that’s the opportunity we’re missing right now, is that U.S. diplomatic and economically are set to rally likeminded states to sort of stand up for the rules of the road that are essential to protecting our interests.

Kathleen Hicks: So important to that is the credibility of the United States as a leader in democracy. You know, we don’t exactly, with our highly polarized society – obviously, violence and dissent, police brutality issues, all of this combined, you know, is not an attractive look for those around the world who want to rally, who might want to find a way toward a common approach. How do you think about our internal chaos and challenges as it relates to our ability to execute an effective foreign policy?
Michele Flournoy: Yeah. No, I think healing ourselves domestically and investing in the drivers of our own strength and competitiveness are absolutely essential. If you look at Chinese state-run media today or Russian media, they’re having a field day, you know, running these images over and over again. So you know, this country has a deep, you know, problem and history of racial injustice, and in many cases police brutality that’s resulted from that. And I think we have to step up as a nation and get after healing some of these wounds and addressing some of these issues at first – you know, step number one. But I also think, if people – you know, when people ask me: What is the most important thing we need to do, you know, to compete well with China? The number-one thing we need to do is to invest in the drivers of our own economic competitiveness here at home. It’s things like science and technology, research and development, 21st century infrastructure. Why in the world are we not the world’s leaders in 5G? Smart immigration policy. You know, look at Silicon Valley. Half of the founders are either immigrants or first-generation Americans. We’ve thrived based on a policy that invites the best and the brightest from around the world, and then incentivizes them to stay and make them – make America their home and the place where they invest their talent. So there’s so much that we could do at home to provide that economic and social foundation. Yes, a strong military with a cutting edge that can effectively deter and, if necessary, defeat aggression is essential. But the foundation on which that is built is a society that has some cohesion and that is very, very strong and competitive economically. And we have to get after those things first and foremost.

Kathleen Hicks: Before we leave the topic of current events, I do want to get your views on the president’s reference to invoking the Insurrection Act. He hasn’t done it yet. He’s talked about, you know, his ability to do that, which is in fact – he has the ability to do that. What is your sense of the appropriate role right now of the U.S. military as part of the, you know, dynamic that is unfolding right now around protests for racial justice?
Michele Flournoy: I mean, the use of the active duty U.S. military should be an absolute last resort, you know, under the Insurrection Act. The first line of defense has got to be local and state law enforcement, then federal law enforcement, then the National Guard. And it’s – you know, the act has not been used in modern times very much, mainly because, A, it hasn’t been necessary because usually when you add those layers up, that’s quite a lot of law and order kind of capability. But also because I think most presidents – (laughs) – previous presidents have understood the extreme sensitivity of using the U.S. military against American citizens or in – you know, confronting American citizens, and the very real risk to the institution and support for the institution as well. So he does have the authority. It’s there for a reason. But if he manages this well, and if governors and mayors manage this well, and use all of the resources at their disposal, including the National Guard called up in a state capacity, it shouldn’t be necessary. The real problem with this approach is that the president is all about, you know, imposing law and order without first truly acknowledging the root of the problem, which is the racial injustice, which is this repeated episodes of police brutality against unarmed people of color. And when he uses force, like he did yesterday, to clear Lafayette Square before the curfew, clear peaceful protesters using tear gas and flash bangs, so that he could stroll across a park and hold up a Bible in front of a church for a photo op – I mean, it’s just, in my view, a gross misuse of his authority. And a failure to respect, and to really understand, to deep grief and hurt, and to try to heal that, to try to unify people, to try to bring people together. We are missing a unify. There’s no – there’s a divider in the White House, not a unifier. And so I just – it pains me. And I don’t want to, you know, have a political conversation here, but I just think we need leadership that can bring us together to try to address some of these root problems, and also support local and state authorities in restoring order.

Kathleen Hicks: So why don’t we talk about some of the constructive things that could be happening, based on many of the comments you’ve already made, in a – in a current – I won’t call it post-COVID, because COVID continues – (laughs) – but in an environment in which we have a global pandemic. We have layered onto that preexisting, and worsening in some cases, domestic conditions for democracies. How – what would be your priorities for U.S. security policy and foreign policy? You mentioned, for instance, continued deterrence to prevent opportunism. So maybe layered on top of that, what are some of the other things you would really like to see?
Michele Flournoy: Well, I think we need a real rebuilding of the other instruments of national power. We've had a huge brain drain in the State Department. We need to rebuild the foreign services and reform the State Department as we rebuild it to be a more capable and robust tool in the future. Diplomacy is going to be essential – robust diplomacy is going to be essential and going forward. I think the same is true for, you know, foreign assistance. The whole question of information tools – I mean, back in the Clinton years USIA was disbanded. But in the age of social media, and the age of social media and the internet how do we communicate our values, our views, you know, the facts, the truths that we hold dear? I'm not talking about a U.S. propaganda machine, because I think that's antithetical to who we are. But just a powerful outlet for speaking the truth, and to be a resource for others who are in oppressed environments, as we have been throughout our history. I think our economic power is probably most important. And, again, rebuilding that will be essential as kind of a – as kind of a foundation, as a means of influence. And then you've done a ton of work on gray zone. We are not effective in the gray zone between peacetime and conflict, where many regimes like – whether it's Beijing or Moscow – where they like to play. The use of propaganda, the use of social media, cyberattacks, funding for nefarious groups or shell entities – those are all things that we've got to wrestle with an be – invest to be prepared in. And again, I think you have right now an administration that focuses primarily on two things: coercive economic tools and the military. And those are essential, but they do not add up to a strategy – (laughs) – or an effective way of influencing the world to support our interests.

Kathleen Hicks: One thread I want to pick up on here is on the information piece. You know, I see little shifts of hope which may be – which may be quashable. But I welcome your thoughts on maybe a sense that Americans and others in the world are turning a little more toward expertise than they have before? In this case, in this pandemic, it’s medical expertise. In the future maybe that translates to other areas, whether it’s climate or foreign policy issues. And I also see some places where the technology that’s out there, that you mentioned before autocracies are using to spy on their citizens, there are places where we’re seeing that potential to demonstration disinformation, to be able to capture where states or groups are trying to stand in the way of freedom and democracy. How would you gauge where we are in this era of disinformation? And in addition to building out better government policy, do you see ways in which this pandemic illustrates how communities or citizens can have a role?

Michele Flournoy: Yeah. No, I think we definitely are developing some important tools. I think there are situations where when we reveal the disinformation campaign, or the conspiracy theory, or the nefarious actor behind some set of tweets or what have you, that it does help educate people that they need to be more careful about understanding the source of their information, not believing everything they read on Twitter, on Facebook, or what have you. But I think, again, we don’t have a coherent strategy and sustained approach. And so we’re getting episodic and anecdotal results, but not sort of consistently beating this back. And so, again, I’d love to see us develop more of a strategy in this regard and really invest in some of these tools and bring them together in a way that really kind of multiplies their effect rather than having these one-off kind of little occasional victories.
Kathleen Hicks: So we do have questions from the audience. I do want to remind folks that they can submit questions still. But let me start off with one that came in from Radio Free Asia. I think it’s Thad Min Lee (sp) asked: What is the impact of COVID-19 on the North Korean nuclear issue?

Michele Flournoy: You know, I think that we don’t know yet. (Laughs.) One of the things we don’t know is whether – the extent to which the pandemic has affected North Korea itself. But what we can see is a – that the distraction of attention in the United States, in allied countries, including South Korea and others, that we are preoccupied with other issues. And so there’s not a lot of attention being paid to North Korea and its continued development of its nuclear program and its missile program, particularly its ICBMs. Usually when we’re distracted and not paying attention, at some point Kim Jong-un will decide he wants attention and start to escalate a series of provocations. The other thing that I think affects this is, you know, when we’ve succeeded in ramping down the tension with North Korea and slowing their progress in the past, it’s been when we’ve been able to pull other key countries into the mix – South Korea and Japan most importantly, China very importantly, Russia to some degree. And right now we are so divided vis-à-vis both China and Russia. And even as we recognize the need to compete and deter, there’s really no strategic dialogue with China to identify areas where we have common interests, whether it’s North Korea, nonproliferation, climate change or dealing with a pandemic. We are not, you know, trying to work with China in areas where we can and we should.

Kathleen Hicks: That relates to a question we received from Air Force Magazine on what role do you think international institutions like the World Health Organization or the U.N. or others can play in mitigating competition and encouraging cooperation?

Michele Flournoy: I do think they are important, but in most cases are in need of some reform. But in my view, you know, the lessons are when we walk away from these institutions and just abandon them to others, they tend to evolve in directions that are not helpful to us. When we double down and invest and try to reform them from within and influence their behavior by showing up and leading, they tend to move in a much more positive direction. And so I am concerned about WHO because this should be a largely apolitical institution that’s really allowing for the more effective collaboration among public-health officials to try to take early action to quell pandemics before they spread. And, you know, if we really render that organization ineffective, it will come back to bite us, whether it’s second and third waves of this pandemic or of future pandemics.

Kathleen Hicks: There are some questions specifically on climate change. So I’m going to kind of summarize several of them and ask do you think this pandemic points to the way in which the world will or should deal with climate change? And then, more specifically, how should the U.S. national-security community and the Pentagon think about climate change as part of its agenda or not?
Michele Flournoy:

You know, I think during the shutdown we saw this sort of, you know, mini-recovery of the environment. You know, when you see – have dolphins swimming in the canals of Venice and people hearing birds in their neighborhood for the first time, you know, it’s – I think it really struck a lot of people. That said, I don’t think we have the kind of leadership we need in the right places in our government right now, either in the White House or on the Hill, to lead on this issue. And I do – I do think – I hope it’s raised the awareness of Americans that not all – not all existential threats are military in nature. Climate change is an existential threat to the species and to the planet, and so we need to think of it is as part of our national security rubric and part of our national security priorities. I do think that, you know, when the Pentagon has been allowed to sort of lean forward on this issue, in many areas it has. It’s done a lot of work on green fuels. It’s done a lot of work on conservation of energy in facilities. It is an amazing platform for testing out ideas at scale. And I think, you know, when you look at the folks who are out in the world and having to think about planning for the future, they think about what rising sea levels would mean to our allies and partners, to our littoral bases, to our – the likelihood and an increasing demand for our forces to be used in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. So, you know, again, if allowed, I think there’s plenty of energy and interest in trying to wrestle with climate change from a national security perspective, as well as the other important perspectives, but right now that’s not allowed politically, quite frankly.

Kathleen Hicks:

There are also questions related, somewhat similarly, to science and national security. Climate is actually, you know, one of the issues, obviously, scientists are most concerned about as it relates to security, but the pandemic is another. Do you think – I mean, you’re on the board of CARE. You’ve engaged on global health issues for a long time. Do you think that we in the United States take global health seriously as a national security threat?

Michele Flournoy:

Not as much as we should. We tend to leave it to the NGO community, frankly. I man, I should – let me say USAID does a lot of great global health funding and that’s very important. And in the past we’ve led on things like PEPFAR and so forth. But I think there’s more that could be done, especially when you realize the interdependence both in terms of, you know, if we beat the disease here but then we let it germinate in the poorest of the poor countries, it’s going to come back to our shores at some point in a second or third wave. So we have self – beyond the humanitarian impulse, which should be very strong in our country, we have interests involved in this too. But I think, to your broader point about science, I do think this is part of reinvesting in our competitiveness, of really investing in things like the National Science Foundation, in real – in basic scientific research, be it, you know, related to diseases or new technologies. This is a source of American strength, and right now we are not investing enough in those areas. And I think that will make us much less safe and much less competitive in the future unless we correct that.
Kathleen Hicks: Now, it occurs to me, too, that this is one area where there – meaning the intersection of advanced technology and the private sector with government policy seems to be an area where there is broad bipartisan support for leaning forward more, and yet we seem to keep falling so far behind where we – our goals, whether that’s as laid out in the National Defense Strategy or wherever else. Do you have priorities there that you think are the next place Congress and the administration should be thinking, whether it’s related to, you know, advanced systems for the military or it’s related to these R&D investments that are about workforce of the future or about science advancement?

Michele Flournoy: Well, I think there’s a long – a long list. And you know, but certainly AI is an area – AI and robotics – and how that’s not only for society, but in terms of keeping our military edge. Things like quantum computing. Things like the next generation of 5G that is less hardware-dependent and more software-driven. Things like biotech, both on the disease side but also in terms of biodefense. So there’s a whole long list. And one of the things I – you know, some people say, well, where are you going to get all the money? A lot of – and that is a legitimate question right now. But I think a lot of these investments can be part of what regenerates the U.S. economy and creates new jobs and different jobs. And I think if you pair that with investment in reskilling/upskilling education, you can move the American workforce in ways that we, again, will be much more competitive internationally, but also I think much – you know, sort of work at closing the income gap and the income inequality in this country as well.

Kathleen Hicks: And we did actually have several questions on how to pay for it, so you’ve saved yourself –

Michele Flournoy: Well, I haven’t really answered them, but –

Kathleen Hicks: Thank you.

Michele Flournoy: I think this will be a huge debate in Congress. And you know, I think – I’m not an economist, so I’m not going to try to give you an economic theory for why this is right, but I do think, you know, we have this pattern of, you know, a crisis starts – whether it’s – whatever the, you know, politics of an administration – we invest heavily in dealing with it, and at some point we get nervous about deficit and debt, understandably, and then we impose draconian measures like the Budget Control Act and the threat of sequestration. I would hate to see that happen early in a next administration because I do think it will undermine our recovery and, ultimately, our competitiveness. We have to get after those issues in the mid to long term, but we have a lot of recovering to do first, and frankly a lot of investment in rebuilding our tools and sharpening our tools for a very different future.
Kathleen Hicks: All right. Now I want to try to squeeze in two more questions, and I apologize because they're both a little broad. The first is I would generalize several questions to you, questions about the pandemic and the military. And so would love to get your assessment of how well the military – U.S. military has done in protecting the health of its force. And as it looks at deployments, whether in state Guard capacity or federal capacity inside the United States of military members, how should it be thinking through the ethics of those force questions given the health concerns? So how should it weigh – how is it doing on the health of its force? How should it weigh in the health of the – of the force as it contemplates a larger role, whether it’s in pandemic response or, of course, the more recent contemplation of use of military forces for dealing with protests?

Michele Flournoy: Yeah. So the – assessing how it’s done with regard to the health of the force is difficult because I think that some general guidance was given at the top, but then authority and decision-making was really delegated down to the commander level, sometimes the base commander level. So you have a really different and uneven record of performance. You have some commands that have literally not had a single case of COVID because of the way they’ve handled it. Others, like we saw on the carrier, you know, a very different situation, and everything in between. So I don’t think the U.S. military was necessarily prepared for this in advance in terms of – you know, they were prepared from a sense of how do we support the civilian authorities. In terms of the health of the force, I don’t think they were as prepared as they’d like to be. One of the things that U.S. military is really good at is after-action reviews and learning lessons. So I am sure there will be long memos written about how we need to be more prepared in the future in terms of PPE, testing, you know, social distancing measures, and so forth. In terms of how they’ve supported the civilian authorities, I think where they’ve been asked to support they’ve done well. To the extent there’s a valid critique, I lay it more at the feet of the president and the civilian authorities in terms of not using the Defense Production Act early enough, not mobilizing resources early enough, and so forth. But you’ve seen, you know, Corps of Engineers step in and build hospitals out of convention centers, and so forth. And much of that capacity wasn’t needed. You’ve seen us deploy both reserve and active duty medical staff as an augmentation, which were invaluable to hard-hit hospitals and medical centers. You’ve seen – you know, I think we probably under-tapped the military in terms of its tremendous logistics capability. I mean, how do we take in a national approach to getting testing out there, to getting PPE out there, to getting ventilators out there? I mean, you know, the Pentagon’s really good at procurement and really good at distribution and logistics. But, again, they weren’t asked to do that. They weren’t asked to help. So, again, I hope that there will be a serious lessons learned effort after this pandemic, not so much to point fingers and assign blame, but to really learn about how we do better next time.

Kathleen Hicks: Let me ask you one last question, which is the always hard to answer, what are the – what are the things we should be looking for and haven’t been paying attention to. And the example given was, of course, Hong Kong, China’s efforts to – excuse me – Hong Kong more fully under Chinese control during the pandemic. We talked a little earlier about some other examples. What might be something we’re not watching right now that you’d encourage people to be thinking about as a potential opportunistic next step from somewhere?
Michele Flournoy: Yeah. I think we’re in a very reactive mode, which is never a good thing. (Laughs.) And so I think we need to proactively be thinking: How will President Xi, who has, frankly, suffered some political criticism from his population and is now surrounded by a group of hardliners who are encouraging him to consolidate power, take strong measures – what’s the next move? Whether it’s in Hong Kong or, we all noticed the dropping of the word “peaceful” in front of Taiwan its reintegration. So what could we expect there? What could we expect in the South China Sea? Really focusing on some of those potential scenarios, and thinking through in advance how we would response, and how could we deter that in the first place. Same thing with Russia. I mean, I don’t think Putin’s in a particularly strong position right now, but we’ve seen whatever he – even when he feels weak, he tries to find ways to change the subject. And so I think we need to be doing the same for Russia, for Iran, for North Korea, and others. And again, maybe that’s happening. I hope it’s happening in some basement office of the Pentagon. But no evidence of it so far in terms of thinking strategically about these scenarios.

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah. And I think I would just take the moderator’s privilege to throw on top of that the domestic pieces. Obviously, right-wing extremism we’re seeing tick up in the current environment. And I can imagine we could see other things of that sort. Michele, thank you so much for helping us kickoff this conference and for being willing to do it in this unusual format. But I know you’re very used to Zoom by now. (Laughter.) Really appreciate you doing such a far-ranging conversation with us. So thanks.

Michele Flournoy: Thank you. And best of luck for the rest of the conference. And everyone, hope you all stay healthy and safe.

Kathleen Hicks: So I want to turn it over now to Dr. Frank Gavin. He’s the director of Henry Kissinger Center for Global Affairs at Johns Hopkins SAIS. Frank, over to you.
Hi. I'm Frank Gavin, director of the Henry Kissinger Center. And it's wonderful to be here. What a terrific presentation from Michele Flournoy. Thank you. I cannot imagine a better way to start the 2020 Future Strategy Forum. I'd also like to say what a privilege and honor it is work with Dr. Kath Hicks, who in addition to being the Kissinger Chair at CSIS, she is also the Donald Marron Senior Scholar with the Kissinger Center. I also want to sincerely thank the amazing team from CSIS, the Smart Women, Smart Power Program. And from our side, the extraordinary Diane Bernabei has been simply indispensable. The Kissinger Center is honored to cosponsor such a remarkable conference, that in only its third years has grown into one of Washington's most impressive platforms for diverse and talented minds from foreign policy and the national and international security worlds. For those of you who are not familiar with us, the Kissinger Center is part of Johns Hopkins SAIS and was founded with the aims of generating historically minded strategy and statecraft, and of bridging the divide between the worlds of scholarship and policy. And it's hard to think of a program more in line with our mission and our vision than the Future Strategy Forum. We have a special initiative I'd like to announce today. As part of the Future Strategy Forum, and in cooperation with Texas National Security Review, we are very proud to sponsor a competition for the best scholarly papers in national and international security from new and underrepresented voices, named after our dear friend Dr. Janne Nolan. Janne was an extraordinary mentor to many and a consummate bridger of gaps, and spoke during the first Future Strategy Forum. The winners will not only receive a stipend but an opportunity to have their article workshopped by a group of distinguished scholars and policymakers. For anyone in our audience who is early in their career, please send us your scholarship. I would like to now introduce the two amazing women who first had the idea for this conference, MIT Ph.D. students Sarah Plana and Rachel Tecott. I first met both of them as Ph.D. students entering the Security Studies program at MIT. They suffered and persevered through my Grand Strategy class. They became exemplary members of the Kissinger Center's International Policy Scholars Consortium and Network. And they are amazing emerging scholars you will be hearing much from in the years to come. And it's with great pride and pleasure that I introduce to you Sarah Plana and Rachel Tecott.
Thank you so much, Dr. Frank Gavin, for the kind introduction. And thank you to the honorable Michele Flournoy, a leading thinker in international security, and an especially important voice in the current moment. I’m Rachel Tecott, a Ph.D. candidate at MIT and a co-founder of the Future Strategy Forum. Three years ago, Sarah Plana and I had a small idea to build a conference for women focused on international security. Thanks to the leadership and support of Dr. Kath Hicks and CSIS, of Dr. Gavin and the Kissinger Center at Johns Hopkins SAIS, and a growing team of all-star graduate students, the Future Strategy Forum has grown into a community of students, academics and policymakers committed to amplifying underrepresented voices and advancing the debate in international relations and foreign policy. Welcome, all of you, to the third annual Future Strategy Forum special edition, the Future of Cooperation and Conflict in Time of COVID-19. The original plan for FSF 2020 was to focus on the nexus between international security and emerging technologies and to meet together at CSIS for panels and a wargame. Plans have changed. We decided to postpone the National Security and Technology Conference to FSF 2021, so stay tuned for that, so that we could focus this year on the international-security questions on all of our minds. For the last several months, many of us on the FSF organizing committee have found ourselves rethinking the fundamentals. What does security mean, really? What should the military be for? A particularly salient question this morning. How should we think about the balance, to the extent they’re in tension, between personal liberties and security? We knew that our audience and participants would be mulling similar questions and that some of the most brilliant women in our field were thinking deeply and writing incisively on these topics. And so we decided to meet the moment and bring you a conference focused on the implications of COVID-19 for international cooperation and conflict. Over to Sarah.
Sarah Planah:  It takes a lot of agility and hard work to develop a whole new conference in just a few weeks. So a special thank you to Beverly Kirk and Christine Brazeau at CSIS, to Diane Bernabei at the Kissinger Center, and to our growing Ph.D. grad-student team for their hard work to make all of this happen. Thank you as well to all the brilliant panelists who will be joining us on such short notice. And thanks also – special thanks to all of you for joining us for a conference that, like so many other things this year, is a little different from what we all had in mind. We recognize especially that developments over the last week have been distressing for many, especially people of color. So we are so grateful you took the time to be here today. A final thank-you to the CSIS AV team, which – without whom we could not have been able to do the virtual programming. John, Clifton, and Travis, thank you so much for all your hard work. The revised, revamped FSF 2020 will proceed with an event each of the next three days, all at 1:00 p.m. Eastern standard time. So please join us tomorrow, June 3rd, at 1:00 p.m. Eastern for a panel on COVID-19 and Grand Strategy featuring Dr. Jennifer Bouey, Dr. Mira Rapp-Hooper, and Dr. Kori Schake, moderated by Dr. Kath Hicks. On Thursday, June 4th, at 1:00 p.m. Eastern, we will continue with a panel on COVID-19 and the military featuring Dr. Risa Brooks, Dr. Mara Karlin, MacKenzie Eaglen and Pam Campos-Palma, moderated by newly minted Dr. Alice Friend. We will conclude the conference on Friday of this week with a panel on COVID-19 and Democracy and Governance featuring Camille Stewart, Dr. Lainie Rutkow, and Dr. Susanna Campbell, moderated by Dr. Suzanne Spaulding. After the public conference, and thanks to the support of the Kissinger Center at SAIS and Bridging the Gap, a special thank you to Naaz Barma and Leila Adler. We will continue the conversations in a series of breakout sessions with our FSF graduate-student cohort. Bridging the Gap does incredible work helping Ph.D. students and professors reach across the divide to policy. And we are grateful for their partnership in our efforts to create a community of emerging scholars. So thank you all again for your time, attention and interest this morning, so early in the morning for some of us. We are excited to bring you FSF 2020. This concludes day one. Please remember to join us tomorrow at 1:00 p.m. Eastern on the livestream for a discussion of COVID-19 and Grand Strategy. You can also follow us on Twitter @FSFConference and submit questions via the Google Forum on the event pages. Have a great rest of your day.

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