TRANSCRIPT

Defense 2020

“Defense, Diplomats, or Dollars: Balancing the National Security Toolkit, Part 1”

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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 U.S. military’s strategy, missions, and funding. This podcast is made possible by contributions from BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and the Thales Group.

Kathleen Hicks: On this episode of Defense 2020, I host a discussion with three experts on balancing the national security toolkit: my colleague, Melissa Dalton, Deputy Director of the International Security Program, Senior Fellow, and Director of the Cooperative Defense Project at CSIS; Ambassador Reuben Brigety, Dean of the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University; and Jamie Fly, President and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Kathleen Hicks: So, this podcast series has been focused, of course, around defense as it says in its title, but we thought we’d spend a few episodes talking about the other pieces of the national security toolkit and how we should even think about security in the world that we’re in today. COVID-19 has put that, I think, into stark relief for many Americans, that what makes them feel safe and secure may not be necessarily directly tied to the military or national defense.

Kathleen Hicks: We want to explore some of those issues today. And of course, we have three great guests with us to do so. Let’s just jump right in. Reuben, let’s start with you. You’re the Dean of a School of International Affairs. You must have to grapple all the time with students trying to think through what does security mean today? How do you conceptualize this challenge as it gets beyond issues of hard power and defense?

Reuben Brigety: Well, there are a lot of ways to think about it and thank you very much for having me along with this conversation. It seems to me that one of the most striking ways to conceptualize it is that traditionally in security circles, there is an underlying binary assumption, and that is friendly versus enemy. And that, by definition, anything that your enemy may do can be viewed as a threat to the friendlies.

Reuben Brigety: And conversely, you’re constantly trying to protect yourself and upgrade your own defenses as a friendly, because potential fakes or ruse from your adversary, from the enemy. The problem with pandemic disease is that the same threat applies to both friendly and enemy. And in fact, that which can make your enemy insecure can also make you insecure. Or conversely, that which can improve your enemy’s strength against this particular threat necessarily also improves your own strength against this threat.

Reuben Brigety: And this is no better way conceptualized than the fact that this virus, this pandemic, started in China, obviously our greatest peer adversary in the
world today. And so, what clearly made Chinese populations vulnerable to this also made us vulnerable. And why does that matter?

Reuben Brigety: It matters because it goes to your very conception of how the world ought to be organized and how you ought to approach it. Do you approach it from a perspective of general collective security or do you approach it from a general perspective of competition and adversarial behavior? And obviously, there are different times in which different approaches are better, but if your general approach, quite frankly, as the Trump administration's, was, as was said, written explicitly in an op-ed by former national security advisor, H.R. McMaster, very early on in the Trump administration, as America First, as one that's fundamentally based on competition, then it's hard to see both a threat to an adversary as also a threat to you, and also inversely seeing as a means of trying to strengthen your adversary against this particular threat as a means of improving your own security.

Reuben Brigety: And I think that was, quite frankly, the fundamental failure of this administration and this pandemic, it's that framework through which they saw it. Which is why, for example, the president, or at least part of the reason, why the president ignored multiple amplified warnings from the intelligence community as early as January 2020, about the significance of this threat emanating from Wuhan, and why it was so critical to take actions, urgent actions, to prepare the people in the United States in order to counter it.

Kathleen Hicks: So, let's get to the issue of what the security threats are that we face and the tools that we have. And Jamie, let me go to you because you're on the front lines of one set of those challenges, and as part of American security posture, is out in Europe, looking at the information space. How do these questions strike you from that perspective?

Jamie Fly: Well, I think, to pick up on what Reuben was describing, really, the leveling effect of a pandemic, like the one that we're dealing with, with coronavirus right now, there are a lot of other types of disruptive forces that are having a similar leveling effect.

Jamie Fly: And one that I've been following for the last several years and certainly engaged in now, out here in Prague at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is the leveling effect of technology. That has also played a role in this pandemic. We've seen the Chinese really boost their overt propaganda efforts in the wake of the pandemic. We've seen the Russians, Iranians, others try to use the pandemic to enhance their geopolitical position.

Jamie Fly: And I think the concerning thing, for me, is that we've been seeing warning signs even before coronavirus, that technology has this disruptive capacity within our societies. Certainly, in the U.S. context, there was a lot of discussion following the 2016 election about the Russian intervention in that election, which was significantly amplified by its use of technology to reach Americans through the media, through which they now receive news
and information. And I think the latest incidents with coronavirus just show that rogue actors who want to threaten the U.S. are going to double down on the use of technology to try to bring Americans and others over to their side.

Jamie Fly: Here at RFE/RL, given that we support independent journalists throughout Eurasia, across 22 countries, we’re seeing this in pretty much every media market, where people with a malign agenda are trying to spread disinformation, spread conspiracy theories, and our societies haven’t really figured out how to respond to that. Some of it is building the response into our national security policy. Some of it’s actually prioritizing funding of independent media outlets, not just those directly supported by the U.S. government, but independent media writ large.

Jamie Fly: And making sure that we realize that this is really the new battle space where wars, quite frankly, may start in that battle space and start to be played out in that battle space well before shots are actually fired, well before military forces are moved into position. And I think there has not been an understanding yet in the U.S. to that effect, that this is an area that we need to treat really as a new domain of the battle space.

Kathleen Hicks: So, Melissa, we’ve talked a little bit about information and public health and challenges beyond the military domain. There is in the United States, often, a quick turn to looking at the defense budget as an element of this puzzle in terms of shifting resources and shifting focus. What’s your perspective as somebody who sits at this intersection of defense and diplomacy and development?

Melissa Dalton: Yeah. Thanks so much, Kath, and great conversation thus far. There is this refrain that our foreign policy is over militarized for the challenges before us and projecting out in the next five to 10 years. And the focus does often default to budgets. But I think we also have to consider the broader foreign policy effects of how we’re using defense in the military around the globe, as often the leading element or the default element. So it’s not just a budgetary question, but it’s actually also, what are the political effects of leading with that particular instrument.

Melissa Dalton: I think a really illustrative case of this is the reliance on security cooperation, security sector assistance to further our security partnerships around the globe, not just as a vital way of accomplishing our common security objectives, for very good reasons, such as burden sharing, operational access, conducting operations with our security partners, deterrence assurance, but often, as an end into themselves. That there is some inherent quality that we are seeking or that we want to accomplish just by having a security partnership, without fully recognizing that when we engage in these types of partnerships and are influencing the monopoly of the use of force in these countries, it’s a political choice that we’re making, and it has political effects beyond the security sphere.
Melissa Dalton: And what we’ve seen since the post-9/11 era is this reliance on a by, with and through approach has become an easy and importantly visible tool for us to respond to counterterrorism or other security challenges, even in the age of strategic competition. When policy makers are sitting at the National Security Council and feel that they have to do something, it’s often the default to reach for security cooperation or security assistance, because it’s something transactional, it’s visible. It’s something that a Secretary of State or Secretary of Defense can announce that we are doing in that moment.

Melissa Dalton: But it’s so very rarely tied to clear, defined policy outcomes, and the relationship often becomes an end to itself without clear criteria of the risks of embarking on that relationship beyond that narrow operational objective. How to end the relationship if it goes badly, how to employ conditionality. And we’re also not willing to be honest with ourselves when it does end up being more of a transactional relationships because we want to be seen as the reliable partner.

Melissa Dalton: We are conflicted in that way, that we don’t want to have that honest conversation with ourselves. And I think we’ve seen this come to a head, particularly in a relationship with Saudi Arabia over the last few years, where there are clear security reasons why we need to partner with them as well as political and economic reasons. But from a defense perspective, when it comes to deterring Iran, when it comes to pursuing our counterterrorism objectives. But I think, given Saudi conduct in Yemen, the Jamal Khashoggi tragedy, it’s been really difficult to calibrate and navigate that security partnership despite significant congressional pressures because we are so invested in the relationship itself.

Melissa Dalton: And so I think this is a great example of how we are very reliant on one particular tool that then crowds out decisions, constraints, decisions that we need to be making from a broader foreign policy perspective and not always the most effective tool to be investing in to further certain objectives.

Kathleen Hicks: So let’s pick up right there, Reuben, because I think this comes back, in some ways, to your original point about a unilateralist sentiment in the America First approach, but then, if you will, weighing in this point that Melissa raises, that having partners is also very complicated, if we’re not saying things through those relationships. It sounds like, Melissa, your point is, in a long-term, strategic way, if we’re only focused transactionally and only focused on security.

Kathleen Hicks: I think all of that, to me, in addition to what we heard from Jamie, brings into this question of the State Department itself. And you’ve been an ambassador for the United States. You’ve also worked at main State in Washington. I think it’s well known that, under the Trump administration, we’ve made a decision as a country to cut diplomacy. Congress, in a bipartisan way, has tried to push some of that back. But there’s no doubt that the state department’s in a weaker position than it’s been in a generation. How do you see that affecting this ability to both work with others, which you have
pointed out, you find very important and COVID points to, and then Melissa’s point about being able to weigh relationships effectively?

Reuben Brigety:  

Badly is the short answer, but let’s step through that a little bit. So, first of all, the critique that the State Department in the last couple of years has been grievously weakened is not a partisan critique because there have been Republican and Democratic presidents and Secretaries of State who have been giants of foreign policy and who understood the value and the criticality of our professional diplomatic service for the purpose of advancing American interests.

Reuben Brigety:  

What is clear in this administration is that the ability of the State Department to both be a vital player in the formulation of American foreign policy and the translation of presidential intent and to actionable diplomatic activity, and having the credibility to be able to understand and speak for the president has been grievously wounded because of the cavalier way that President Trump and his closest associates have dealt with American diplomacy writ large.

Reuben Brigety:  

This is not news. This clearly has been widely reported in multiple venues. And I can tell you, my office at the Elliott School is across the street from the state department, and my personal office has become almost like a speakeasy for foreign service officers, from very junior to very senior, who come over regularly, knock on my door, and tell you, you have no idea how bad it is, regardless of what you’re seeing in the news, it’s dramatically worse.

Reuben Brigety:  

And so, to Melissa’s point, managing relationships and managing partnerships are at the essence of American diplomacy, and diplomacy is not arithmetic. It is not straightforward, one plus one equals two. The kinds of complexities that Melissa describes in the Saudi relationship are plenteous in a number of both bilateral and multilateral relationships we have all around the world. And being able to balance our values and our interests at any given point, for both immediate and long-term impact is the stuff of diplomacy.

Reuben Brigety:  

And the fact that we are having such difficulty in this regard, with regards to our engagement with China, with our friends, like the Canadians, for the love of God, or our colleagues in the European Union, is quite frankly emblematic of the profound disconnect between the understanding and trying to interpret the president’s whipsaw-like approach to our interest in the world, and then what it takes to have a professional, competent foreign policy run by professionals.

Kathleen Hicks:  

So, Jamie, when you’re looking at Europe in particular, obviously there’s extreme tensions in U.S. relations with some allies, for instance, the Germans. What do you think are the key tools that the U.S. is not substantially invested in right now? Is it diplomacy? Is it public diplomacy? How would you characterize it?
Jamie Fly: I think public diplomacy is an area. I’m all for spending more money to support the state department, and going back to my time working on Capitol Hill, that’s something that I always tried to prioritize. And so I think there is an actual good news story there that sometimes gets masked.

Jamie Fly: The reality is, despite the budgets that this administration has put forward every spring, bipartisan majorities in Congress have continued to fund the international affairs budget, fund U.S. international broadcasting and organizations like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Despite the fact that there’s very little that Democrats and Republicans in Washington can agree on these days, there has been a bipartisan majority that has continued to support the international affairs budget, which I think is important to note.

Jamie Fly: However, I think the way in which the United States government and the State Department in particular go about public diplomacy needs to fundamentally change, given some of the technological changes I talked about earlier, given the changing nature of the threat. So, I think public diplomacy is an area that’s ripe for review.

Jamie Fly: Some of it does get bogged down by the broader riffs in relations with allies that Reuben was talking about. That said, I think what we often forget from a U.S. perspective when we’re debating these things is how much division there is in many of our allies. I’m sitting here in the Czech Republic, within the European Union, even pre-coronavirus, there were fundamental forces at play pulling parts of the EU apart.

Jamie Fly: There are EU member states and NATO allies that have fallen back on some of their basic commitments, both to the EU and to NATO. The three newest services here at RFE/RL that we’ve started up in the last two years are in EU member states and NATO allies: Bulgaria, Romania, and in a couple months, in Hungary. That’s partly because of a decline in press freedom in each of those places.

Jamie Fly: Bulgaria, which again is an EU member state, is ranked 111th in the world in press freedom. You just think about that for a minute. Again, an EU member state, a NATO ally that’s part of Europe, 111th in the world in press freedom. That’s not an issue that was caused by the Trump administration or by American politics or American policy. Quite frankly, it’s an issue that relates to some of the EU zone policies towards its member states, and the EU’s ability to continue to improve the rule of law, press freedom in its own members and its willingness to tackle some of these tough issues.

Jamie Fly: So, I think issues like that are areas where many people in Brussels would agree that this is a major challenge and would agree that it’s a prime area of potential cooperation between Washington and Brussels, but there’s no one really driving that conversation right now.

Jamie Fly: The final thing, I just note that I think also unites us across the Atlantic, despite some of the challenges that both sides of the Atlantic are facing, is
the threat. Again, sitting here in the heart of Europe over the last several weeks, watching coronavirus play out, the European Union member states realized that they were getting hit by an information offensive from the Chinese. They’re kind of used to this now, unfortunately, from the Russians.

Jamie Fly: But that was a wake up moment for Brussels and for the member state capitals, as they saw propaganda being pushed to their citizens on a daily basis about China, the great benefactor coming in to save European lives, to ship equipment. Obviously misleading the public, in many cases, about the origins of that equipment, about the cost of that equipment, about the quality of that equipment and mixed in with a healthy dose of anti-Americanism, portraying America in a very biased perspective.

Jamie Fly: That has led to, I think, a lot of reflection in Brussels about what the EU can do better to improve its messaging. And I think that’s a healthy conversation to have, because again, I think it’s a conversation that needs to happen in Washington, as well, about U.S. public diplomacy.

Jamie Fly: We often, unfortunately, I think, view these things through the perspective that you need the U.S. to lead, everyone else to follow. Well, the reality is we’re grappling with a lot of the same challenges, and honestly, I think we just need more lines of communication between European capitals and between Washington. Because the threat assessment is increasingly similar. It’s just a question of what we can do together to deal with these challenges.

Kathleen Hicks: Well, I know we’ve only scratched the surface. We could talk more about development. We could talk more about climate, but I think this is a good opener for a conversation to follow on what we do about the balance issue between defense and other tools in the national security toolkit. So Reuben Brigety, Jamie Fly, and Melissa Dalton, thank you for your time today, and I look forward to picking up the conversation there.

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 Chess Board, and more. You can listen to them all on major streaming platforms like iTunes and Spotify. Visit csis.org/podcasts to see our full catalog. And for all of CSIS’s defense-related content, visit defense360.csis.org.