TRANSCRIPT
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“Defense, Diplomats, or Dollars: Balancing the National Security Toolkit, Part 2”

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Kathleen Hicks: Hi, I’m Kathleen Hicks, Senior Vice President and Director of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. 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 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 continue my discussion with three experts on balancing the national security toolkit: Melissa Dalton, Senior Fellow, and Deputy Director of the International Security Program 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 thanks for joining me again today. We're going to pick up the conversation that we began last time with our three guests on the national security toolkit beyond defense. And we talked a little bit last time about COVID-19 is maybe helping to set the stage for many Americans, even though the national security community has been very much involved in a conversation over this question of balancing the toolkit, it may not have been apparent to the average listener.

Kathleen Hicks: But I think it's fair to say today, we have a pretty broad understanding of safety and security, and the question is how do we best set ourselves up going forward? So we have a new administration or a second term of the Trump administration starting next year, and the big question for them is how they should set their agenda. And Melissa Dalton, I'm going to start with you. What are the big agenda items you see around this question of balancing national security or setting priorities in national security? What do you want to see happen in January? At least by January of 2021?

Melissa Dalton: I think, to pick up where our last conversation left off and Jamie's great points about the information domain, I think that is really where we're seeing the problematic areas arise for where there's a lack of capacity on the U.S. government's side and to compliment the other tools of national power.

Melissa Dalton: And these investments that would need to be made in that domain are not necessarily fiscal in nature. It's a lot to do with integration and coordination of tools and authorities that we already have in place, while at the same time, maybe building out in some key areas. So the need to have first and foremost integration at the National Security Council and with the intelligence community to better integrate and coordinate information threats, to decide how they're actually impacting specific priorities and objectives that we have for our overseas engagement, to drive inter-agency action and operations from a very central perspective.
Melissa Dalton: We also do need to have an increase in appropriations for Department of State overseas engagement, in part to fill some of the gaps in capacity that we’re seeing in our allies and partners that Jamie was talking about. And just to highlight a couple of things that are probably necessary on the domestic front, really working to require and resource civic education and media literacy across the country. Done largely at a state and local level, but with federal support, is quite important.

Melissa Dalton: And then there does need to be more robust engagement with social media companies to develop more collective action to bridge private and public and address some of the threats that we’re seeing from the social media standpoint.

Kathleen Hicks: So Jamie, first of all, Melissa gave your world a very rich menu. I invite your thoughts on that, but also I think information, I think to many Americans, that could sound a lot like propaganda. And how do we think about what America does, in terms of information, that’s different than what RT does? What Chinese Communist Party, state media puts out. So is it right to pick information first as one of the priority areas? And welcome your thoughts on what that looks like to you. And second is that wrong? Is that not something that the United States of America ought to be doing at a state level?

Jamie Fly: So just one reaction first to Melissa, and then I’ll get to answering your question. Now, I think the policy prescriptions make a lot of sense. I mean the fundamental thing that concerns me, and it’s actually very similar to dealing with a pandemic. I started off my career actually at the Pentagon working on weapons of mass destruction, back when I first met Reuben as he may remember-

Kathleen Hicks: Jamie, you were working on countering weapons of mass destruction?

Jamie Fly: Yes, actually biological weapons initially, biological arms control. And a lot of these threats actually require a whole of society response, both to build up resilience, but then certainly in the case of a pandemic or an information operation to actually respond to that threat in real time. Just like WMD or dealing with a pandemic, you need to bring in parts of government, which are often not considered part of the national security community. HHS for instance, as we’ve seen in recent months in the case of Coronavirus.

Jamie Fly: Information, operations and responding to them are very similar. And that’s why it’s been so difficult, I think, to set into motion some of these policy prescriptions, because in the case of dealing with this information, it involves a public-private partnership bringing in the tech companies, trying to get them on board, in the U.S. case, without over-regulating them, and making them less relevant for everyday Americans.

Jamie Fly: So it’s really a significant undertaking to deal with some of these cross cutting threats. And we’re only just beginning to deal with that challenge. Again, as we’ve seen I think with Coronavirus, we don’t have it right. Even
though we've been talking about dealing with the pandemic now within national security circles for several decades, but we haven't come up with all the answers. I think we're at an even earlier stage in terms of dealing with the information threat.

Jamie Fly: Now on the question of propaganda, I think the reality is, these tools are being used against Americans on a daily basis. They're being used in other countries as part of an attempt to undermine American standing in the world. So this war is happening, whether or not we want to get involved in it. We, and through at least U.S. International broadcasting and networks like RFE/RL, obviously go about our business in a very different way than RT and Sputnik.

Jamie Fly: We abide by the highest journalistic standards. We maintain an independent editorial relationship from the U.S. government. Even though we receive our funding from the U.S. Congress. RT, Sputnik, our Chinese competitors, do not adhere to those standards. So there are marked differences. The other thing I had noticed, I don't think the U.S. government should be in the business of providing this sort of news and information for the American people. We, under U.S. law, something called the Smith Mundt Act, are actually not allowed to target any of our news or our journalism to the American people. And we strive to abide by that. And I think that's a good regulation to have in place because our purpose is to provide independent journalism in societies where a free and independent media does not exist. And that's obviously not the case in the United States.

Jamie Fly: Americans, despite the fact that they're getting bombarded with all kinds of questionable material now online, through social media, they do have other sources that they can turn to that are objective for news and information. The places where you need more focus, I'd say, from the U.S. are in places like Russia, Central Asia, where state media dominate and independent media are often forced out of those societies through government pressure or regulation.

Jamie Fly: That's where U.S. funded broadcasting can really play an important role in opening up the information space, but it doesn't just have to be directly funded by the U.S. government. I think the U.S. government should be supporting more independent media, civil society, groups that support independent media and should just be speaking out on behalf of journalists, under pressure. All of these things I think can help maintain a freer information space, that make it much more difficult for conspiracy theories and disinformation to really be successful.

Kathleen Hicks: So Reuben, same question to you about the priorities.

Reuben Brigety: I'm one who thinks that Richard Haas got it right, which is that foreign policy begins at home. And one of the things that clearly is a great concern, is the extent to which our adversaries have our number in terms of our own national weaknesses. They know that at least as of yet, they cannot compete
against us on a peer to peer, military basis. But the Russians in particular have identified our internal, cultural and political fissures as a weakness for us. And to the extent that I think Jamie is absolutely right, that we have been bombarded by propaganda information operations from abroad. And that Melissa, I think has an awful lot of value in what she says about civic education. These external efforts are not simply a means of foreign adversaries trying to show how their governments are better than ours. They're also increasingly a means of trying to understand what are the fault lines in American society? And then turning us against ourselves.

Reuben Brigety: Why does that matter? Because at a very base level, in a democracy, your ability to exert foreign policy is only as good as the extent to which you have domestic support for it. And so, to the extent to which there is a very different conception about what America’s role in the world is, how we relate to our neighbors, how we think about events beyond our shores impacting events within our own borders, and therefore what role we should play in helping to shape or buttress our allies, as well as the so-called non traditional security matters, whether it be questions of refugees, migration or questions of international health or questions of climate.

Reuben Brigety: These are all fundamental fissures, quite frankly, in our own domestic politics. Now I am never, not so Pollyannish, and again, it's hard to believe, that we are or will ever be or should ever be monolithic in our approach to our own society. But what I would say is that we have got to figure out how to assess our own role in the world and understand our own interests beyond a typical left, right partisan divide in America if we were ever to have a hope of successfully pursuing our interests abroad. And I think quite frankly, that is the most fundamental issue that I see.

Kathleen Hicks: Let's push on that a little bit. So there has been very consistent polling by Gallup and by Pew that's longitudinal - year over year - that demonstrates a actually quite resilient American public support for the U.S. to have a leading role in the world. Now, the devil's in the details, right, of what that means and how that breaks down when it comes to anything from the Iran nuclear deal to U.S. force levels in Afghanistan, et cetera. But it does seem to suggest that there's a basis no matter who takes office next, that there is a basis to build on, if the desire is there to do so. And so the push, Reuben, would be, what do you think ought to be in those top priorities? Is it strengthening that domestic consensus? Is it building guardrails in different ways around our public health, our civic health? Or is it about something overseas?

Reuben Brigety: Well, I'd say a couple of things. First of all, there is no scenario in which the abdication of American leadership is in our interests, on any matter, in my view. Because the abdication of leadership means necessarily opening a void for other people to pursue their interest in rallying others to support their view. That's the first thing.

Reuben Brigety: The second thing, I would say, is I actually think it's very important for us to reinvest in the architecture of mutual cooperation, amongst our allies and
crucially helping to reconstitute frameworks for international engagement that are based on our values and our interests rather than others. And the reason that is significant is that once you are able to reestablish both international confidence, both of our allies and our adversaries, that the international order such as it is, will be underwritten by American prestige, by American financing, and by American military interests. Then that then gives you the basis to address a series of external shocks to that system.

Reuben Brigety: Whether it be, like we’re currently experiencing, a sense of how we respond to this pandemic or some other major health crisis. Or whether it be how we rally our allies to address the violation of international borders by a hostile adversary or something else. But we don’t have that right now. There are a series of opinion polls of suggest that American prestige right now is certainly at it’s lowest level since the Vietnam War. And we have got to figure out how to restrengthen that as a means of the baseline for addressing everything else that is in our interests.

Kathleen Hicks: Jamie, I just want to come back to this question of what appetite there might be in the American public and in a new administration in the midst of the COVID pandemic, presumably continuing on in some form through the early part of next year at least. And the global financial crisis. Do you think there’s opportunity here? Or is it going to be a very challenging time to take all the things that you all have talked about today and put them as priorities for the United States and like-minded nations?

Jamie Fly: I think it’s going to be incredibly challenging. I worked for one of the Republicans that ran against President Trump in 2016. And so I saw firsthand what that debate was like in the Republican party, not that long ago. The reality is even before the pandemic, there was, at least on the right and I think in elements of the left too, a significant segment of the population, despite what you see in the annual Pew and other polling, who are highly skeptical about the need to prioritize investments in additional support for diplomacy and defense as well. People in the United States are increasingly tired, again, even prior to Coronavirus, and want to focus on challenges at home. I think a big part of it is, you need political leaders on both sides of the political spectrum who are willing to devote the political capital, despite what they see in the polling, to make the case, and to actually explain to people what the consequences are if America does not lead.

Jamie Fly: Coronavirus shows in some ways, some of the blowback that can result from an erratic rise of China. But I think a lot more public explanation needs to happen and it’s going to be even more difficult. The other thing to realize is, it’s not going to just be an American challenge. Again, based on what I’ve seen firsthand here in Europe, the Schengen agreement with open borders between EU member states, that’s gone at this point. You can’t travel from here in Prague, three hours to Dresden, Germany without going through a checkpoint and explaining yourself. That was unheard of six months ago here. The European mentality also is under pressure right now. Support for
the EU is being challenged, countries like Russia is trying to take advantage of that and sew deeper divisions between EU member states.

Jamie Fly: There’s a return of nationalism here. Throwing borders back up and imposing border restrictions has helped to further that. The question is going to be, how long do those restrictions stay in place once Coronavirus is under control in many parts of Europe? But I think we’re going to see lasting impacts and those end up having psychological impacts as well. If people can’t travel freely, study in other countries as easily. Tourism is impacted. Every country is going to have the economic impact. So I think it’s going to be incredibly difficult for political figures, not just in the United States, but also here in Europe, to step back and convey to their citizens a broader strategic perspective about what is actually at stake here, and why those countries need to invest in international leadership and in the institutions that support that.

Kathleen Hicks: Melissa, we've gone back and forth around this issue of defense spending and spending in other areas both on the last episode and this one. And it just strikes me from the conversation that it seems like all of you have a sense of a symbiotic relationship, which is both that you need defense underpinning, if you will, for diplomacy to be successful. But then there’s the great James Mattis quote from 2017 where he says, "if you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition." How should we be thinking about this guns versus butter debate? That's often the simplified way of framing the challenge as we look at this next generation of national security.

Melissa Dalton: The military is most effective when it's used in combination with information, diplomatic, and economic tools. These things are actually mutually reinforcing. When you think about what the U.S. and its allies ought to be doing around the world and want to do whether it’s signaling, deterrence, stabilization, alliance and partner management, you need all of those tools working in concert. And from a fiscal perspective, if planned strategically and framed in terms of what are our desired outcomes in these different places around the world, and also from a functional perspective, it’s possible that you could actually accrue savings or perhaps be more strategic in where you’re placing your bets in your investments. If you think about the full package of the tools and in a sequenced approach.

Melissa Dalton: And I do think, coming out of the COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity. The fact that this crisis has shook the very infrastructure and bones of this country in a way that hasn’t been in decades is an opportunity to think about some of the structural inefficiencies and gaps, not only in terms of what has been exposed in this crisis in terms of our economic foundations, inequality and healthcare, but how you build from that, to Reuben’s point of leading at home in order to lead abroad.

Melissa Dalton: In thinking about what role defense can play in support of that, I think is really important because you want all these tools working in concert. How
can defense be prompting investments in research and development across sectors, domestically here at home, reaching different and underserved communities, to help patch some of those gaps and inequalities that we're seeing across the country?

Melissa Dalton: What role can a call to serve play coming out of this crisis? If you look back post-Depression era with the jobs works programs, service initiatives that are retooled for a 21st century context, and given the threats and challenges we've discussed in this podcast episodes in terms of how China and Russia have been trying to exacerbate some of those gaps and tensions here at home, how can a call to serve help bridge some of that and create real capacity where we critically need it?

Melissa Dalton: I think there's an opportunity, for example, coming out of the National Commission on Public Service to perhaps frame some of its recommendations along these lines. But even more broadly, thinking about how to rebuild the State Department, USAID our information elements with opportunities for Americans of all stripes - foreign, civil, military service. And thinking about how we align our priorities and budgetary requirements, more from a mission perspective going forward, that transcends the traditional stovepipes, domestic and foreign policy. But also that national security toolkit so that you can better integrate civilian and military competencies like information, like cyber, like partner capacity building, that are going to require the full tool set to do them right, and how that can be integrated in those frameworks with allies that Reuben and Jamie were describing. And this is going to require role clarity and subordination of the military element to best support all of these activities. But it might actually at the end of the day, enable the military to focus where it's best fit for purpose.

Kathleen Hicks: So Ruben and Jamie, I want to let you each get in your thoughts on a concrete recommendation you'd like to see the next U.S. administration put in place. And Melissa’s given us a pretty rich menu herself, and I'm being unfair because I’m going to limit you each to one as we close out this podcast. So Reuben, why don’t I start with you?

Reuben Brigety: Sure. Very simple, hold a bipartisan foreign policy conference of senior foreign policy experts, both in Capitol Hill and run it very early in the administration to try to get to some level of consensus of what we think is of crucial importance to move from there.

Jamie Fly: I would just say that great power competition may never even play out on the battlefield, on the traditional battlefield. And to realize that the great power competition, which is often talked about is already underway and it's happening in many other domains that do not get the attention they deserve.

Kathleen Hicks: Well, Jamie Fly, Reuben Brigety, Melissa Dalton, thank you all for joining me today.
Melissa Dalton: Thanks so much.

Jamie Fly: Thank you.

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