“The Republican Debate over Defense, Part 1”

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GUESTS

Mark Cancian
Senior Advisor, International Security Program, CSIS

Thomas Mahnken
President and CEO, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

Jen Stewart
Minority Staff Director, House Armed Service Committee

HOST
Kathleen Hicks
Senior Vice President, Henry A. Kissinger Chair, and Director, International Security Program, CSIS

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Kathleen Hicks: Hi, I'm Kathleen Hicks, Senior Vice President and Director of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and this is Defense 2020, a CSIS podcast examining critical defense issues in the United States’ 2020 election cycle. We bring in defense experts from across the political spectrum to survey the debates over the US military strategy, missions and funding. This podcast is made possible by contributions from BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and the Thales Group.

Kathleen Hicks: In this episode of Defense 2020, I'll be speaking with three Republican experts on defense. My colleague, Mark Cancian, Senior Advisor in the International Security program here at CSIS, Jen Stewart, Republican Staff Director of the House Armed Services Committee, and Tom Mahnken, President and CEO of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. We discuss views within the Republican Party on key defense issues heading into the 2020 election. Thanks very much to our guests today. Let me start first with Jen, and ask how you think about whether the Republican Party has a singular viewpoint, unified viewpoint on issues on defense, or if there are some fissures or differences of viewpoint in the party that we're going to see play out over the coming election cycle.

Jen Stewart: Thank you Kath. I would say areas where we are seeing a lot of convergence, our support for allies and partners, the need to have an effective response on China, and readiness recovery, and that has come about mainly from the conversations we've been having about adequate resources for the defense budget.

Kathleen Hicks: Tom, what are your thoughts on that?

Thomas Mahnken: Yeah, I would agree with Jen on that, and particularly the issue of China. I mean, I think that's an area not only of Republican consensus, but I think there's a strong bipartisan consensus on the need to develop a comprehensive approach to compete with China.

Kathleen Hicks: You have a different viewpoint here, Mark?

Mark Cancian: I think that there are some splits on the Republican side, strong agreement that we need a robust defense, but you have still some deficit hawks, although they've mostly been hunted to extinction, and you also have the nationalists, that is people like Trump who want a strong defense, but are much more focused on the United States.

Kathleen Hicks: This came up certainly in our conversations in the last few episodes. Let's start there for this group as well, which is this point on the allies burden sharing, how we think about, the United States interests vis-a-vis common interests. And so Jen, I'm going to go back to you, how is the Republican Party wrestling through the rhetoric that the President has on allies, which
emphasizes the burden sharing point, and then if you will, the strength of the documents coming out of the [Trump] Administration, the National Defense Strategy, the National Security Strategy that emphasize the role of allies in our security.

Jen Stewart: I think Mark made a really important point, but to take that a step further, what I’m seeing is, when you’re talking about these issues in isolation, there is a more robust conversation, but when you’re having a conversation about a specific issue, are we going to support NATO? We’ve seen through votes on the House, and Senate floor is strong, overwhelming bipartisan support and very few votes that are opposing supporting the alliance. When you look at the conversation we’re having right now about our larger strategy and policy for the Middle East, and we start talking about our partners, the Syrian Kurds, we’ve actually seen that coalesce Republicans around, we need to support our partners who have tangibly demonstrated that they are helping us achieve our national objectives. So, when we can tie it to very specific concrete examples, we are seeing a lot of agreement. When we’re having a larger ideological discussion, I think that you are having more of a conversation about, are we all on the same page?

Kathleen Hicks: Tom, you talk a lot, I’m assuming to foreign counterparts, folks visiting allies. How are you explaining what Jen just described as a Republican frame around these issues?

Thomas Mahnken: What’s interesting is, I think we’re in Washington DC, we’re endlessly fascinated by the political goings on and we can find all sorts of different divisions and variations, I think. When I talk to a lot of allies, they don’t see those things. I mean, I think they look at our pattern of behavior much more broadly. I mean, that takes me back to this idea of burden sharing, which I don’t like the term and I think the metaphor is wrong, I think what we should be talking about is a way to help our partners do more, and help our partners do more with us. I think that’s the type of discussion that our allies really are looking for.

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah. Mark, thoughts back on this topic.

Mark Cancian: You see this split on Republican side that is between what the strategy documents say and what the United States is doing on the one hand, and then the President’s tweets on the other. I think partly that split is due to the fact that the President hasn’t quite figured out how to use the levers of government to achieve what he wants. And every once in while you see an explosion there, for example, on Syria, where he tries to interject himself without doing the bureaucratic diplomatic precursors that would more smoothly implement his policies.

Thomas Mahnken: I think it’s also worth remembering that our close allies are also themselves, democracies, and their policies are also subject to democratic forces. And so, I think they tend to understand that policymaking in a democracy can be
messy and often that messiness is on display for all at home and abroad to see.

Kathleen Hicks: Now, one of the issues that you hear most about on defense really is around use of or deployment of forces, which relates in some ways to this burden sharing issue. Most recently of course, [the] President’s decision with regard to US forces in Northern Syria, but looking ahead and behind if you will, there’s certainly been discussion about US military forces in Afghanistan and where they’re going. This frame of the “Forever Wars”, which has come mostly on the Left, but also the President again has framed things in this way. How do you think that the issues around US force deployments generally, and maybe specifically US military presence in the Middle East is going to play out in the coming year?

Jen Stewart: I would say there’s two issues that are always critical to stabilize the conversation in Washington. The first is, we need to understand how these deployments are linked to a strategy to achieve policy objectives, and when that piece gets overlooked, we tend to start having tough conversations in Washington. The second piece is the consultation piece. When you look at the number of members who were not in Congress when 9/11 happened, who don’t have that as a current memory for them, and then you ask them to support something without consulting them or without tying it back to the objectives, we get into trouble. The other thing I would say is we have talked a lot about the conversation in Washington, one of the areas we need to do better at is reconnecting our policy conversations to Washington to the American people, tying it to their economic prosperity, tying it to the advancement of our values, our norms, our ethics. And this comes up for example in emerging technologies but is certainly relevant here.

Thomas Mahnken: Look, I’d say across administrations, we’ve seen repeated desire to reduce our footprint in the Middle East or get out of the Middle East, and for, I’d say partially understandable reasons. But at the same time, there’s the reality that the United States has interests in the Middle East, and that events in the Middle East, including terrorism can affect Americans here at home. And so, as desirable as it is to just wash one’s hands in the Middle East, I think successive administrations have found that extremely difficult to do in practice.

Mark Cancian: I think Republicans and many Democrats also are haunted by the experience in Iraq, that is a feeling that the surge had reduced violence, United States left but did not create a stable political environment, and then this political situation collapses, ISIS comes in, and the fear that the same thing might happen in Syria or Afghanistan has pushed many, I think to support a longer commitment.

Jen Stewart: If I may, I agree with that and I would go a step further and say they’re increasingly concerned about … we understand what the military objectives are, and the strategy, but help me understand where those start and where the political objectives start, and what is our end state goal.
Mark Cancian: We did an entire project on this question, and what we found was that US goals in Afghanistan had expanded over time. That is starting with very limited goals to prevent the country from becoming a launch pad for terrorist attacks, to a very expansive set of goals for nation building, including political involvement and economic development and rule of law and women's rights in the whole thing. And you see in the negotiations, the United States wrestling with this, is it willing to reduce its goals and give up some of these very important human rights or is does it want to go for the full set of goals, which might imply decades of continued engagement?

Kathleen Hicks: Well, and we had of course John McCain, a strong, maybe I would even say loud Republican voice representing that second camp inside the Republican Party. I'm not sure you have as much of that today. I can think of members who speak to that, certainly Jim Mattis has said some things along those lines, both while he was Secretary of Defense and then subsequently. Is that really still out there? Jen, is there still a segment of the Republican Party that sees a enduring strong military presence in the Middle East as something that is supportive of long term political goals?

Jen Stewart: It's impossible to replace the moral clarity that Senator McCain brought to many of these issues, but I do believe strongly that across both the Congress and in Washington, that there is still a consensus that it is important to be present, it's important to reassure our allies and partners, it's important to deter some potential competitors, and is incredibly important to keep it away game when we're dealing with counter ISIS and other extremist organizations.

Kathleen Hicks: So one of the things, Jen, that you brought up without using the phrasing, you talked about consultation, but one of the things we talked about in the last few episodes is this idea of new Authorization for the Use of Military Force [AUMF], or specificity around authorizations for use of military force in a variety of contingencies that have come up. Can you talk a little bit about what you think the value of such a thing would be, or is it overstated for those who advocate for it, and then maybe a little on the prospects around how we think about better consultation between the executive branch and the Congress on use of force issues?

Jen Stewart: It's a very constructive conversation to talk about, do we need to update the AUMF? Do we need to update the political support that governs all of the operational authorities, the funding that goes into these operations? The one thing that we have not seen yet is, what would a constructive replacement look like? And so right now the focus has been, it is appropriate to have a conversation about updating it, but it needs to be an update with a concrete replace, that it gives our diplomats, our military professionals, our intelligence professionals, the tools and more importantly, the authorities that they would need and we haven't seen that conversation mature yet.

Kathleen Hicks: Tom, I want to ask you about one of the other big themes we've heard a lot from the [Trump] Administration, which is around competition, is typically
how it's stated. Some people have talked about related terms, anything from malign influence, hybrid operations, gray zone challenges, but inside the executive branch they're really using this frame of competition. Can you talk a little bit about how that is playing through in terms of where the Defense Department in particular needs to go in its mindset and capabilities?

Thomas Mahnken: Yeah, I think we're at a place now where government officials from the highest levels are talking. I mean, you just have to think about Vice President Pence's recent speech, are talking about the reality of the multidimensional challenge that the China and Russia play to the United States, to our allies. And if we take that seriously embedded in that, although we don't like to talk about it as openly, is the prospect that we might have to fight China or Russia. And so, I think DOD [Department of Defense] planning really does need to center on those possibilities. And again, if you take that seriously, there's a whole string of second third order consequences that go with that. We need to be thinking much more seriously than we have really in the past 25, 30 years, about what a large scale war would look like. That has implications for all sorts of things such as industrial mobilization, defense planning, and the relationship between defense and industry, government and industry. So, I think we're at the front end of real reconsideration of defense and defense priorities.

Kathleen Hicks: Do you expect defense in that way or maybe security in that way to play a big role in the minds of voters in the coming year?

Thomas Mahnken: Well, I think those of us who care about defense every four years, we expect defense to play a central role, and we expect to have the spotlight shine on us, rarely happens. So, I think the historian in me would say that, well maybe defense will come up or it'll come up in a debate or a couple of debates, but that's probably it. Now, it might come up, if it comes up more centrally, I think it would probably be because of a disaster, and so let's hope that that's not the case.

Kathleen Hicks: Does everyone share that view, that it's probably not near the top of the issues that will come up?

Jen Stewart: I agree that if it comes up, it'll be anchored to probably a specific country or a specific incident. I don't expect to have a strategic conversation about some of these long term issues.

Thomas Mahnken: I agree, but I think you're going to have some rhetoric around waste in the department of defense, a bloated defense budget without any specifics. Also, some issues about nukes, I think may also come up because that's one place where the two parties are clearly in a different place. Democrats leaning more towards [nuclear] arms control, Republicans more towards nuclear modernization.

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah, and we're going to dig into both of those issues on our next episode, so I'm glad you raised them here. And by the way, this is the origin story of this
podcast, is we also don’t expect here at CSIS that we’re going to have a lot of discussion going on in the mainstream if you will, on defense. So, we'll try to help out on that part of it. There are a couple of other issues that have animated the conversation around defense in the past few years, and of course we talked a little bit already about Syria and Afghanistan, but counter terrorism more generally, and how the United States has engaged in the fight since 2001 against radical Islamist groups. Again, there seems to be a bit of a shift in viewpoint that’s happened since then to today across both the Obama and Trump Administrations, but how do you think about where the United States is going next in this counter terrorism campaign set, and again if there is a Republican mindset to that, how would you describe it?

Thomas Mahnken: I think the Republicans on the whole are comfortable with the counter terrorism campaign, it doesn’t mean that they support every element of it, but the notion that we will hunt down terrorists globally and use the assets we have available, for example UAVs to do that, I think has pretty broad support. I think it’s on the Democratic left where you see concerns arising about that campaign, which up until now has been quite bi-partisan.

Kathleen Hicks: Any other views?

Jen Stewart: I would agree with that, and I would just like to reinforce where I see an opportunity here is to make sure that we keep connecting this back to the American people. If you look at some of the major contenders in the 2020 Presidential election, in many ways they are reflecting an American public for whom 9/11 and some of these other terrorist events is a distant memory. And so, I would say it’s more, Washington has become a little bit isolated and needs to reach back and explain why we think consistent with our norms, values, ethics in away game is the appropriate response.

Kathleen Hicks: Where are you seeing that succeed? Are there breakthrough issues or people out there speaking in a way that’s connecting to the voters that you admire?

Jen Stewart: I would start, and this is a little bit self serving, but Mac Thornberry has initiated a series of public speaking engagements because he really sees the disconnect. Every single time we’ve had something come up, we’ve eventually gotten to the right place, but it’s gotten a little bit harder each time, and it’s reinforced in our minds that we’ve taken a little bit for granted some of the foundational truths that most people have been working in the national security space since 2001 take for granted. So, he’s working on that and he’s talking to other like minded individuals about that need to reconnect the American people to what we’re trying to do in Washington on their behalf.

Thomas Mahnken: I would agree with that, and I think that that goes even broader than counterterrorism, I think it goes to support for a vigorous American presence across the world. There’s a very strong case to be made, but the case does have to be made, and I think many of us who support that view of
American international engagement unfortunately started to take for granted that the case just made itself rather than us having to make the case.

Kathleen Hicks: This connects I think closely to maybe a broad view of civil military relations or how well connected American society is to the military. There’s the often quoted percent, 1% of the American population is in the military, I don’t see a cause for that to grow significantly absent a major crisis. So, this gets to this disconnect, Jen, that you in particular have pointed to a couple of times already. How do we think through a better way of connecting the military to society so that we ensure that when there’s issues around, should we use force, should we use forces that we have, an engaged electorate on these issues?

Thomas Mahnken: Well, I think our competitors are in a way doing some of that for us. I mean, you referred to a foreign malign political influence, there’s maligned economic, statecraft. I mean, I think Americans broadly see a pattern of aggressive behavior out in the world, doesn’t mean that they’re going to go down and sign up for the military tomorrow, nor should they. But I think there is a growing perception, and I think it’s an accurate perception, that we live in a more dangerous world. Things that we care about from American lives and property, to our allies, to broader way of life, I think are things that we actively need to defend.

Mark Cancian: I agree. I think we have to have a conversation on the civilian side, and within the Congress about how we will use force, when we will use force. I’m very uncomfortable about any notion that the military ought to be leading that conversation because both parties would like to have the military standing on their side has been, I think, far too much politicization of senior military leadership, particularly retired military, and I would like to get them out of that conversation in the public sphere and have that continue among politicians and the civilian public.

Kathleen Hicks: You have thoughts on how to help effectuate that change?

Mark Cancian: Yeah. Well, in the last election, I think Eliot Cohen came out with a piece and urged that senior military officers, retired officers not get involved, and I think that if we can build on that, getting more and more officers saying that they’re not going to be involved, that maybe you can build a set of a cultural norm that you won’t have military officers on the stage at any of the conventions appear to lend the military to a particular partisan cause.

Kathleen Hicks: I want to loop back a little bit, pulling together many of the threads we’ve talked about already, which is the National Defense Strategy, the National Security Strategy, the Trump Administration have emphasized China and Russia, and I would say for most people who … The documents may say China and Russia, but for most people following the conversations, the particular focus is around China, the long term competition with China, and at the same time, the day-to-day conversation, the bulk of energy being put forward is around these issues of Middle East policy and strategy. We’re
going to talk in the next episode I think in some depth about how you think about capabilities and budget, but just at the broad level, how are we doing in terms of getting focus in the American public, if that's the desired Administration viewpoint around competition with China, making that something that connects for them and actually driving change across that national security toolkit with defense as one component?

Thomas Mahnken: I actually think we're doing pretty well, and I would say just judging progress say over the last year or two years ... Well first, we're actually having the conversation and we're actually openly having the conversation, and I think that's one positive attribute of the current Administration, is the willingness to actually talk about these things. Vice President Pence has given two speeches. At one level you could say they were unremarkable speeches except it was remarkable that it was the Vice President of the United States calling out China on malign behavior in a whole series of categories. So, the conversation is going on, and I think that conversation is not just one going on with, in between us here in Washington DC, but is increasingly nation nationwide. So I think that that is a necessary first step.

Mark Cancian: I think you put your finger on a tension in our military posture, which is, on the one hand, we have strategy documents that look at great power competition, particularly China, but also Russia, on the other hand, every day we're sending forces out to regional conflicts, to crisis response, humanitarian needs, and that split has potential in all of the services. Do they have smaller forces that are very high tech or do they have broader, larger forces that can meet all these many demands? And you see those tensions playing out, many of the services have opted to have a spectrum of capabilities, but it's a good conversation to have.

Jen Stewart: I'd like to emphasize some areas where I think if we can continue to move the conversation forward would be helpful. The first is when we talk about our relationship with China, and it's not just us. When you talk to allies and partners, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, there are many commonalities of their policy debates they're having in their capitals that I think we can leverage in terms of, how do you both engage and compete with China at the same time? And that's across the entire range of our society and certainly there's, and I think continuing to work with our business community on that is going to be critically important. The emerging technologies, the trendlines of some of the places that Beijing wants to take those are not consistent with our ethics and our values, but we haven't really had a conversation in the United States about what our ethics and values are in some of these areas as well.

Jen Stewart: So, making sure that we don't frame this as a military response, but focus on some of these areas where getting it right means we wouldn't have a conflict with China, is where I think our opportunity is right now.

Kathleen Hicks: Let's close out with tying this to the other instruments of power, which I think is an implicit in the conversation that we haven't talked about because
our focus is on defense, but to compete effectively to make sure that we’re countering influence to make sure we have the positive narrative we need to have, we need more than just the military. The Administration has come under significant heat from on the Hill pushing back against attempts to significantly reduce ... the State Department is an example, other instruments, what’s been helpful, if anything, in this conversation that we’re having and where do you think we need to go from here?

Thomas Mahnken: Well, look, I think we are in a multidimensional competition, if we want to use that word. I mean, in some cases, competition is too mild, a description of what actually is going on-

Kathleen Hicks: Your point being, it could be considered conflict?

Thomas Mahnken: Absolutely right, absolutely right. When it comes to political warfare, when it comes to things going on in the cyber domain, I think competition is too polite a term for it. I think that that gets us to something that's vitally important, which is here we are on a podcast talking about defense, and we tend to talk about peace versus war, and we, in the United States, are very comfortable with that dichotomy. But if you look at the way Chinese writers think about it, if you look at the way Russian writers think about it, they don’t see that dichotomy, they don’t admit that dichotomy, they see a spectrum, a spectrum of conflict and competition. I think one of the things we need to accommodate ourselves to and adapt to is the fact that yeah, we’re competing with states, with actors that are quite comfortable doing things that we neatly categorize as peace, but they’re not peaceful and they don’t have peaceful intent. I think that speaks to the way DOD is organized, I think it speaks executive legislative matters. We need to adapt, and also, it does speak to a to organization as well.

Thomas Mahnken: We did have, back during the Cold War, the tools for multi-dimensional competition. I’m not saying we should reproduce those, or we’re in Cold War II, or anything like that. But we’ve done it before, and I think it is worthwhile to at least go back and look historically at how, not just DOD, but the whole government and society adapted to a period of multi-dimensional competition as we think about going forward.

Mark Cancian: I think we should recognize that the capabilities of the private sector are probably more important here, and we always default to what can the government do, but for the United States, the private sector I think has a much greater reach. The example I use from the Cold War is West German TV. Everyone in East Germany could get West German TV and they realized over time that their government was lying to them about conditions in the West, and that probably did more then to convince them about the corruption of their own government than all of the pamphlets the US embassy perused.

Jen Stewart: I agree with both my colleagues, but there's two points I want to reemphasize, the first is on the private sector. I do think we have to
acknowledge that some of the areas in the spectrum of conflict that we're dealing with, the private sector has a much more complicated relationship. I'm thinking mainly of the telecommunications companies, but there's others as well, that we need to respect and understand what issues and interests that they're balancing before we just assume that they're going to be an instrument of US government policy. I think that's something we don't like to talk about a lot. The second thing going back is, when we're talking about the spectrum of conflict and you ask Kath about, how can we make sure it's a robust inter-agency process, to be blunt, usually people evaluate how much we value based on whether we're funding or not. And because we have pretty static phases of conflict right now, and we're not having a conversation about what Russia and China are doing, I think beyond probably the Administration, we don't talk about what authorities do people need and what resources do they need, and do we have an outdated view about what they should have and when they have it.

Jen Stewart: And if we can anchor the conversation that way, in many ways, it ties it to, are you going to fund this or are you going to fund that? And because we're not doing that, it's very easy to overlook, not just State [Department] and AID [USAID], which we usually talk about, but DHS, FBI, Treasury with sanctions, we don't talk about it holistically because it's very easy to just ignore it until we have a problem, and then that's too late to start funding those activities and those people working those authorities.

Kathleen Hicks: Are we going to get better in this particular area, which is this idea of integrating across the national security sector? Are we on a good pathway in the coming year as we approach the 2020 election?

Jen Stewart: I will say no.

Mark Cancian: I think this is a continuing with the US government, the difficulty in getting all the different agencies to work together in a chaotic democracy, so we're always going to get a poor grade. I think we can maybe do a little better.

Kathleen Hicks: Well, Mark Cancian, Tom Mahnken, Jen Stewart, thanks so much for joining me today. The conversation will continue [in the next episode].

Kathleen Hicks: On behalf of CSIS, I’d like to thank our sponsors, BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and the Thales Group for contributing to Defense 2020. If you enjoyed this podcast, check out some of our other CSIS podcasts, including Smart Women Smart Power, The Truth of the Matter, The Asia Chessboard and more. You can listen to them all on major streaming platforms like iTunes and Spotify. Visit csis.org/podcasts to see our full catalog, and for all of CSIS’s defense related content, visit defense360.csis.org.