TRANSCRIPT
Defense 2020

“The Overseas Basing Debate, Part 2”

RECORDING DATE
Friday, January 24, 2020

GUESTS
Susanna Blume
Senior Fellow and Director, Defense Program, Center for a New American Security

Zack Cooper
Research Fellow, American Enterprise Institute

Dave Ochmanek
Senior International/Defense Researcher, RAND Corporation

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

Transcript by Rev.com
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 continue my conversation with experts about US overseas military basing. Susanna Blume, senior fellow and director of the Defense Program at the Center for New American Security. Zack Cooper, research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and Dave Ochmanek, senior international and defense researcher at the RAND Corporation.

Kathleen Hicks: So I want to get in now to the costing elements of posture. If you're a taxpayer in America, how you want to be thinking about what you get out of this force that we have overseas. And there's a really interesting piece that came in War on the Rocks from Rick Berger. And he did some costing analysis that showed if you just take those major force concentrations the US has in Germany, Japan and South Korea costs about $15 billion. About $4 billion of that is covered by those allies. So you're talking, if these numbers are right, about $11 billion cost to have that presence overseas. But at the same time he points out, Rick points out that it would cost you about $2 billion to bring those same forces home and the construction that you’d have to do once you got them home.

Kathleen Hicks: So that $2 billion is their plane ticket, if you will, to say it simplistically is another $8 to $10 billion, meaning you are either roughly equal, saving no money or roughly in the negative zone. So that’s hard I think for most Americans to really understand because they mostly think about the costs of forces overseas and not, as you all have said very clearly on the prior podcast, about the fact that as long as the structure exists, the way to think about posture is more about the marginal cost and then the utility piece.

Kathleen Hicks: So Zack, let me have you make your best pitch around how an American taxpayer might think positively about having US forces. Right now in South Korea.

Zack Cooper: Sure. The question isn’t whether you want to have 28,500 mostly soldiers in South Korea or whether you want them in the United States. The question is whether you want to have 28,000 soldiers in Korea or maybe 40,000 or 50,000 in the United States because for a couple of reasons, they do a lot more in Korea for our strategic interests than they might back home wherever they would be in the continental United States.

Zack Cooper: For one, they're constant presence that you don’t have to rotate through, that is there both to deter adversaries and to reassure our allies. Second,
they're actually in Korea so they know how to operate with Korean forces and they have trust and they build relationships. And third, and I think potentially this is maybe the most important point, you need fewer forces forward often than you would need at home to generate that combat power.

Zack Cooper: And so both Dave and Susanna and yourself, Kath, have talked about the need to fight early on in a conflict and do so effectively. Well, if you're going to flow in forces to Korea over weeks or months in a fight, the other side is going to have gone pretty far down the [Korean] Peninsula before you get there. And you're going to have to flow in a lot more forces, which means you're going to have a bigger force structure. So the trade off-

Dave Ochmanek: A bigger war and more casualties. When it's over.

Zack Cooper: Exactly. So, I actually think the question for a lot of American taxpayers is why isn't more of the force forward?

Kathleen Hicks: I like the way you think Zack but I don't want to stack the deck too much here. Susanna pick up maybe on just the piece of this that is what we often will jokingly call “Navy math”, which is the structure implications, which Rick Berger isn't trying to pick up in his costing, but there are picking up on what Zack said, there are some implications if you keep more of the force home but ended up needing it abroad.

Susanna Blume: So the kind of shorthand for this inside the Department [of Defense] is three to make one, right? If you decide that you need an AEGIS equipped DDG in the sea of Japan to do missile defense missions at all times, you can either base it there, at which case you get a 1.0 presence, actually a little bit less, because you got to do maintenance sometimes but close.

Susanna Blume: Whereas if you wanted to achieve that same presence with forces that were based in the United States, you'd need at least three ships to do that in order to kind of cover the cycle of getting ready to deploy, deployed, recovering from deployment. And for different kinds of units, the math works out a little bit differently. Three to make one is like a good kind of shorthand or heuristic.

Susanna Blume: But you know what Zack said is absolutely correct that if you wanted to achieve the same presence from forces based in the United States, you need a lot more force structure to do that.

Kathleen Hicks: So Dave, in Europe, we've sort of run those exercises over the course of the Cold War. Of course we had forces forward but we imagined a very large force having to come from the United States. Would a model like that even be... could it be operationally effective today?

Dave Ochmanek: It could be. It's a question of balance like everything else and there's no general rule of thumb here. You have to look again and again at what your adversary can bring to bear and how fast and that will dictate how much
time you have to bring an adequate amount of combat power to bear in the defense. And again, we're about a third of the way toward having what looks like an adequate footprint of ground combat power on the Eastern flank of the [NATO] Alliance vis-à-vis what Russia can bring today. So more troops in being in place is the remedy there.

Kathleen Hicks: Well let’s talk a little bit about burden sharing because that’s such a big issue. It's long been an issue. As a matter of fact, after the Cold War, it was mostly an issue among Democrats on the left who wanted to get the “peace dividend”. Today it’s something President Trump talks quite a lot about in very colorful language. But in between those two periods of time, it's always been a tension point.

Kathleen Hicks: What’s fair to be asking of these allies and partners who are hosting US forces and how are they doing in terms of meeting what we think should be fair?

Susanna Blume: Well I think it depends on the ally and it depends why we're there. I guess I would just say as a point of departure, you know, "Cost plus 50" is probably not fair. But you know, the discussion of our NATO allies needing to contribute more to collective defense, dates back long before President Trump took office and for good reason. So if we take that as an example, it is a collective defense problem.

Susanna Blume: You know, the US is in Europe for our own purposes and interests as well, but we're also there to protect our European allies and as a result they should be investing more in their own military capabilities, strengthening the alliance as a whole and its ability to respond to a contingency involving Russia or other bad actors. The story in Asia is a bit different. Both the Japanese and the Koreans contribute substantially in terms of direct dollars and cents payments on the theory that you know, US presence in Japan for example, allows the Japanese to invest less in their own military capabilities.

Zack Cooper: I think actually where this discussion often begins is the wrong starting point. The question to me isn’t what should they be paying and that's the question President Trump often asks. What ... He thinks there's a check that they write to, I don't know, the US Treasury or something of that sort and that should cover all US forces. I actually agree with the President that I don't think our allies and partners do enough. I just think what they should be doing is building their own capabilities, not paying us money.

Zack Cooper: How much do we really get from the South Koreans paying us $800 million a year? Does that add substantial amounts of combat power to American forces? I don't think so. It's a huge political issue in Korea and the fact that we're asking them for $5 billion now is going to threaten the alliance. But if we got an extra $4 billion a year from Korea, would it fundamentally change our capabilities? No.
Zack Cooper: I think the problem we have in Asia is we need more capability in both of our major Northeast-Asian alliances. We should be asking our allies to do more themselves with us in terms of capabilities, not to pay more in terms of the amount that they write a check to the United States government every year.

Kathleen Hicks: This is actually what NATO has been trying to pivot to rhetorically. I'm not sure how far they're getting in terms of actual capability, but this is where the NATO readiness initiative that was announced at the last summit has really kind of tried to shift the conversation from dollars to capabilities on the ground. Dave, how are we doing with our European allies?

Dave Ochmanek: I'm not up to date on that.

Kathleen Hicks: No, that's fine.

Dave Ochmanek: It is a lot easier to measure the amount of a check written to you than it is to assess the efficacy of spending on readiness on forces or aggregate defense budget.

Kathleen Hicks: Do you ... Have you guys done any assessment on the areas where European contributions would be valuable?

Dave Ochmanek: Yes, and it's in the same capability areas that we keep emphasizing from our game. So having over the medium term United Kingdom, France and Germany, be able to provide a ready brigade on the Eastern flank of the alliance within 7-10 days would be terrific. Bringing up the readiness of the so-called very high readiness multinational brigade within Europe, so that it could be available on seven days versus 30 days notice would be a substantial contribution as well.

Dave Ochmanek: And again, anti-armor munitions, cruise missile defense, UAVs for surveillance and reconnaissance, prosaic things like unattended ground sensors on the borders of the Baltics, special operations forces, jam resistant communications. All of our war fighters know the tools they need to do the job. Again, none of these are really high tech things that are beyond the reach of certainly our most advanced allies.

Kathleen Hicks: One of the other ways we see the cost conversation come about is around the readiness trade-offs that are being made or the discussion is are they being made in order to keep up these different descriptions the Department's been using of their time? Is this what it's really about?

Susanna Blume: I think absolutely to in some part, at least that's what it's about. I think the tricky thing is that the relationship between readiness and presence is complicated. Even readiness and posture, it's complicated. I think for example, there is excellent ground forces training available in Europe. If you send a unit to Europe, sometimes that unit's readiness metrics can actually go up, right? Because they have access to this kind of high-end, combined arms training. You know, on the other hand, because of airspace restrictions,
Susanna Blume: And so it really depends on the kind of unit and where it's going whether a stint overseas is good for its readiness or bad for its readiness. There's one example that I point to a lot and that is if we look back at the USS *McCain* and USS *Fitzgerald* ship collisions. Obviously the underlying factors behind those two terrible tragedies were myriad and complicated and interlocking.

Susanna Blume: But you know, one thing that I see when I look at those two incidents is a Navy that had burned through all of its readiness in the steady state or whatever we're calling it, peacetime, whatever you want to call it, kind of presence type missions. And had nothing left in the tank when asked to surge just a little bit in response to provocative activity from North Korea. And the results, as I say, were absolutely tragic.

Susanna Blume: And so I think the Department absolutely has to get a better grip on what those trade-offs are in order to make better decisions about the way that we position our forces around the world.

Kathleen Hicks: So there are lots of different ways the US uses these forces. Some ways we use them are more expensive than others. And there has always been this debate in the department over whether using the forces that we have for missions that are really in support of foreign policy goals versus for war fighting purposes has value. Susanna, what's your view on that?

Susanna Blume: Yeah, I will admit to being a little bit conflicted on this question because on the one hand I think it is not the most effective use of military forces to do very small, kind of not operationally important to US interests type of like for example, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercises in certain countries. It's costly. It is a drain on readiness as we have just discussed and it doesn't really move the needle when it comes to deterrence or sending a message to our adversaries that we are serious and kind of combat credible.

Susanna Blume: On the other hand there are some instances where that kind of exercise is the only way to build a partnership with certain countries. In cases where that's really true then maybe it is worth it. But I think it's probably not worth it as often as we do it.

Kathleen Hicks: So Zack, that makes me think for instance of Southeast Asia where it's really difficult for them to collaborate with exercise with the United States, both in terms of their capabilities and in terms of their domestic and regional challenges on issues that more directly relate to China. But where we've used things like humanitarian assistance and disaster relief [HADR] as a way to ... or maritime domain awareness, you know, what's the value we should take from that?

Zack Cooper: Yeah, I think absolutely just as Susanna said, those kinds of ties help us build relationships. And if we're trying to build a relationship with a certain
country, it can often be very difficult to start with a carrier visit or even a visit from aircraft or destroyers. It can be much easier to start off with HADR and build from there. So I do think there's a role for those kinds of missions, but as Susanna said, we no longer have the luxury of doing everything we want to do. We're going to have to make really tough choices. And I think at times those kinds of relationships are going to make sense and those kinds of exercises and trainings, but not everywhere and not all of the time.

Susanna Blume: Yeah. So for example, in a case with a country where building that kind of military-to-military relationship is not as critical to our kind of operational or fighting interests. Wouldn't it be better if we could, like the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] could do more on like pandemic preparation, right, as opposed to doing an exercise with the Navy or the Marine Corps or whomever?

Susanna Blume: I think there definitely is room to explore that rebalancing of the face of US presence abroad.

Kathleen Hicks: So I want to end by going once around. I'm going to start with you Dave, and just ask you, you know, January 2021 either you'll be at the beginning of the second term of the Trump Administration or you'll have a new team in place in the White House, in the Pentagon leadership. And as it relates to this topic, what's top of your list for the advice you want them to hear?

Dave Ochmanek: Let me answer that question by posing yet another. What constitutes appropriate posture in regions where we face serious to A2AD challenges will depend very much on the concept of operations that we eventually develop for projecting power into those regions. So, the predicate to fixing posture in East Asia is coming up with a way to project combat power survivably and effectively into the contested zone from the outset of hostilities. So I would accelerate the development and fielding of runway independent air vehicles and inexpensive things that I can throw into the face of the enemy or defense and overwhelm them, to create a targeting mesh so that the adversary can't move without being observed. Those kinds of things.

Dave Ochmanek: And as those mature, then we start changing out what we have in our forward posture. On Europe some of those things about increasing land combat power and anti-armor munitions, that's a fairly straightforward sort of a set of things we could start doing right away.

Kathleen Hicks: That's very consistent with actually the way we approach this challenge on the Commission on the national defense strategy where I served, which is it's all about the operational concepts, but we can't be immobile while we wait for that.

Dave Ochmanek: Exactly.

Kathleen Hicks: So what can we do today? Zack.
Zack Cooper: I would build on what Dave was saying and add that I think for the last two decades we've made small tweaks to our posture in Asia. And the Chinese have made huge rapid strides both in their force structure and the advancement and capability of their forces to operate effectively and in their own posture in fact. We have just not kept up. And that's not because each administration hasn't come in saying that they're going to make big changes in Asia. Right? The Bush Administration said it and then got diverted by 9/11. The Obama team came in with the rebalance and the pivot, but we didn't see as much posture change as I would have hoped. And the Trump team came in and talked about great power competition but is sending forces back to the Middle East.

Zack Cooper: And so it reminds me a little bit of the TV show, Friends, where there's an episode where they're trying to get a couch up some stairs and they just keep yelling, "Pivot, pivot, pivot." And it never quite happens. And I think that's kind of the American problem. I've been hearing my whole professional career that Asia is urgent and critical and important and yet we just don't see much posture change. So if I was coming in with the next team, I would say, "Let's do a big posture review of what we would actually need in Asia to fight a major contingency against a rapidly growing Chinese force. And I don't think we're anywhere near where we need to be today.

Susanna Blume: So in addition to everything that Dave and Zack have just said about needing to position the Joint Force in order to fight the wars of the future as opposed to the wars of the past, I would make a push for whomever is in office on January 21st of 2021 to really develop a more sophisticated means of assessing this relationship between presence and readiness. Because I think doing so is essential both to optimizing the position of US forces overseas as well as making sure that the force is healthy enough and ready enough in the event of a crisis.

Dave Ochmanek: I would accelerate the production of weapons for our bomber force. We have this marvelous force of 96 combat coded bombers that can operate from well outside the enemy's missile range and bring lethality into the battlespace and it will run out of useful weapons to shoot within about two days of a conflict. That is an irrational allocation of resources. We can fix that.

Kathleen Hicks: Well, I wanted to thank all of you for joining me today and I hope folks will tune in for our next podcast.

Zack Cooper: Thanks Kath.

Susanna Blume: Thanks Kath.

Dave Ochmanek: Thank you.

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’ defense related content visit defense360.csis.org