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A CONVERSATION WITH
HASC CHAIRMAN ADAM SMITH

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Featured Speaker:

THE HONORABLE ADAM SMITH (D-WA)
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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: Good morning, everyone, I'm Mike O'Hanlon with the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings and we're honored today to welcome the Honorable Adam Smith, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, who is now beginning I believe his 13th term in Congress representing the great state of Washington and the area around Puget Sound and the broader Seattle vicinity.

Chairman Smith is, as we know, an important voice in the United States on many matters of American foreign policy, including not only defense, but foreign assistance and trade. But today we're going to hear him speak a bit about national security strategy. This is of course an important year for the incoming Biden administration to shape its own national security and then perhaps national defense strategies. And certainly the Congress' role historically has been quite important in this process as Chairman Smith knows well from his previous years of experience.

So we're very delighted today to welcome him and his initial thoughts on how we should think about national security strategy. We all know that the Trump administration's national defense strategy under Jim Mattis, another great Washingtonian from out West, which built on some of the Obama administration's latter thinking with its so called third offset, that there's been a fair amount of bipartisan support. And yet, undoubtedly, there's going to be an opportunity and a need for some new direction, and if nothing else, refinement of the previous Mattis thinking as we come into a new decade, a new era in American foreign policy.

So, Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for joining us. Without further ado we'll look forward to your comments. And then, of course, I'll have some questions for myself and the audience for the rest of the hour.

But thank you for joining us and the floor is your

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: Thank you very much, Michael. I appreciate Brookings giving me this opportunity.

And it's really an exciting year. I mean we've got obviously a lot of challenges on the national security front, some we've had for a while, some are relatively new. But I think the most

interesting thing is this is probably one of the biggest transitions from one president to the next that we've had in quite some time. You know, as you mentioned, Jim Mattis sort of, you know, drove the national security strategy, but particularly as we worked our way through President Trump's four years Trump himself began to really dominate sort of a number of aspects of that. And his world view is considerably different than Joe Biden's. So big transition happening and this is going to impact what we do in the world, how our partners view us. And so the relationships that we have in the world are really important right now. I think much of the rest of the world is wondering where we go and I think there's a great opportunity here. And, certainly, we have a fairly known quantity in Joe Biden, 40 years of work on foreign policy and national security and we've seen some clear themes emerging.

And over the top what we're looking for is a peaceful and prosperous world. That's sort of been the post-World War II involvement of the U.S., is to build institutions and to help be part of creating a world that enables people to live in peace and prosper. And our general approach to that is a belief in economic and political freedom and international institutions, partnerships, working together with people all around the world to deal with whatever challenges we face. And I think there is going to be a huge focus — you know, when President Biden speaks about this, he mentions partnerships and alliances very frequently. And I completely agree with him on how important those are as we go forward.

And so there's a bunch of challenges on this. I sort of put them in two categories here, the sort of overarching challenges and then the specific threats that we tend to worry about in the Armed Services Committee. I think the two biggest overarching challenges as a starting point are the rise of autocracy and authoritarian governments. There has been a more explicit injection of economic and political freedom than we've seen in some time. As you've seen, you know, Putin and Xi and Erdogan and others take a much more authoritarian approach to this that has undermined — we have to rebuild that, deal with that. And then the second big issue — I try not to put this — I tend to speak a little bluntly and frankly as opposed to academically, so I'll just go ahead and say it — we have to overcome the perception of our own incompetence. One of the things that has really helped us since World War II is even people who didn't like us or didn't even necessarily trust our intentions, they knew we were capable. I always remember reading “From Beirut to Jerusalem,” and Thomas Friedman talked about 1983 when

the civil war was raging and Reagan made the decision to send in the Marines, the stock market in Lebanon went up, everybody's confidence went up. And this is Lebanon, the country that didn't necessarily — you wouldn't necessarily think of as welcoming American involvement. They thought if America is showing up, then that's good. There was a confidence that we knew what we were doing.

Well, a lot of things have undermined that, none more so than our terrible response to the pandemic and the fact that our U.S. Capitol was stormed on January 6. We have got to rebuild our credibility. If we're going to go out the world and say don't follow China, don't follow Xi, don't follow Putin and side with us, we can get you to a better place. People have to have confidence that we can do that. I mean towards that end, what we do with the vaccine, how we handle the economic fallout from that, the economic rescue package, that's going to really help us I think internationally as we go forward.

So that's the broad. The specific threats — and for those of you who follow this, I know you know the list — Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, and transnational terrorist threats. But I think no national security strategy is complete if you don't add other nonmilitary threats. Pandemic health, obviously a threat to us, climate change — if the planet gets fried, there's no peace and prosperity for anybody. But I would add extreme economic inequality, which tends to lead to ungoverned spaces. So if there is instability out there, as we've seen in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Libya, that is a threat to us as well. So I think we've got to take that holistic approach.

And in that holistic approach, the Department of Defense is part of it, absolutely, but there are a lot of other players that the whole of government approach, that I know you've heard much about, placing greater emphasis on diplomacy, development, building this partners, building those alliances, that's going to be crucial to it a swell.

Now, as we go forward with this, China obviously is the big issue that is taking on everybody's focus. And just two quick things on that — I'll save most of that for the Q&A because there's a lot of details there — I think we need to be really careful about stumbling into a cold war with China. And I'm worried as we look at our sort of war planning, and there's been a lot of talk about the Office of Net Assessment and the war games exercises that they've done over the course of the last six or seven years, that show that we struggle in a straight on confrontation with China. And I think the wrong

message to get out of that is oh my gosh, we have got to build a military that enables us to dominate China. I don't think that's possible and I don't think it's desirable. And I also think it runs the distinct risk of creating conflict where it doesn't need to be. What we need is we need an entire approach that deters China and others from doing the things we don't want them to do. Certainly, you know, military strength is part of that, but alliances and partnerships and diplomacy and a whole lot of other things will play a crucial role in being able to deter China from taking a hegemonic approach to the region and other parts of the world, to undermining all of those international institutions that we know are so important. So we want to be able to take that approach.

And all the while, while we're doing this — and Donald Trump spoke to something in the American people, and that is the notion that what are we doing in the rest of the world. And you see that in the right wing of the Republican Party, you also see that within the Democratic Party. Why do we have troops in Europe, why do we have troops in Asia, why are we still in Afghanistan? There is a strong desire in this country to come home and stop engaging in those activities. We have to make the case for why we're involved. And I also believe we have to be more selective about when we get involved and not rely on the military to the degree that we've done.

So with all of that as sort of the overview, I want to give you a little bit of a preview of what we're looking at on the Armed Services Committee and what our priorities are.

So the question is, what role does the Department of Defense and the U.S. military play in what I just talked about? Well, there's a couple of pieces of good news. First of all, our global presence give us the ability to build relationships. And it's as simple as an aircraft carrier making a port call in the Philippines. This is a connection with people, it brings economic activity to the region. You know, we have done in some cases — you know, we've helped with earthquakes and tsunamis. The presence of the U.S. military has been able to build positive relationships in a lot of places. Not everywhere, obviously. I don't know if there are any Ted Lasso fans out there, but I love the scene where he's passing out these little army men to people and he gives it to his Nigerian soccer player and he says, appreciate the sentiment, coach, but I'm going to give this back to you. I don't have the same fondness for the U.S. military that you do. But there are places that it's positive.

And the other thing about the U.S. military goes back to what I was talking about in the “Beirut to Jerusalem” analogy, our military is incredibly capable, more capable than probably any other institution in the world, frankly. So when we are dealing with countries that have security concerns, and they're looking to say, well, who can I work with — and I'm not talking about us sending in the Marines and fighting for them, I'm talking about training, equipping, teaching them how to use that equipment, working through all of that. We have a lot to offer in that regard because, for better, or in many cases, for worse, there are no other military in the world that's as battle tested as we are right now.

But the big three things that we need to work on, in my view, where we need to make the Pentagon more effective, number one, we have wasted a spectacular amount of money on weapons systems that either haven't worked at all or who have not lived up to their promise. Our acquisition and procurement process over the last 20 years can only be described as a complete disaster. You know, from what's going on with the F35 to the LCS to the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, to a whole — to future combat systems. I was like — I mentioned future combat systems because Neil Abercrombie had one of the best lines ever when he asked the Army why they were doing this. They didn't really give a good answer. He said well, I've always thought the reason you did future combat systems is the Navy and the Air Force, they could buy big things, big programs, they could get us so far down the road of a program that we were forced to waste a lot of money, but you guys in the Army didn't buy in that quantity, so you had to create future combat systems so you could have something that was too big to fail. And I wish that was just a good, but we've got to get better at that. And we on the Armed Services Committee have to seriously scrub those programs, like the F35. Okay, we can complain about the money that we wasted, but that's gone. What we have to make sure is that we don't waste anymore. The Future of Defense Task Force that I set up and that Seth Moulton chaired last year, incredibly important in taking a look at that question.

Also incredibly important in looking at the second — well, let me just say one thing about the procurement and acquisition process, we've got to get past the program of record, past process and focus on results. Of all of the big ticket items, the one that always drives me crazy is the JTRS radio. 10 years — 10 fricken years to build a radio, that by the time it got done didn't work that much better than

stuff we could have gone down and bought at Radio Shack. Slight exaggeration, but not much. That was process. Well, we had a program of record. We went through all the steps, we did all the — we said, no, let's just figure out what we need, buy it, and make it work. We've really got to change that culture to make it more outcome oriented instead of process oriented.

And then within that is what you've been hearing a lot about, and that is the idea of information warfare. And there's a lot of different ways to describe this. The best way to describe this is it's not quantity it's quality and it's the ability to make your systems work. You know, I have a long speech about my frustration with the obsession of 355 ship Navy, which I'll spare you for the moment, except to say if you have a 500 ship Navy, okay, and you're up against someone who has a 5 ship Navy, but they're able to shut down your information systems so none of your 500 ships work, they win, okay. That's what it comes down to. Our command and control information systems have got to become more durable, more resilient, and also more replaceable. We cannot have the single points of failure. We have to be able to protect those systems and ideally we have to be able to build a system so that we can make our adversary's systems more vulnerable. That really needs to be the focus.

So we talked about getting off of legacy systems and (inaudible) systems, that's what it's talking about. Woven into that too is using technology better. And this sort of ties the two together. Our acquisition and procurement problems tie into the fact that because it takes so long, because there's so much process involved, as you well, now we are not getting the best technology the way we used to. It takes too long. I mean the software, the stuff that they're generating in Silicon Valley and elsewhere, by the time we get done with the two year procurement cycle, what we're buying was obsolete six months ago. We have got to build a better relationship with cutting edge technology. I'm worried that we don't have the same positive relationships with some of the newest companies that are developing these technologies, whether you're talking about AI, hypersonics, a bunch of different technologies that could be incredibly important in the military. I really want to focus on rebuilding that relationship. That's the purpose of the new subcommittee. We split one subcommittee into two basically, really wanting to place greater emphasis on cyber information systems and emerging technologies. And that's our hope to build off of that.

The last thing I'll say is we got personnel issues. And this is not easy to describe in short, but whether you're talking about sexual harassment problems, whether you're talking about diversity, extremist problems, whether you're talking about mental health problems. What happened down in Fort Hood in the last year, the number of soldiers who died really shined a bright light on the fact that we are not taking care of our people. I think the report that Secretary McCarthy put out before he left on that is one of the most important things out there. And I know Secretary Austin is really focused on how can we get this under control, how can we tell people that we're going to protect the service members. And I'll just close with this. One of the best ways this has ever been explained to me is a congressman from California, Lou Correa, was telling me when he heard about sexual assaults stuff that he had a constituent who he nominated for — I forget which academy, one of the academies — who was sexually assaulted when she got there. And I mean it's just — we're telling our young people — and yes, we're going to put them in harm's way, okay, that's part of the purpose of being in the military — but they should not be in harm's way amongst their own. And if we don't fix that, we're going to have a devil of a time building the force that we need to adequately protect this country.

A lot going on in the world of course, but that's sort of the top line overview of how I'm thinking about the broader national security challenges and what the Armed Services Committee hopes to be able to do this year.

MR. O'HANLON: Mr. Chairman, thank you. And you raised a lot of stuff. So let me now try to delve into a couple of the issues a little bit more deeply before also then weaving in some audience questions.

And let me start with acquisition reform, where you ended, or just before you spoke about personnel issues. I wondered if you have in mind a theory of the case for what's our number one problem with acquisition reform. I know you were on the committee when Chairman Thornberry and Chairman McCain worked on their acquisition reform bill, and that was partly about how the Pentagon divvies up responsibility.

I wondered if you wanted to offer an assessment of that. And then to the extent that reaching out to Silicon Valley needs to be more of a priority, what's been the impediments? The number

one impediment that still remains? Is it the intellectual property, you know, that the government demands whenever it buys something en masse? Or has that problem been alleviated, but now there's still just the cultural differences or the paperwork requirements? I mean do you have a sense of what really needs to happen to push acquisition reform to the next level?

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: Yeah. I mean there's three big things, if I can remember my train of thought here. Number one, on the Silicon Valley piece, I mean there's a lot of talk about how, you know, it's become more of a libertarian left leaning sort of thing and they don't want to work with the military because the military drops bombs on people. And maybe I think the bigger issue it it's an impenetrable bureaucracy. And the tech guys, not just in Silicon Valley — got to speak up the Pacific Northwest with Amazon, Microsoft, and elsewhere —

MR. O'HANLON: Yes.

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: — but I'm the one who said Silicon Valley, I know that. You know, they don't want to — they want an innovative thinking, not, okay, we're looking forward to work with you, here's this stack of paperwork, fill that out and then get back to us. It's just the clog of the whole system that I think has pushed the most innovative people away.

Now, I think we've got some opportunities here. Space Force is a great opportunity. They love space. And it gives them an opportunity to work with us. But we've got work to streamline that stuff. Second, is process over results. You know, we are so obsessed with having — and oddly I think part of it is, you know, Silicon Valley likes to brag about the fact that they tolerate failure. In the Pentagon, it's odd, we set up a system that is probably designed to say we won't tolerate failure. If you fill out that form incorrectly, if you do this wrong, then you will be punished. But we reward people for process, not for results. The failure we wind up tolerating is failure on a massive fricken scale — think F35. Instead of understanding that, yeah, if you give that mid-level procurement person greater freedom to look at a problem and go, you know what, I know this is the way we've been doing it, but I think if we did it this way we'd get to a better place. You give them that freedom, they'll screw up from time to time, they'll make a mistake. But more often than not, because of the way the human mind works, they'll come up with a better solution. The Pentagon procurement process is resistant to better solutions. This is the

way we do it, we're going to check all these boxes so if anything goes wrong we can say, hey, it's not my fault. Here's CFR — I don't know CFRs, but code 99-374C345 that says that I must do this, this, this, this, and this before I do that. I did it all. I did what is said. So we're good, right? That thinking is really what is crushing us in terms of getting to better procurement and better acquisition. So we've got to change those two cultural things.

And I apologize, I forget about the top of my head what my third point was based on your question, but I think those are the two biggest things that we need to change up — sorry, I do remember what the third one was. The third one was to get members of Congress on the Armed Services Committee and Congress to realize that it is not their job to pump as much money as is humanly possible into their districts. And this is something that I was — I respect my colleagues, so I won't get into it, but you know, I mean you guys worked there. I mean every member of Congress — well, I'll get into it, okay. I've been to — I think it's — it is Jonestown, Pennsylvania — I forget the name of it — the town that (inaudible) the bill on your tax dollars. That's fine, okay. But it wasn't an assessment of programs. One of my first votes in Congress was to not build 21 more B2 bombers. Half of them were made in my district, but I looked at the numbers and said, this doesn't make sense. I'm not going to vote for this just because it's going to pump money into my district. And many of these programs are kept alive because — and it's politics. I mean it's something you can bring home to your district. We have got to get past that. We just don't have the money to waste.

MR. O'HANLON: I want to get into resource questions in just a second. But first I want to go to where you began on China and ask a specific question about avoiding that cold war and also the risk of a hot war with China that you talked about at first. And specifically, war plans, which I can't see because I don't have security clearance, you can't talk about because we're in an open forum, and yet we all know that war plans are important. And I believe that previous secretaries of defense have been saying we've got to spend more time looking at them, thinking about them. I wrote a book called "The Senkaku Paradox" because I was worried that war plans might lead us to a rapid escalation against China over a relatively meaningless kind of issue, like the uninhabited Senkaku Islands, if somebody decides to push their prerogatives there and China tries to assert itself. And we feel locked in by the

U.S.-Japan alliance.

But then there's also the question of Taiwan, which is of course not insignificant, but is geographically at a place, whereas the Office of Net Assessment has underscored, we have a hard time winning a fight against China, and yet we don't want to give free reign to China.

So do you have any suggestions for how we create different options? Or, if you don't want to talk about them specifically, how do we make sure that Indo-Pacific Command is thinking about different options and researching and investigating different options so a war plan doesn't have to be like the World War I Schlieffen Plan, sort of all in from the get go and can be a little bit more plausible, credible, and non-escalatory?

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: Well, a simple way to put it is — you know, that's why I said focus on deterrence, not dominance. You want to be able to make it clear to China that if they were to do something in — you want to stop them from doing it in the first place because the cost of them doing it is so great that they wouldn't even contemplate it. And that's not about being — because they know — well, I'm sorry, they don't know — they would suspect that if we felt we had to go to an all-out war, they would think the cost would be too great to us. But if we had quick strike deterrent capabilities that would impose a cost upon China and not drag us into a large war — and that's about alliances and partnerships. If China knew that if they did this we had Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, India, whoever, on our side and that we would impose a cost on China that would not be worth that action, that deters them from doing it in the first place.

Now, the two other things that I think we need to be aware of when we're trying to deescalate this conflict is number one, war plans do have to be made, okay. You have to be prepared. And I see this breathless stuff going back and forth, oh, we have discovered that China has a plan to nuke the West Coast of California — aaahhhh. It's like well, yeah, and so do we, okay. That's why communication between the two sides is so important. We're doing this for deterring. Yeah, we've got a plan. It doesn't mean we're planning on doing it. It means we have to be ready in case you do something. And that's why dialogue is so important. I mean the efforts that Nixon and Reagan made to make sure that we were talking to Soviets quite possibly saved the planet so that there wasn't that

misunderstanding.

And the final point I'd make, and I was watching Fox News yesterday, I will admit I'm a Democrat, but I get a little tired these days of watching the Democratic news talking about how afraid we all should be about every right wing militia group in the world. I am deeply concerned, for instance, that we shut down Congress yesterday because of some nut job on the internet. We cannot jump every time they say boo. But I digress. I will leave that to the side. So I was watching Fox and the guy was talking about China. It's like talking about how Biden's China plan is just like everybody else's China plan, it's doomed to fail because it seems to think that we can work with China when we have to understand how evil and terrible and awful China is. And they're trying to steal our intellectual property, they're trying to become the hegemon in Asia and spread autocracy and everything everywhere. And I'm like, okay, yeah. What would you do? Is he saying that China is so bad, let's go, okay? You know, I don't disagree with that at all. And I want to make it 100 % clear to everybody on this call and everyone elsewhere, I don't and President Biden doesn't have any illusions about how bad China is. But we have to work with them as a major factor in the world. And if we get too far down the road of China's terrible, we cannot tolerate this, we cannot accept them stealing our intellectual property, we cannot accept Huawei doing this, okay, well if you can't accept it, that leads you to a conflict. You know, you can talk about how bad they are and what they're doing, and you can also talk about the fact that destroying the entire globe because of it is the wrong choice. That's why I emphasize deterrence, containment. You know, containment has become a dirty word for some reason, just like compromise has become a dirty word. But if the alternative is an all-out war that's going to kill everybody — and I think we need to embrace containment and deterrence. Be clear eyed about China, fine, all right, but understand that there are alternatives to dealing with that threat to all out conflict.

MR. O'HANLON: So that leads, I think naturally, to the question of how much we should spend on defense and what our priorities should be? And here I'd really just welcome your overall sense of where we stand.

Let me frame it very briefly first, which is of course, as you well know, everyone associated with the National Defense Strategy in 2018 said we needed 3% to 5% annual real growth

indefinitely into the future in order to sustain that strategy. Perhaps to try to reclaim a kind of dominance over China that you don't think is realistic, but I'll let you speak to that in a second.

And we know that Democrats, like Michele Flournoy, also thought 3% to 5% annual real growth was the right prescription. That was in the pre-Covid era, that was before even the last budget submission of President Trump, who did not envision 3% to 5% real growth. And of course, you and the Committee and the Democrats supported Republicans in giving that growth for a couple of years, but now we envision a plateau. Whether it's the last Trump budget or anything else that I've seen, people are tending to think in terms of a flat line, 0 % real growth. Senator Warren, when Kath Hicks had her confirmation hearing for deputy secretary of defense, suggested that we should cut the defense budget. And certainly some Democrats would prefer that.

I wondered if you could give your general sense of what the right philosophy should be going in on the size of the defense budget for the next few years.

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: Right off the top, let me heavily emphasize the fact that of the many things we are going to talk about, substantively this is about the least important question that we could talk about, okay. Politically is a different matter, but substantively, you know. And this is what drives me insane. How you spend the money is what matters. I mean spending all this time, it's got to be 3% to 5% — well, 3% to 5% on what, okay? And how the hell can you tell me that four or five years from now we're going to have to have a 3% to 5% increase? You know, how about we spend the next four to five years figuring out how to get more out of the money that we're spending so that we will actually end up with greater resources.

I mean this is what — and I'm just going to give a speech in a couple of weeks that focuses directly on this topic — but the one big thing that really frustrates me about this is when it comes to coming up with national security policy there is a desire to sort of focus on easily quantifiable things. Well, how do you know you have the right defense policy? Well, we're spending a lot of money. My campaign analogy always goes into this, but my very first campaign I had a plan to raise like \$175,000 for the state senate. You know, it's a long story. There's no way in hell I was every going to raise that money, but I was young and ignorant and didn't know that. Eventually it turned out that it was obvious

and I was to going to get that money. So I had to go back and figure it out. And I learned that I didn't need that money, okay. I figured out how to do mail more efficiently, how to target my audience more efficiently, and do all of that. Now, the two quotes I can give you on this are number one, you know, the gentlemen we're out of money, now we have to think quote, and — gosh, what was the second thing I was going to say — but, anyway, that's the point. The point is this obsession with numbers and with — it's like the thought that entered my head when I was worried about I didn't get the money, I said what does the money really matter. Do I show up down on election day and say, look, I've got more money than my opponent, so I win, right. No, that's not the way it works. How you spend the money matters.

So I don't — you know, when we get in this epic fight over 740 or 760 or 720, it doesn't really matter at the end of the day. How are you going to spend the money? That's the other quote I was going to give you. A BC of mine once told me that he has not yet come across the entity that can't be cut by 10% and get better at what it does. And this is a major problem in the Pentagon. For too long, if you want to know whether or not you're tough on defense, we measure it by one thing — how much money are you spending. Missile defense always drove me crazy on the Committee. You know, Republicans were arguing that we didn't care about missile defense because we didn't want to spend as much money as they did. And, you know, Jim Cooper and others, we said, no, no, no, no, what you're spending the money on, it doesn't work, okay. Which we just found out and they canceled the program about six months ago, several billion dollars into the project. So can we all just sort of get off of this epic fight over whether or not it's 3% or 5% or 1% or it's cut or whatever and let's just spend the goddamn money effectively. See where we're out and then we can talk about how much we're going to spend.

Now, all of that leaves out the part of the people who legitimately want to cut the defense budget by 20% because they fundamentally want to change the role of the U.S. in the world with regard to DOD. Now, that's a substantive policy debate to have. I don't support that, but it's a substantive policy debate. But all this obsession over is it 750, is it 733, I'm still incredibly bitter about that fight back in FY '19 over the 733 versus 750 thing. I'll let that go. But you get the point. The DOD, and those of us who are charged with the oversight of it, we need to figure out how to actually spend the money intelligently instead of getting into fights over how much it is we're spending.

And don't even get me started on the 500 ship Navy.

MR. O'HANLON: Well, I was about to, but maybe I'll give you a menu —

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: That's fine. I'm happy to do it, but —

MR. O'HANLON: —I'll give you a menu of topics that may be — and you can choose.

You've alluded to most of them already. But maybe if you want to dive into a little bit more deeply on one or two. And some of this builds on questions we're already getting from the audience.

There are some people who say should the Army's end strength be reduced, is that the best bill payer. And, by the way, Chairman Milley almost seems to suggest that he thought so in some remarks he gave at the end of calendar year 2020 when he was wanting to support the focus on the Pacific and perhaps therefore the Navy.

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: I'll just handle that one quickly. I don't know, but I think that is exactly the type of question we should be asking. What are we trying to accomplish. And if our goals are shifting in that way, do we need an army of that size. I don't know the answer to that question, but it's the type of question we need to ask if we're going to figure out how to get the most out of the money we spent.

MR. O'HANLON: And then also the reserve and active mix within the Army, is that another area we should look at?

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: Yeah. I think the idea of — you know, if you truly — and this is another reason why I don't want to get into a cold war with China — what's really made us successful in the wars that we've fought where we have been successful has been surge capacity, okay. Bob Gates used to have this formulation when he would say that when you look at the record of the U.S. predicting and being prepared for what the next war was going to be, our record is perfect. We've always been wrong. And the point of that story, if I was tracking correctly in Bob Gates' mind, was to show that we needed to do more to be ready. And I always came up with the opposite conclusion. The opposite conclusion was this kind of shows that no matter what you — you can spend yourself into a frenzy and something else would come up that you didn't anticipate and then you'd wasted all this money over here when it ought to be over there. What I came up with is we need search capacity, okay. You know, you

can't spend all this money getting ready for this, but we need to be ready to ramp up. And obviously the Guard and reserve can play a crucial role in that. And we've also seen recently the Guard and reserve are pretty necessary for dealing with natural disasters and pandemics and stuff like that.

So as we're folding in the broader national security strategy, I think the Guard and reserve are going to be a crucial part of it.

MR. O'HANLON: So I will come back to in a minute to the F35 and the 500 ship Navy, but first I wanted to ask you, building on a question from the audience about nuclear force modernization. And we hear the Pentagon frequently say, under the Biden team I believe already, but certainly predecessors, that nuclear modernization is the number one priority. And that's partly because of aging platforms and the need for safety, et cetera. But, as you will know, there's at least six different components to that nuclear modernization agenda. And I wondered if you prioritized within them and thought that some were more essential others because they include, of course, the replacement of the ballistic missile submarine, which is getting old, the replacement or the addition of a new bomber, the B21, which can also be used for conventional missions, the ultimate replacement of the ICBM force, which some people think we could delay, improvement of nuclear command and control, getting to your point about the importance of that working for anything else to be possible. And then there's two last things. One of them is the long range stealthy cruise missile. A little bit less expensive, but still part of the mix. And then, finally, the Department of Energy nuclear weapons capability to build more warheads. And even though those historically have not been built so much in Washington State, Washington State is a big player in that general domain.

So I wondered if you prioritize.

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: Yeah, I'll let you know. I'm not going to be able to cover everything you just said. But I will give you a few top line items on this.

As far as prioritizing is concerned, the top two priorities are command and control and the pits that we have to make. All the other stuff, you know, if you don't have any of that then you don't — you know, we have a significant problem in terms of being able to make the nuclear pits that are necessary to build any weapons whatsoever, and being able to make sure that we can control and protect

our systems are important. But aside from all those individual systems, there is the larger issue that sort of builds off of my theme of how much isn't so much important as capabilities, a nuclear modernization is really important. The nuclear force is old and we must have a nuclear deterrent. The purpose of our nuclear weapons systems are to stop nuclear war — period. That's the reason they exist. The technology exists. You can't unring the bell. It ain't going away. Kim Jong Un isn't going to wake up one day and say, "Oh, I don't want these, I'm going to get rid of them."

We have to have a deterrent so that nobody thinks they can ever launch any nuclear weapon of any size without paying an unacceptable cost. My big beef is that I don't think we need 5,000 nuclear weapons to accomplish that. And I recently did — I read the editorial from Jim Inhofe and Mike Rogers, both of whom I have an enormous amount of respect for. Senator Inhofe and I are not that much alike and we started off perhaps a little awkwardly, but let me just say the respect I have for him has grown enormously in working with him in the last two years. I don't agree with him and Congressman Rogers on this issue because their argument is we — it basically goes like this, we have to defend ourselves against nuclear attack. It is the core and most important mission. Completely agreed. But then they leap from that to therefore we have to spend \$1.5 trillion on nuclear weapons, okay. But the delta in there is that really necessary to have a deterrent? And I come back to China, that as we speak, has slightly less than 200 nuclear weapons. And we are breathlessly told that in the next decade they're going to double that amount.

I was a Poli Sci major, I didn't go into math, but I'm pretty sure I can figure out if they double it, that will mean they have slightly less than 400 weapons. We have 4,000 nuclear weapons. Do we really need to spend \$1.5 trillion to have that many and that much? I don't believe that we do. Now, we do have to spend the money to make sure that what we have is reliable, has been replaced, and is ready to go, but I would love to see us have a conversation about how large of a deterrent force do we need.

And then when you go through the laundry list that you just cited, I don't know off the top of my head which piece of that I'd want to get rid of. My focus is more on the quantity of the weapons. I will say that I believe the submarines are the most important piece of this, without question. The ability to

deliver from the submarines is the most survivable in the triad. I just wish we would do a serious look at whether or not we can achieve the necessary level of deterrence for less money, like China has.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

Let me know move onto the F35. And you've mentioned a couple of times your concern about that program. And I wondered if you could lay out a little bit more of your thinking about what's specifically problematic about it today. Because it's certainly had enormous growing pains. And it's certainly a huge program, but it seems to be doing better. So I wondered if your main beef with it is sort of how long it's taken to get to this point and how much expense, or is it still too big of a program. Are we thinking too much about short range strike versus long range strike.

I wondered if you could elucidate a little bit more on that topic and just going forward with the F35, how much more should we be investing in that program.

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: Well, the best way to think of the F35 for me is it's like the contract that the Los Angeles Rams gave Jared Goff. Now, is Jared Goff a completely useless football player? Nah, he's okay. You know, I mean he plays the position, he runs the offense, he does okay. But, my god, the amount of money they spent on him for what they got out of him? They finally managed to abandon that strategy this year. And I guess if I could trade the F35 for Matthew Stafford, take the cap hit in one year and then just sort of go ahead, okay, we're going to go forward from here, that would be awesome. Sadly, my analogy breaks down at that point because we don't have that option. And that's the way I feel. For what we have spent in terms of what we have gotten back is — it's just painful, it just hurts. And the problem is there's not an easy way out of it.

Now, what I would like us to do, and this brings me back to my cap analogy, you've only got so much money, you want to spend it in certain places to get the value out of it, when it comes to fighter attack aircraft we have certain needs. And I'd also point out something I haven't said yet, the obsessive focus with China is fine, but we do a lot of other things that don't have anything to do with China. So just because a weapons system would not be effective against China doesn't mean that it's not an important part of what we're doing. You know, we are still dealing with transnational terrorist threats and trying to stop ISIS and al-Qaida and keep their networks under control. Our presence, mere

presence, even if the weapon system wouldn't dominate China, in different part of the world gives us credibility and is a deterrent against Iran, is an encouragement for partners to join us. So there's all manners of valuable things they bring to us.

So when we look at fighter attack aircraft — and I would have a much more intelligent answer to this question next week. I'm getting briefed — getting a class fight brief. Okay, what I'm trying to do here is now we're talking about the F15 — I forget the initials that come after it, but the new one — you know, just sort of fill some of those gaps. We've been talking about maybe looking at a next generation fighter. You know, what does the F35 give us and is there a way to cut our losses. Is there a way to not keep spending that much money for such a low capability, because as you know, the sustainment costs are brutal. And they keep saying they're going to bring them down, but past a certain point they can't. And it's just — the thing about the F35 — and it all comes down to don't put all your eggs in one basket. The things your mother told you that are just so simple and straight forward that are true. And I remember — and this is my ignorance — you know, 31 years old, I went to St. Louis when Boeing was still bidding on the thing, and they showed me their model and the idea of redundancy and we're going to have this one plane that was going to fit all three of these things, we're going to do all this stuff. And 90% of our fighter attack aircraft into that one platform. Was that such a smart idea? But once we did it, then what. You can't not have a fighter attack aircraft for most of the needs that we have. So the short answer, as opposed to the long answer I just gave you, is I'm not sure, but I flinch when you give me the, well, it seems to be working better now. Yeah, but I want to stop throwing money down that particular rat hole. Can't get rid of the program. For those Lockheed fans listening, I do understand that. You know, but telling us, well — and I love this argument — well, I know it doesn't work particularly well, but if you bought more, your per unit cost would go down. That's just — that's awesome and I respect that from a business standpoint, but ultimately it drives us into the ground.

So what I'm going to try to do is figure out how we can get a mix of fighter attack aircraft that's the most cost effective. Bottom line, okay. And I'm telling you right now that a big part of that is finding something that doesn't make us have to rely on the F35 for the next 35 years.

MR. O'HANLON: So on the 500 ship Navy, another concept that you alluded to earlier in

our hour, Secretary Mark Esper unveiled a plan last fall for this concept. (Laughter) And there's a lot —

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: I'm sorry, this whole thing is just funny to me because — go ahead. Because I've talked to Mark about this repeatedly and I know exactly how that came to be. So — but go ahead.

MR. O'HANLON: Well, yeah. So let me just say a word about even the 355 ship Navy concept, which some of us already thought was too big. But that came about, as I understand it — and you may want to comment or disagree or embellish — that came about because the Obama Pentagon asked the combatant commanders how many ships would you like to maintain your daily activities given the way you like to do business, whether that's optimal and efficient or not. And they added up the requests — I'm being a little flip, but this is essentially my understanding —

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: Oh, I'll be more flip than you are when you're done. So go ahead.

MR. O'HANLON: So if Secretary Esper essentially took that and then added unmanned systems and other kind of innovative platforms to 355 and he got to 500, then it strikes me that maybe there's some good thinking that went into the emphasis on innovation, but maybe we need to rethink the 355 core that was there before. But that's just — I'm just trying to provoke you.

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: Two crucial thoughts on that. First of all, you know, figuring out what your needs are by simply asking the combatant commanders is like asking the Cookie Monster how many cookies you should have in your store, okay. There are limitations to it. And I get that. And I'm going to go slightly down a rabbit hole before returning to the central point here. But I have been to brief after brief, and you've got to understand, so many things are built into the way we do things within the DoD to spend more money, spend more money, got to spend more money. That's what it's built on. And the combatant commanders thing, every time I would see a member of Congress try to defend his or her program in his or her district and the combatant commanders are only able to field 50% of their requirements for the EB46758 missile. And I thought about this for a while. It's like is there ever a time when we're giving the combatant commanders what they want? No. No, there's not.

And, again, people seem to not be able to look at this the other way around. I mean

everyone looks at that and goes, oh my god, we're — you know, combatant commanders, they're not getting what they need to protect us. We're all going to die. Maybe the case is that what we've taught them to expect they don't really actually need, all right. So we can go back and think about, okay, what are the actual needs to meet our core national security objectives. It's just like the unfunded requirements thing. You know, what's an unfunded requirement to begin with, all right. It's not a requirement if it's not funded, all right. We have decided that it is not required. There is a finite amount of money in the world and we need to come to grips with that reality. And we also need to come to grips with reality, like I said, if you tell somebody you have an infinite amount of money, they will find an infinite amount of ways to spend it. If you tell them, look, this is your budget, make it work. I really have enormous confidence in the ingenuity of people, all right. And if you tell someone, just like the gods of politics told me back in 1990, sorry, kid, this is the amount of money you have, make it work. You make it work instead of let's imagine that we could just have everything. No, this is what we got, make it work.

Now, on your 500 ship Navy, same thing. The obsession with the number is just an excuse to try to force people to spend money. But what Mark and I talked about, and what he did, was, okay, I've got these crazy people who want me to come up with a 500 ship Navy so they can look like they're better on defense than the people who don't want a 500 ship Navy, but within that we can go ahead and actually focus on capabilities, which is what you talked about, which is unmanned systems. And if it happens to be that because the ships that we need to buy are smaller and less expensive, so that we can have more of them and more capability — and okay, fine, that's — I don't care, I'm not hung up on a number one way or the other. But let's not get obsessed about the number of ships. You could buy 500 row boats, hell, you could probably buy 5,000 row boats and then you'd had a 5,000 ship Navy, and wouldn't that be grand.

So what we need to get out of the ship building plan is exactly what you said. Is what do we really need going forward in terms of having a survivable platform, having redundant platforms. All those things. I think they did some good work even though the people who are asking them to put that out were motivated in ways that I don't find helpful. Let's just put it that way.

MR. O'HANLON: Incidentally, I'll make a quick plug, not for Brookings, for the Stimson

Center. Barry Blechman and Melanie Sisson did a great study last year in which they examined all the crisis response activities of the United States since the cold war ended and basically concluded a variance on what you just said, Mr. Chairman, that it's important for us to be able to respond, but the way in which we respond, the type of asset — you know, we don't always need a carrier, we don't always need a certain high capital value capability to be able to send a message to show presence to maintain deterrence. It was very useful I thought, for what that's worth.

But I wanted to ask you about North Korea briefly, because there are a couple of questions about it. And I realize North Korea brings together all sorts of issues, foreign policy and nuclear disarmament strategy, and a few other things. But I don't want to ask you for a complete strategy towards North Korea, unless you want to provide it, but there were some questions that alluded to issues like large exercises, whether we need to resume those with South Korea or not. The probability of war, which of course seemed pretty real about three years ago in regard to North Korea. Are we all calmer about that today? Is there anything we need to do to make sure we don't have another crisis that could risk war with Korea?

And then any thoughts you might have on the nuclear negotiation strategy.

So that's a lot to throw at you. Please don't feel obliged to tackle the whole thing.

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: No, I could hit those fairly quickly. And fortunately I just spoke with General Abrams a couple of days ago, got a pretty decent update on this. And, look, in a nutshell, we need to contain North Korea. That's what we need to do. I mean we can go ahead and beat our chests and talk about how unacceptable it is that Kim Jong-un has nuclear weapons, but he does. So what we have to do is we have to make sure a conflict doesn't break out. And a big part of the way we do that is to make sure that we have an adequate deterrence, that the South Korean military is capable enough, we are capable enough, and we make it unequivocally clear to Kim Jong Un that if he — we may not like you building all of this stuff and we're going to keep looking for ways to get you to stop building it, we understand past a certain point we are limited in our ability to stop you from building it, but understand, if you even for a second think that you're going to be able to use it, you're done, okay. You will cease to exist and your regime will cease to exist. If you attack South Korea, if you even think about

using any of those weapons.

So I think it's deterrence and containment. If we want to talk along the way, I don't see a particular harm in talking, but I think we need to really understand where North Korea is concerned deter and contain are key.

And then the third piece of this, which is the good news, things are calmer on the Peninsula now. You don't have as many of the back and forth stuff and different efforts have been made to try to have the south and the north talking to each other, finding ways to not have the flare ups they used to have. I think if you do those three things, that gives us the best chance of making sure that nothing blows up over there. And we can all hope for the day when North Korea changes, but I don't see much in the way of a forcing mechanism at the moment that we have available to us to force that to happen.

MR. O'HANLON: So think there's just two last questions. And one of them has to do with Middle East basing and posture for the U.S. military. And there's been some discussion, and Secretary Austin has alluded to the idea of a global posture review and maybe trying to reduce our footprint. And not just on Iraq and Afghanistan where we're down to pretty low numbers, but more generally throughout that region that I know you understand well, but a lot of people don't have a sense of the numbers and they've been classified in recent years, regrettably. But in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, now Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Turkey, we've got a lot of assets.

And I wondered if you had any guidance for the Pentagon about how to think of the global posture review, and especially towards the Middle East. Are there places you would look for efficiencies or cuts?

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: Yeah, I think so. And I think the Middle East is probably one of the best places that we could look to make reductions. Then there's the whole Afghanistan question, which is much more difficult. But, look, I think our presence in Europe and our presence in Asia has a definite bank for the buck. One of the other priorities in the Armed Services Committee is continuing to support the European defense initiative and the Asia Indo-Pacific defense initiative as well, as well as to build partner capacity, okay. We're not going to have the numbers that we had in the latter part of the

20th century, you know (inaudible), but when you look at the Middle East we need to find a way to be less present. I think there are important alliances. I think what's going on with the Abraham Accords, you know, we've all kind of — a lot of positive things happening. Trying to figure out how to contain Iran is going to continue to be a priority. But, as we've seen, the place where our troops are most vulnerable right now, if they are present, is in the Middle East. And I think I would love to look at the posture review and figure out how we can accomplish our goals with lesser numbers.

Now, I'm not saying we — well, in Africa, which is not the Middle East I understand, same thing. I don't think we need huge numbers. I wouldn't want to see us like say we've got to get out of Africa, because I think relatively small numbers of our troops in different places can really help us accomplish our goals of containing some of the transnational terrorist threats, building partner capacity and also, by the way, making sure that China doesn't sneak in there and start building problematic alliances. I was in Tunisia a year ago, right before the pandemic, and that's China flirting with Tunisia for obvious reasons, sitting right there in the Mediterranean, so they're going to start building bases in the next 30 years. Wouldn't it be cool if China had a base in the Mediterranean.

So we want to make sure that we maintain positive relationships with those countries for a number of reasons, but I think we can do it with a smaller footprint.

MR. O'HANLON: Before I get to the last question, though, you mentioned Afghanistan. I don't know if you want to get into that today, but does the fact that we're now down to 2,500 U.S. troops, or so, in Afghanistan mean that we're now at a sustainable level that allows us to do the kinds of things you were just alluding to and therefore the Biden administration doesn't need to be in a hurry to cut back further, or would you like to see us leave by May, as some think the deal from last year with the Taliban would require?

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: Well, that's a very difficult question. I think the force structure we have there does enable us to do the CT operations that we want to do. And given that the Taliban has for the moment — or for the last several months now — stopped attacking us, they're attacking the Afghans brutally and it's — you know, we are better protected there. We're not going to be out by May 1. You know, I think that's highly unlikely under these circumstances. I will tell you I think it would be

enormously important for U.S. foreign policy and for the confidence of the people here locally in our country if we could get out of Afghanistan. I think there is considerable concern, and legitimate concern with the degree to which the U.S. has relied on its military to impose foreign policy on the world, which has generated a fair amount of conflict. Certainly the Iraq war being the biggest disaster in all of this in terms of a decision to go in with the military and try to fix a problem.

You know, we need to find a way to have our presence be more strategic and less large because U.S. military presence, after my Ted Lasso comment, does create a certain amount of conflict for people who don't like the idea of the U.S. military being there. Is there a scenario that I can see this year for us getting to the point where getting out of Afghanistan makes sense? Yes. I think it's going to be real tough to do it in the next two months. And I think we need to think about that. And it's the same answer in the Middle East. That, you know, that that presence creates greater conflict. We need to start relying on other tools in the tool box — diplomacy, alliance partnerships, development — to contain the threats we face and understand that the U.S. military being present, particularly in a place where they may get involved in direct fighting, is very much a double edged sword in terms of meeting our national security objectives.

MR. O'HANLON: So very last question. And thank you for this hour. It's been tremendous.

The task force that you set up last year that you referred to that Seth Moulton and Jim Banks chaired with a number of other largely younger members, and with some fresh ideas, and that we had the privilege of helping them release at Brookings in the fall, it talked a lot about artificial intelligence, and a lot of people are talking about artificial intelligence. The task force really honed in on that and prioritized that.

There was also a question from the audience about how do we make sure that as we try to pursue this new cutting edge technology, this big umbrella term of artificial intelligence, that we don't wind up creating new white elephant procurement programs that essentially repeat the same old mistakes, but with sort of a new banner or a new name attached?

So that's a big thing to throw at you for the final question, but I wondered if you had any

comments on how we prioritize AI?

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: Well, three quick things. First of all, I want to talk just a little about the Committee. We have another task force that's being formed right now that Elissa Slotkin is leading up on supply chain. And one of the big philosophies I want everyone to understand in terms of how I run the Committee, I want to empower the members of that committee. I don't want just the folks up on the top row to be running everything, because we've got a ton of talent on this Committee, a lot of smart people, a lot of great backgrounds. And that's sort of the philosophy, is to try to be as inclusive as possible. I think the — and I want to be clear it was Seth Moulton who had the idea for the task force. I was the one who let him do it. Same thing with Elissa Slotkin on this one. I want to empower those folks to do that.

Second, I think the crucial thing about AI is getting back to that deter your adversaries. Deterring our adversaries now is really about information systems and command and control. How can you process information, how can you interfere with your adversary's ability to process information. AI is going to be crucial to that. Also of course how can you interfere with your enemy's ability to communicate with its systems to make them work and how can you make sure yours are protected. I think AI can be a big part of it. And then the last thing is, yes, that's my future combat systems line. You know, never underestimate the ability of defense contractors and people at DoD to come up with ideas that all seem to end in the same thought, yeah, just give me more money.

So we need to be careful about these programs. And that's dark — a lot of things you can sort of — you could sort of test things initially before you go puking money all over them, okay. Make sure it works. Do the small pilot projects, figure out what works. But then I'll tell you, last thought, all of that is going to work a hell of a lot better if you have people thinking in terms of results instead of process and volume. I just really want to build into people's brains, I wanted to physically pain anyone in the defense world every time they spend a dollar, okay. I want them to think, god, what did I do wrong that required me to spend this. And that requires a major culture shift. And we set up a competition, you know. Who can accomplish this task for the least amount of money. That has got to become part of our philosophy. And this gets into the audit, this gets into everything. DoD for so long, it goes back to David

Stockman, the triumph of politics and how he lost to Cap Weinberger because Cap Weinberger came in with the charts, you know. Well, you can have David Stockman's military if you want, but you'll have this puny little soldier. Whereas if you have mine, you'll have these big tall six foot, you know. And isn't that better. We've got to get past that and we've got to view money as a precious, precious resource. And part of that is saving money, but part of it also is having a fricken product that works at the end of the day.

So whether it's AI, whether it's figuring out what to do with the F35, you know, whether it's unmanned — whatever it is, make sure it works and it costs the least amount of money possible.

MR. O'HANLON: It's been a real privilege. You've covered a lot. I learned a lot. I'm sure others have as well. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for being with us today. And very best wishes going forward for the spring and beyond.

CONGRESSMAN SMITH: Thank you. Appreciate all your work and the opportunity.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, sir.

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