Strengthening Defense in an Unstable World

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

- **Bryan Clark**, Senior Fellow and Director, Defense Concepts and Technology
- **Senator Roger Wicker**, US Senator, Mississippi

Disclaimer: This transcript is based off a recorded video conference and breaks in the stream may have resulted in mistranscriptions in the text.

A video of the event is available: [https://youtu.be/oEe12GSEIqE](https://youtu.be/oEe12GSEIqE)

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Bryan Clark:

Welcome to the Hudson Institute. I'm Bryan Clark, a senior fellow at the Institute, and we are blessed today to have with us Senator Roger Wicker from Mississippi, the current ranking member on the Commerce, Science, and Technology Committee of the Senate, soon, I think, to join the Senate Armed Services Committee as a ranking member. You're already on the Senate Armed Service Committee, but you'll soon be the ranking member, I anticipate.

Senator Roger Wicker:

Sure hope so. Yes.

Bryan Clark:

Sure hope so. And so to talk about some issues that are surrounding defense and also talk a little bit about your work on the CHIPS Act. So thank you very much for meeting with us today, Senator.

Senator Roger Wicker:

Glad to be here. Thank you, sir.

Bryan Clark:

So we're finishing up the NDA right now, that cycle. The House has passed its National Defense Authorization Act, Senate's looking at passing it as well. How do you think that the department is doing in terms of its ability to deal with the threat from China? So, yeah, I think one of the things you did in the NDA is increase the defense budget substantially to try to address maybe some shortfalls in what the administration had submitted. So where do you think the big things should change?

Senator Roger Wicker:

No question about it. Yes. Well, the big news is that there's a $45 billion plus-up in the national defense budget, and is very much needed. Is the defense department doing as much as they can? I'm sure with the money they are, but I think we are always too constrained by the Office of Management and Budget. Now, we certainly need their statistics and there's a place for bean counting, but I don't think when it comes to national security and the fact that we might very well have to fight a two-front war, even though we've moved away from that capability. When you look at that, you don't need to be constrained by what an office of budget gives you. You need to be constrained by what you need on the ground in the sea and in the air to protect American interest. And so I'm glad we plussed it up this year.

I'm sure the Senate will pass it, and there may be an amendment or two offered, but it seems to me that the version that came from the House is what we'll end up with. It really should be more, but in terms of what we could get, to me, it's astonishing the President would have been really $45 billion or more off in terms of what we need.

Bryan Clark:
Right. Right. And so one of the things I noticed in the NDAA draft that's out there is the increase has been mostly applied to existing programs. So that 45 billion, a lot went towards ship-building, towards increases in the number of aircraft that we're buying. Do you think that that's one of the big shortfalls right now is just the capacity to be able to deal with it as potentially a two-front campaign against two adversaries?

Senator Roger Wicker:

Yes, we have a capacity problem. We are not ready. And if you don't mind me quoting other sources, the Heritage Foundation puts out an index every year, and they've already released their index for 2023. They say that the Navy is very weak, the Army's marginal. No, they say, let me get it right, the Navy is weak, the Army's marginal, the Air Force and the Space Force are very weak. I don't know what axe they have to grind. I'd feel a lot better if Heritage had said we're in great shape. But I have to believe that they're at least making a case. And I talked about this at the Reagan forum a few days ago in California, and the Chief of Naval Operations took issue with that and mentioned all of the great things that our servicemen are doing and our manufacturers are doing.

But still, I haven't seen a war game reported where we actually were overwhelmingly successful in the Pacific. Whether that is a Rand Corporation study or whether it's a public discussion about some classified war games that DOD is playing. We're not ready. And the best thing for us to do is acknowledge that and get about the business, on a bipartisan basis because it has to be bipartisan, of building up as we did during the Reagan administration to where we need. And to me, that's the best way to prevent a war by overwhelmingly being able to win a war. So it's Reaganesque peace through strength. And what I tried to do with my Ships Act several years ago with the requirement of 355 ships and getting our yards ready for that is for us to avoid conflict by making China think more than twice, and maybe now using the lesson that the Russians are learning and the dictators and communists are learning about their limitations.

Bryan Clark:

So one of the lessons from the war in Ukraine has been the importance of a defense industrial base because we're finding that we have supplied Ukraine with a large number of weapons, Europe has been supplying them, and now a lot of those magazines are empty because we had a small amount of weapons, munitions like the Javelin, like the HIMARS rockets, the GMLRS rockets, that the HIMARS shoots, like air defense weapons, like Patriot missiles or missiles that go into the NASAMS. We're running out of all of those munitions.

Senator Roger Wicker:

We are. And we're not breaching any classified briefings by saying that it's well known. The pace at which we are shipping things to our friends in Ukraine so they can do the fighting for us and take the risk and have the boots on the ground is greater than the pace at which the West, that's us and our NATO allies and our allies that are in NATO, can replace. And so it's a lesson to us and it's a wake-up call.

Bryan Clark:

And I think one of the things that was mentioned at Reagan by the defense industry was, the reason we don't have that capacity is because you haven't asked us to deliver the number of
weapons that would require us to build up that capacity. So we've got the bare-minimum, lean manufacturing capacity for weapon systems. And so if you give us the demand signal, then sure we'll expand our capacity for construction manufacturing.

Senator Roger Wicker:

And they are absolutely correct to say that. Yes, you can't expect them to make national defense strategy. They're in a business, they have stockholders and employees, and they got to stay in business, and if we appropriate the money and send them the requirements, they can get it done, and they'll do it better than any defense manufacturer on the face of the globe.

Bryan Clark:

Which to talk about now, your Ships Act and also shipbuilding, I know that this is a topic of conversation that's grown more heated over the years as the Navy has sent over a couple of budgets now where they wanted to reduce the number of ships in order to invest in future capabilities. It looks like we're pushing back on that or you're pushing back on that in the National Defense Authorization Act. How do you strike that balance between the capacity that you need while also investing in new technology or do you just have to do both?

Senator Roger Wicker:

Well, you listen to the experts, but it's not only the folks that are drawing a salary right now, some of whom answer to the commander in chief and correctly so, but you listen to people who've done it before and you make that judgment. So in my view, we need to be very careful of a draw-down of our current fleet type in the hopes that we can get something more efficient in the future. It takes a long time to even conceive of a ship and then it takes quite a while to get it designed and then built. It takes years to even build. So it's a while. Our fleet is not as big as it needs to be. Our fleet needs to be big enough so that, looking back, Vladimir Putin, looking at what we should have, might have said, "I don't think I'll try this. I'm already a trillionaire. Stolen enough money from the Russian people, and I don't need this little conquest." And going forward, we need to be overwhelmingly strong enough so that Xi Jinping, who absolutely has designs not only on Taiwan but on the Pacific, is dissuaded from doing this.

The Chinese people under their previous two leaders enjoy a quality of life that they didn't have four or five decades ago. He needs to concentrate on that. He won't if he sees a sign of weakness coming from the United States. And to me there's no better way to show a sign of strength and resolve is for us to say we are going to spend the necessary funds efficiently, but to make some sort of invasion of our friends a real headache if not surely a loss.

Bryan Clark:

Too uncertain. Right, right. So I'm glad you brought up the idea of new ships versus existing ships because the Navy is facing a couple of those choices right now. They've got this new light, amphibious worship that's on the horizon potentially, and then they're talking about, releasing the budget they submitted, they were going to truncate the LPD 17 class amphibious warship and then maybe build some new amphibious war to replace it in the future. So there's one case where the Navy was sort of betting on a future ship to replace something that maybe they could continue building today. And then also DDG(X), the secretary recently was talking about DDG(X) maybe being something they want to push out into the future, which would imply they
want to continue to build existing destroyers and build the capacity with the existing ships rather than bet on future capabilities to deliver. Do you think that that's the right choice or do you think we should be going hard over on these new ship classes?

**Senator Roger Wicker:**

No, no, I think until we are ready to start construction of new classes of ships, we need to go with what we have. And also to realize on the amphibs, and I think you and I probably share this view, there’s much flexibility there where the innovations that we see coming like uncrewed aircraft, uncrewed submarines, and things of that nature, drones, can fit into the flexibility and adaptability of the amphibs. So I really think the future of them is necessary and we ought to make the adjustments to use what we have in a new and innovative way, which we’re seeing.

**Bryan Clark:**

And to your point, we did complete a couple of studies over the last couple of years where we looked at the versatility of amphibious ships, launching unmanned undersea vessels, unmanned aerial vehicles to complement what's already in the fleet in terms of your submarines and your aircraft carriers because those platforms aren't going to be able to do it alone. They need these unmanned vehicles to complement them.

**Senator Roger Wicker:**

Indeed they do. Yes, absolutely. But the amphibs ought to be part and parcel of that.

**Bryan Clark:**

Right. Right. So switching gears a little bit, I wanted to commend you on your work on the CHIPS Act, which finally got over the finish line this year, both as chairman and then as ranking member on the commerce committee.

**Senator Roger Wicker:**

Thank you.

**Bryan Clark:**

There's an interesting parallel though with the defense industrial base where the microelectronics or the semiconductor industrial base in the United States weakened over time because we didn't really invest in it and we ended up with a situation where we did all the design and the thinking up front and maybe the marketing at the back end, but all the manufacturing was being done overseas for the most part except for maybe 12%. So the CHIPS Act is going to try to restore that. Is the CHIPS Act money going to go to the right pieces of the industrial base to make that happen? I mean it looks like it's getting spread across different pieces.

**Senator Roger Wicker:**

Well, we think so, but frankly, we were way behind the power curve. I mean, it's like we looked up one morning and said, "Oh my goodness, if something ever happens, we're totally or 80%
dependent on the Pacific.” Even our allies in the Pacific could not be counted on in a major conflict over there. So we're doing catchup when it comes to semiconductors. And yes, decisions are going to have to be made, and I hear different experts expressing different opinions about whether it's the sophisticated ships or, I hate to say less sophisticated, 'cause all of the semiconductors are very sophisticated based on what you and I might have seen 20 years ago. But listen, to me, you can't have a Stinger without hundreds of chips. You can't any of these Javelins, just hundreds if not thousands of microchips.

And so I viewed the CHIPS and Science Act as a matter of national security, and some of my friends were advocating that we could encourage domestic manufacturing to return based on trade agreements or things like that. I think that was unrealistic and if it would ever work, it would be very time-consuming. So basically, it's kind of like building a fighter jet. You spend the taxpayer's money with an American manufacturer and get this item manufactured 'cause it's necessary for national security and it's in the American interest. So it's the same with chips. Part and parcel to that, what is the research that is also essential? And I had been vocally grousing for decades about that important research that has everything to do with national security going to a handful of states, five or six states, and you know which ones they are. When we had a program called EPSCoR for sort of the 25 have-not states and their colleges and universities, including land grant universities, including historically black colleges and universities, turning in good research but getting only a very small percentage of the research dollar.

So we were able to insist that as the CHIPS and Science bill went forward, we expanded the EPSCoR program. And I can tell you I was at Mississippi State University two or three weeks ago, we invited scientists from all over the state of Mississippi, and of course, we had people down from the National Science Foundation, I can't tell you how thrilled the NSF is to be able to draw on all the talent that is out there. I mean, there are some talented people at MIT and Johns Hopkins, but there's some talented people at Ole Miss and Mississippi State and Southern Miss also.

Bryan Clark:

Right. Right. And I thought that was really important, that the CHIPS and Science Act included that R&D component because that's how you get the lead in the next generation. So we're not playing catch-up, we move to the next design paradigm for chips as opposed to kind of where we are today, which is where most of them are manufactured overseas, and we're now sort of trying to rebuild our capacity.

Senator Roger Wicker:

We are way behind bringing them back. But we have to do it.

Bryan Clark:

And I think it's important to bring out that other countries are doing this as well, and the reason why the United States is behind is because of the subsidies and the incentives that have been provided by countries like Taiwan, some of which are friends to the United States.

Senator Roger Wicker:
By countries that compete with us, yes. Absolutely, yup. We probably should have done this 5 or 10 years ago, but we got it done and done on a bipartisan basis. And I viewed it as a national defense bill.

Bryan Clark:

Absolutely. When you've got US military capabilities drawing upon chips built in foreign countries, even if they're friendly foreign countries, it does expose you to that vulnerability. That supply could be cut off for some reason and then we're no longer able to build F-35s or something. So to that point, Taiwan is the source of about 80% of the high-end chips and about a third of all the chips that we use in either our mobile phones or even our military systems. In addition to building up our own military, how do we help Taiwan become more defensible, able to deter Chinese aggression on its own?

Senator Roger Wicker:

Yes, there's a big difference between Taiwan and Ukraine. Ukraine's a wonderful country and what they've done in standing up for freedom and their own liberty against a tyrant and a more powerful neighbor is just commendable. But Taiwan is a rich country, and basically, they've put the lie to the argument that Asian Pacific people can't make a democracy work 'cause they've made it work. And also, they have just exploded with their economy there, much like South Korea has done. You look at that line and it's just utter darkness north of it, in South Korea. But with regard to Taiwan, they really have the wealth to afford their own defense. And Senator Graham, retired Senator Phil Graham, and I wrote a piece several months ago about this. We need to sell them what they need. And there are two ways the People's Republic could come at them, they could do an invasion across the 100-mile Strait, or they could try to do a blockade.

And I don't know which one they would do, or a combination thereof, but we need to help Taiwan purchase from us and the allies, the ammunition, the armament, the missiles they need to repel an attack and make it so doubtful or, say, at least so questionable that they won't try it. And then we have ways and means to make a blockade very, very difficult. Blockades are difficult, but cross-strait invasions are also difficult. Much, much harder for this major power, communist China, to invade than it was for Russia.

Bryan Clark:

Right. Right. So you want to take advantage of that?

Senator Roger Wicker:

Want to take advantage of that, and we also need to take advantage of lessons learned. We weren't ready, the West wasn't ready, NATO wasn't ready, for Ukraine. Sanctions didn't really work. I supported the sanctions, and I'm not for lifting them unless it can be shown that they're being counterproductive, but it's with an economy the size of China, I think it's very unlikely that sanctions will work. They will be deterred if they think they might lose, they might lose.

Bryan Clark:

Right. Right. Which gets to the defense, industrial-based argument, we need to be prepared to supply Taiwan with what it needs in a way that we maybe aren't able to do with Ukraine.
Senator Roger Wicker:

And in a way, we hate that this is the case, but it's good that we now know it here at the end of 2022 rather than after China makes a move.

Bryan Clark:

Absolutely. Well, I think that's a great place to wrap it up, although it's a sort of a sour note, but a dour note, but thank you very much for being with us.

Senator Roger Wicker:

Well, a positive note is peace through strength. It worked during Reagan and it could work again.

Bryan Clark:

Absolutely. Great point. Thank you very much.

Senator Roger Wicker:

Thank you.

Bryan Clark:

Thank you, Senator Roger Wicker, for being with us today.

Senator Roger Wicker:

Thank you.

Bryan Clark:

Have a great day. And thank you all for being with us, and from the Hudson Institute. Have a great afternoon.