Virtual Event | Should the US Overhaul its Defense Strategy?

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

- Congressman Mike Rogers, U.S. Representative, Alabama’s 3rd district, Ranking Member, House Armed Services Committee
- Bryan Clark, Senior Fellow and Director, Hudson Center for Defense Concepts and Technology

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A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/2108-virtual-event-should-the-us-overhaul-its-defense-strategy-52022

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Bryan Clark:
Welcome to the Hudson Institute. I'm Bryan Clark, a senior fellow at the institute and director of the Hudson Center for Defense Concepts and Technology.

We're honored today, to have with us the ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee, Congressman Mike Rogers, from the 3rd District of Alabama.

In addition to being a longtime member of the House Armed Services Committee, Congressman Rogers also have been a ranking member of the Homeland Security Committee. So, he's been working in national security for a long time and is an expert in that area.

Thank you very much, Congressman, for being here with us today.

Congressman Mike Rogers:
Glad to be with you. Thank you.

Bryan Clark:
So to start off, the Biden administration just recently released its budget, sent it over to the Hill. And along with it, they've released at least an unclassified summary of their National Defense Strategy, which is apparently still available in classified form, within the department.

There's a lot to be talked about, with regard to the defense budget and its implications, and also whether it meets up with the strategy.

How do you take the strategy? Do you think that the administration's on the right track with the direction they're going, with this focus on integrated deterrence and some of the divest to invest that we're seeing in the budget? Or do you think we should be going in a different direction, with regard to defense strategy?

Do you think the budget is meeting up with that strategy, or does the budget also need to change?

Congressman Mike Rogers:
Yeah, it really doesn't matter what the defense strategy is, if you don't have robust spending. I understand the divest to invest, but I don't like the way they're going about it.

The fact is, that we are in the early stages of a transformation of our military, a modernization process. That is going to be at least a decade long and very expensive endeavor.

While at the same time, we're coming out of two decades of war, where we have worn out everything we've got.

But we still have threats that we have to deal with right now, while we're starting to transform the military and modernize it, to deal with the threats of the future, which are coming from China. It's a completely different animal than what we've been facing in CENTCOM, and now what we see over in EUCOM right now.
So the fact is, the budget just doesn't deal with that reality. It didn't last year. Congress had to address that.

I make this point. I've been up here a long time. Presidents proposed budgets, Congress writes budgets. So, I don't care if it's a Republican president or a Democrat president. When we get their budget, we say thank you and we ignore it. Basically, that's what we're going to do again this year.

We had the chairman of the joint chiefs, as well as the secretary of defense, testify before us a couple of weeks ago, on the president's budget.

They had to acknowledge that the 2.2% inflation that they factored into the budget proposal, is grossly out of line with reality. We're at 8.5% Right now. And that they're going to have to come back and modify those numbers, as the coming months go by.

So no, the proposal by the president makes modest increases. We need significant increases.

We've been talking about making sure that we get a budget for the defense department, that is at least 5% over inflation. And again, inflation right now is 8.5%. It may go to 10. We don't know.

The thing that I try to remind people is, I was around during the Jimmy Carter administration and then the Reagan administration, right after. This inflation doesn't go away fast. It's going to be painful as it goes away.

So, we've got to be thinking big, when we think about dealing with funding the defense department, with factoring in inflation and reminding everybody that we're having to do this transformative process and pivot away from CENTCOM to INDOPACOM.

It's just a whole different dynamic, as to what we need to be funding, to deal with Chinese threats.

So it all goes back to robust funding and it's going to be multiple year funding. I keep beating that horse, but it's got to be done.

We have to be continuously reminding people that it's not just a one year, a two year, a three year endeavor. This is going to be at least a decade, of us consistently making the investments that we have to make, to get us to where we need to be. That's the pacing threat from China.

**Bryan Clark:**

Yeah. You brought up several areas where defense spending needs to increase, which I thought was interesting.

You're a longtime member of the Readiness Subcommittee. Obviously, that's a big focus for the department too, but it seems like in the budget to pay for readiness, they're giving up existing forestructure.

They're retiring ships. They're retiring airplanes. They're getting rid of some ground troop formations. So, they're going to give up all that in order to, whatever's left, try to maintain ready.

Inflation's going to kill that. I mean, inflation, that's exactly where you start seeing it, is in maintenance and operations costs.
Obviously, the divest to invest approach is something they’re trying to do to modernize, but it seems like in a lot of ways, they’re divesting just to pay for keeping up the force today and not really making the investments for tomorrow. Is that what you’re seeing?

Congressman Mike Rogers:

You hit the nail on the head. And by the way, we’re not going to let them do those things you just described.

They proposed it. We are not going to let that happen. I’ve spoken very clearly to the secretary of the air force and his two chiefs, when they came in a couple days ago and the secretary of the Navy and his two chiefs, when they came in the same afternoon. Reminded them that these things they’re proposing, like decommissioning 24 ships while you’re only buying eight or buying 74 airplanes, when you’re wanting to decommission 369, that’s not going to happen.

The fact is, it’s our responsibility as Congress, to provide them with the resources they need to meet today’s threats, while we prepare for the future.

They’re not mutually exclusive. That’s the thing that we have to keep reminding them, is stop trying to make the threats fit the budget number that the president gave you.

You worry about the threats and tell us how much it’s going cost, and let us worry about it.

The president will get a budget when we send it to him. He doesn't tell us what we're going to do.

I’m just frustrated that by law, we have to wait for the president’s budget before we can start marking up. Because the truth is, we ignore it. I don’t know why we have to wait for it. Maybe that’s one of the things we can change in the law.

Bryan Clark:

Right. [inaudible 00:07:39]. It might be a good place to start.

Congressman Mike Rogers:

You’re exactly right. I mean, the defense department seems to think they've got to make their threat, so their capabilities fit an arbitrary number that comes from the White House. That’s not what we’re going to do.

Bryan Clark:

Right. Bringing up that point about the threat, the Indo-Pacific commander, so Admiral Davidson and now Admiral Aquilino after him, both said China’s going to be a problem for Taiwan this decade. It's not a 2030s problem. It's a 2020s problem. We need to prepare for that.

The divest to invest approach, the taking money out of today’s forestructure, in the hopes that it'll give us something in the 2030s, that seems to be at odds with what their own commanders are saying in the field, about the needs for the near term.
Congressman Mike Rogers:

That's right. That is the pacing threat. Aquilino is correct, but we just have to keep telling them what we expect.

Again, we're going to be the one to drive this train. It's not going to be them saluting and saying, "Yes, sir," to the commander in chief, and then come over here, trying to put lipstick on that pig.

Bryan Clark:

Right. China is watching events in Ukraine. We can talk a little about Ukraine, here in a minute. But what do you think China's taking away from what they've seen thus far, in Ukraine, where we were unable to deter Russia? They attacked anyway.

Russia's had some difficulties, but you see them still chewing up territory and eventually being able to control part of what used to be an independent country. What do you think China's taken away from all that?

Congressman Mike Rogers:

Two things. One is bad. One, I think is good. The first is, I think China has seen the passivity from this administration that I was worried they would see.

In the Congress, we had great intelligence about what Russia was going to do, dating back to last fall.

We tried to get the president to be proactive and send lethal aid, as a deterrent to Russian aggression. He had a philosophical difference and felt like that for us to do that, would be provocative. He was more worried about upsetting Putin than deterring him.

It was just a philosophical difference. He's the commander in chief. He won.

I hate that China saw our president being passive and reactive, rather than leading and being assertive and trying to deter aggression. That was not good.

So, I think they probably find that appealing, with their desire for aggression.

Now, the thing that I'm pleased about is the way the world has turned on Putin. Putin doesn't care, by the way. I mean, he doesn't care who doesn't like him.

China cares about their standing in the world. And the fact that the world, save China and India and a couple other countries, have just turned Putin into the next Adolf Hitler, he'll never be able to wash this off.

Major companies around the globe, have pulled out of Russia, at their great expense. So, they won't have anything to do with him. They have become an international pariah, or Putin has.

That is a problem for China because they have global aspirations, and they do care what the world thinks about them.

So, I think that is going to have a chilling effect on their naked aggression against Taiwan, because they see how the world has reacted to this kind of aggression by Putin.
I mean, I may be naive about that, but that’s just my impression. I think it's significant because China does care.

**Bryan Clark:**

Yeah. That's a really good point. This would be where the administration would come in and say, well, this is integrated deterrence in action. The diplomatic repercussions, the information repercussions, the economic impacts, those are things countries care about. So, we can deter by relying on those tools, more so than the military tool.

But it seems like China's got other ways to bring Taiwan back into the fold, other than just a strict invasion.

It seems like our military tools need to be there, in order to deter those other type. If it's not a full invasion, it might be a bombardment or it might be a blockade. There's lots of other ways they can do it.

So, do we still need to have that military presence there, to enable deterring these other forms of aggression that China might mount?

**Congressman Mike Rogers:**

Absolutely. But we're having the same problem with the administration. He is so worried about upsetting somebody, as opposed to leading.

The fact is, we can do a lot to make Taiwan a much more difficult target for Chinese aggression, if we would just lead.

The fact is, this is not one that we can just sit by and just let happen. I mean, we cannot let China take Taiwan, for a host of reasons. We will wind up involved in that one, as opposed to doing what we're doing with Ukraine right now. Basically, we're fighting a proxy war.

We will be involved in the Taiwan conflict. But I mean, it's the same people that are... same liberals that were running that White House when Obama was there and Putin took Crimea with no consequences.

These are the same people that are advising Biden right now. They're giving him bad advice. It's regrettable, but it is what it is.

He's the commander in chief. So, Congress is just going to have to keep pushing it and trying to get public opinion on our side, so that he basically has to do it.

**Bryan Clark:**

Do you think the US needs to start thinking about putting troops on Taiwan maybe, or having regular rotations of forces there?

I think, we've done a few training missions. It started to be more consistent, but is that one of the things we need to think about more, more US presence on Taiwan?
Congressman Mike Rogers:

Absolutely. There is nothing more effective as a deterrent than US troops. I don't know if you've been keeping up with it, but that's one of the things I've been pushing for in Eastern Europe.

I'd started this over a year ago, with the EUCOM commander, talking about enhancing our presence along the Eastern flank.

So, we got him in testimony in the HASC. We had the EUCOM commander, as well as the chairman of joint chiefs, all agree that we need to redistribute.

We've got about a hundred thousand troops in Europe right now. Redistribute a lot of our troops along the front. Put permanent presence in Romania, on the Black Sea, in Poland, right up against the Ukrainian border and then each of the three Baltic states.

That's one of the things we're going to be doing, because there is nothing that is going to have more of a chilling effect on Russia's aggression into a NATO country, than seeing American troops.

They don't like seeing NATO. They really don't want to see American troops. That has a chilling effect on them.

It's going to be the same way with China. There's no substitute, but we can just rotate them through Taiwan. It doesn't have to be a permanent base, necessarily, but make sure we're always over there.

We need to make sure that the things that we do give Taiwan... we can never get the president to do it, is all stuff that's interoperable with us and is going to be necessary for a conflict with China. Stuff that they need, not just some things they may want.

Bryan Clark:

Right. Right. I mean, to a degree, Taiwan wants things that are more like other militaries, rather than things that are designed for the kind of situation they find themselves in.

Congressman Mike Rogers:

Right.

Bryan Clark:

Going to the Ukraine and going to Europe, I'm glad you brought that up. The increased troop presence along the Eastern front of NATO, that's been started, with additional battle groups being put there, we're now reacting.

We're now doing some of the things you'd been arguing for, for a while, to kind of close the door after, to some degree, the horse is out of the barn.

Do you think if we had done some of those things before the Ukraine conflict started, we might have been able to better deter Putin? Do you think that would've shown more resolve?

Or do you think this is something that is just going to help us, in terms of protecting NATO from further aggression by Putin?
Congressman Mike Rogers:

It definitely will do the latter.

Bryan Clark:

Yeah.

Congressman Mike Rogers:

But no, I really believe that we could have made Ukraine a much less attractive target, if we had been more serious about providing them the capabilities before the invasion.

Because again, I can't overstate this. We couldn't talk about it because it classified, but we had great intelligence. I mean, it was spot on.

I don't know how they got it, but it was really incredible intelligence. We knew what they were going to do. I think we could have really made it less appealing. Yeah.

The thing about what we're talking about now, with redistributing troops, it was a luxury with Ukraine. It's a necessity with NATO countries, because we're going to wind up pulled into that fight, if he crosses one of those borders.

So, I think it's just imperative that we make sure those American troops are there, to let him know to not even think about it. That we're taking this all together differently than what we did with Ukraine, because Ukraine is not in NATO, unfortunately.

But we need to make sure he understands to not even consider going into a NATO country. And you cannot do that any other way than American troops, in my view.

But the capabilities that their military has, we own a lot of that. We should take pride in the fact that they're able to push back as effective as they do because we've been making investments for eight years, in that military.

Bryan Clark:

Yeah. I mean, that's-

Congressman Mike Rogers:

I mean, we haven't [inaudible 00:17:51] Moldova. That's the reason why it came to my mind. You mentioned Moldova. We just hadn't been over there, helping them. I don't know what their capabilities are.

Bryan Clark:

Right. That's a good point. They don't have that same partnership program as Ukraine did.

When you think about Taiwan, we do training events with Taiwan, but we have not yet extended that same kind of tight relationship, where you have the California National Guard training Ukrainian troops year after year after year.
We need to maybe think about doing that same kind of thing for Taiwan. We can get them to that point.

Yeah. Which brings up a point I was going to raise, because we had talked a little bit about increasing costs for defense.

People is obviously one of our biggest expenses in the DOD, and it's one of the fastest growing ones.

With the tight economy or with the tight labor market today, now we're hearing from all the services, they're having difficulty meeting their recruiting targets.

Is this another area where we got to look at spending more money, is making compensation higher for potential recruits, to bring them in the military?

Are we going to have to dramatically change how much we pay or how much we compensate the folks trying to come into... or that we're trying to get into to the DOD?

Congressman Mike Rogers:

I'm glad you brought that up. That is a priority area for me, for this and the next two or three years, particularly when it comes to enlisted compensation. We're not paying enough. It's not just pay, it's benefits.

The military of the future is going to be much more highly skilled, much more technologically advanced than what we currently have.

We just created the Space Force because space is now a warfighting domain. Cyber is a huge warfighting domain. Artificial intelligence is going to be a big part of the future.

When I talk about transforming the military to military of the future, modernizing, it's going to be much more highly skilled, highly technical military, which means we're going to have to have a much more highly educated and skilled workforce, but you got to pay those folks to get them.

They're going to be different animals than what we've been recruiting in the past. So, we're taking a good, hard look at the entire package of compensation and benefits, so that we can start trying to gear it toward getting the people we need.

It's going to be expensive. I mean, that's the biggest part of the budget right now. It's going to be expensive, but we really don't have a choice.

We're going to have to get those people and you got to compete. You got to make it attractive for the family. That's why I keep talking about the package. You need their spouse to want to commit to a career in the military.

So, you're going to have to worry about daycare, health insurance, employment opportunities for the family members when they're moved around, a whole host of things.

Pay, at a minimum, we know for enlisted, it's not what it needs to be. We're not going to be able to hit recruiting targets. It's going to be a much bigger gap between what we're getting and what we need, if we don't make that change.
But I think this is going to be a bipartisan endeavor, to get us to a better place, so we can compete for that talent.

_Bryan Clark:_

Yeah. Another place that we're competing for talent is in the industrial base. Our shipyards, our weapons manufacturing, the arsenals, they're all having difficulty bringing workers in, who have other options to make similar money.

Maybe they don't get the same benefits or the same cache as being a uniformed member of the military.

Part of that is how much money you have to spend. So, spending more will help us to buy more, which obviously will help the industrial base.

Is the committee looking at ways to try to target some more spending, to prop up or sustain parts of the industrial base, that are kind of having a feast or famine experience right now?

They'll get an order, and then they don't get a lot of orders for several months or a year, and then they have to get another bunch of orders in.

It's difficult to maintain a workforce in an environment like that, where the budgets are so uneven. Is the committee working on ways to address that?

_Congressman Mike Rogers:_

Well, that's why I go back to what I said in the very first opening comments. We are going have to have sustained increases in spending, every year, for several years.

Shipyards are a perfect example. They can't just have one year or two years of funding. Huge capital investment has to be made, for them to do the things that we need them to do. They need steady streams of work that are coming to them.

So, that's why I'm working on making sure that we talk consistently about giving them steady budgets, that are increasing and not going through these ups and downs that they just can't do.

Our shipyards, we can't have fewer shipyards than we have right now. It's just, we need more. We need more capability.

I'm determined to figure out a way to help get them some sustained, steady work, that they can count on and make the investments they need to get the workforce, for us to be able to...

Because that's going to be a big part of our future spending. As we pivot to INDOPACOM and the Chinese threats, the navy has got to be more capable than it is now, a much larger fleet. You're not going to get there by building eight ships and decommissioning 24.

_Bryan Clark:_

Right. That's for sure. Also, you need a more diverse fleet, I guess I'd say. So, a lot more vessels, including smaller ones, that you can keep out there all the time and that might be able to push back on gray zone operations by the Chinese. You can't use a destroyer every time, to do that.
Congressman Mike Rogers:

Yeah. That's exactly right. We got to have the shipyard building, no matter whether you're talking about small or big vessels.

I mean, these folks are great Americans. I love talking with them, but it's a business. You got to be able to sustain your business. That means you got to have steady work.

Bryan Clark:

You bet.

Congressman Mike Rogers:

We're at fault for making sure they haven't had that. It's our responsibility to fix that, and we're going to work on it.

One thing I do want to make sure your participants appreciate and that is, our committee is very bipartisan. It's probably the only committee left in Congress... Maybe the appropriators are a little bit bipartisan.

We see this as threats that are not Democrat threats, not Republican threats. We work in a very bipartisan fashion on the HASC. We will continue to do that, no matter who's in the majority.

We'll fight over transgender issues and Gitmo and nuclear weapons stuff, but those are literally 5% of the issues. The other 95%, we see them as threats and they're not partisan.

So, I do hope people appreciate the fact that we are bipartisan. That's the reason why we get NDAA passed every year, for 61 straight years.

I mean, this is a big piece of legislation. It authorizes almost 20% of discretionary spending, but we find a way to get it done every year.

So, when I talk about these problems, like the industrial base and the compensation for employees, we're serious about it. We'll find some way to address these, and we'll do it in a bipartisan fashion. These are not things that are just going to be talked about and nothing done about.

Bryan Clark:

Right. Absolutely. Yeah. One last thing I want to ask you about before we close, is you've been a long time member of the Homeland Security Committee.

Obviously, with the fight in Ukraine, we were worried about cyber threats. We were worried about, now the nuclear threat for Russia.

Yeah. Are we doing enough to be able to deter those kinds of attacks from a threat like Russia, or even what we might see from China, in the future?

Where do we need to ramp up, in terms of defending our cyberspace and in nuclear weapons deterrence?
Congressman Mike Rogers:

Yeah, we don't do enough. I mean, obviously the president's budget's talking about getting rid of the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile and some of the B83 gravity bombs.

Which we aren't going, to do by the way, but just talking about, it's not helpful, not helpful when you're trying to deter aggression.

We have a lot of work to do on defensive capability on cyber. We've got some pretty impressive offensive capabilities. We need to do a lot more on the defensive side.

I'll tell you one of the interesting things that we're looking at doing in the HASC. You may be familiar with the Defense Innovation Commission that Eric Schmidt helped co-chair.

Last year, they gave us a recommendation to start a digital service academy. We fully embraced that on a bipartisan basis, because the only way we're...

It's going to be something we try to do for the defense department, not just the military, but the civils, civilian personnel.

Because if we're going to be able to deal with cyber and artificial intelligence, we're going to have to train our own. There's not enough people in the private sector to deal with theirs.

So, we're looking at standing up a digital service academy, that will be focused on preparing our workforce to deal with the threats you're talking about.

In the meantime, while we're trying to set it up, looking at scholarships that we can fund, for people to go to school and get those skills because we just don't have them right now.

Those are very real threats. They're going to be very prominent in future conflicts.

Bryan Clark:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we're finding that, that's where a lot of the fight's happening, day to day. So, we're going to have to build our own, just like we have in every other area of the military. Absolutely.

Well, Congressman, thank you very much for taking some time out to talk with us today. We appreciate you and the work you're doing. We really hope that the committee's able to pull together a pretty effective defense budget this year. We wish you all the best.

Congressman Mike Rogers:

Thank you very much.