A Conversation with U.S. Representative Jim Langevin on the Pandemic's Impact on the National Security Landscape

TRANSCRIPT

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Bryan Clark:

Well, welcome to the Hudson Institute. I'm Bryan Clark, a senior fellow at the Institute where I study defense concepts and technology. Our guest today is Chairman James Langevin, who is a congressman from Rhode Island. He is currently the chairman of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Intelligence and Emerging Threats and Capabilities where he is also a member of the subcommittees on Seapower and Projection Forces, as well as Tactical Air and Land Forces. Congressman Langevin is also a member of the House Committee on Homeland Security where he is a member of several subcommittees. Chairman Langevin has been in Congress since 2000 [inaudible 00:00:42] including secretary of state there, where he led to several initiatives to improve voting rights for people throughout the state of Rhode Island. So Chairman Langevin, thank you very much for taking the time today to talk to us here at the Hudson Institute.

Rep. Jim Langevin:

Thank you. Great to be with you, Bryan. Thanks for the introduction and I want to thank the Hudson Institute for arranging this and the invitation to join, so great to be with you and look forward to our discussion today.

Bryan Clark:

Me too. So to open up, obviously, Congress is still working, despite the challenges of social distancing, having to make sure that you don't increase the potential for contamination and infection among the Congresspeople. So what are your priorities right now, working through this period of pandemic response and then looking forward to post-pandemic congressional action?

Rep. Jim Langevin:

So, first of all, again, appreciate having me on here and the fact that we're having this conversation remotely, it shows really how the world has changed and the challenges that we are facing, everything from working remotely to now, our grocery workers and all with healthcare workers, our first responders on the front lines, and we're grateful for everything that especially our healthcare workers are doing to protect people and keep us all healthy.

And so, we are still trying to find our way in terms of being able to function as a Congress. One of the big things that's happening now, obviously, is legislation is being negotiated, both at the staff and the leadership level, and we're on daily, weekly conference calls. I should say, most of them, it's multiple times during the week that I'm on the phone with Speaker Pelosi and our democratic leadership team and we're still moving forward.

Twice we've had to return to Washington to vote on an important piece of aid legislation, which I actually drove back and forth to D.C. to do this since it was a little risky on my end to get in an airplane right now or to take a train, so driving was the safest option. So we're still working in addition to getting phone briefings and things of that nature. So, those are kind of the background of how Congress is trying to continue its work.

There are things underway, like potential rules changes that allow us to do proxy voting, I believe, in the near future, but also, hopefully, at some point, we'll be able to figure out a path forward for continuing our oversight, doing it remotely, or by video conferences, or by telephone

briefings and things and I've been doing that also with my subcommittee right now, still getting briefings. We're doing it remotely by telephone conference call.

But, in terms of my priorities, we are adapting to, obviously, this new world and I'm fresh off our work with the Cyber Solarium Commission where we're looking at how we can continue to function as an economy, as a government, and so there's a lot of parallels right now, between what's happening with coronavirus and working remotely, but also it's continuing to operate in it, in as normal a way as possible. So right now we're looking at making sure that we're setting course and we're getting ready to do the NDAA, but we also have to look at other things down the road.

Bryan Clark:

Well, thank you, Chairman. And again, thank you very much for continuing to work through what is a very difficult time and trying to juggle both the enduring responsibilities that you have as part of the House Armed Services Committee and your own chairmanship, but also dealing with the response to the pandemic. So there's a whole set of legislative issues that are separate from your normal day job of working defense and homeland security issues.

You were on the Cyberspace Solarium Commission. So we're all working a lot online. Obviously, we're doing this online as well. What were some of the major recommendations the commission had because it seems like the ability to keep our cyberspace access secure, prevent intrusions, as well as expand access to cyberspace for folks that don't necessarily have easy access to wifi or internet connection. So what were some of the recommendations that the commission came up with that you think are particularly relevant now, as we work through this pandemic and the aftermath?

Rep. Jim Langevin:

Sure. So probably there are a few that come to the top of the list, and really one of the most important of which is the recommendation that really has gathered new relevance in this coronavirus outbreak, this pandemic that we're dealing with, and that has to be continuity of the economy, planning, if you will.

So, we've traditionally had continuity of government and we've also had COOP or continuity of operations plans in place, but in a lot of ways, these are very focused on maintaining governmental and maintaining military command and control. And so, the commission has really looked at how this would apply in case of a cyber incident of significant consequence and we weren't thrilled with what we saw because so much of the vulnerable systems we were concerned about were in private hands.

So in this case, COOP and COD, it really didn't necessarily account for the private sector involvement and what's most vulnerable. What's more, the fact that critical infrastructure versus military or government targets were much more likely to be targeted by malicious actors and planning for restoration of services that might look much different than those of the private sector equities were in the mix.

And finally, we noted that the qualities of cyber vulnerabilities made it much more likely that destructing our economic power itself would be the goal of our adversaries. And so, the continuity of economy planning or COEP as we're calling it, is the commission's suggested

remedy for a lot of these, again, both for, obviously, preventing the cyber. But we need comprehensive planning to understand what's most at risk and importantly how we can basically bring what's most important back online as quickly as possible, making it as resilient as possible.

The other thing that's really relevant in this time, right now, is helping state and local governments transition to the cloud. Right now, you think of all the people that have had to file for unemployment, for just by way of example, and how so many people have not been able to get their unemployment checks because the unemployment systems have just been vastly overwhelmed.

And so, with better infrastructure, we wouldn't have these problems. We could ramp up quickly. We wouldn't have these problems, but what most states that have found and certainly even Rhode Island has found this to be true, that most states really have antiquated IT infrastructure that needs to be improved. And then, being able to ramp up quickly, like you can do if you have a lot of data and you have systems that are in the cloud, then it can ramp up more quickly, you can handle the surge that we're we're dealing with.

So one of the things that we have talked about for a variety of reasons is helping state and local governments move to the cloud. We think there's an important role there for Congress to play, to incentivize, moving, for states and local governments, moving to the cloud. And so, we encourage that to happen, but we think that Congress has an important role to play in helping that migration.

And then, of course, in order to reap the benefits of moving to the cloud, the cloud service providers themselves must be secure and that's certainly why we need some sort of certification to ensure that we're incentivizing businesses to move to providers that take security seriously. So, as for the maturity of our recommendations before COVID-19, I would have been skeptical, maybe, that we could get this moving in the interim, but, with more and more organizations, including Congress, by the way, moving to, trying to do more remote business and work, and they understand the importance of teleworker resiliency, we might actually be able to get something started sooner. I think people get it, right now.

The last thing I'll mention that's important right now is a sort of an overlap in this area that we're in, dealing with COVID-19, is the importance of leadership and coordination. And one of the things that we saw is really sorely lacking in the cyber domain, cyber area, is the lack of a cyber director, a coordinator that we believe needs to be Senate confirmed, that has both policy and budgetary authority to reach across government.

We've seen what happens when there's an uncoordinated, slow response and that's what really happened with COVID-19. If we were able to have really much more forward-leaning insight as to what's happening and you had somebody that had the power and the authority to direct government resources and focus and attention to response, we would have been much more effective, I believe, in limiting the downfall, the problems of dealing with COVID-19. So creating a national cyber director is really one of our top priorities as well. Moving into the continuity of the economy, the incentivizing moving to the cloud, and coordination of cyber activities with a national cyber director is one of our most important priorities.

Bryan Clark:

Thank you, Chairman. It seems like, with the effort that DOD and the intelligence community have been making on trying to move to the cloud between JEDI and CGP, the government seems to be getting more experience on how to manage the procurement and acquisition of cloud services. So hopefully it seems like the Cyberspace Solarium Commission found that there might be opportunities to pivot from an emphasis on government clouds to support government activities, to supporting states in their own efforts to help build government infrastructure in the cloud.

Yeah. So certainly DOD's efforts are... they can be a market leader, right? And so, when you see big departments moving to the cloud, it's easy to see the benefits that are reaped. I give Dana Deasy, the Pentagon CIO, a lot of credit for the work that he's doing over there, but I think that the biggest, I guess, incentivizer or attention-getter about why it's important to modernize your IT infrastructure and move to the cloud, unfortunately, is the lessons learned from dealing with coronavirus right now, and everything that has just upended our world and forced us to work more remotely online and telework, telecommute.

Rep. Jim Langevin:

So I think that is going to be a big lesson learned and thinking about also kids learning from home. And now, all of a sudden, sure, I think parents probably have a much deeper appreciation for the work that teachers do every day, and there's probably going to be a lot of kudos to teachers in the classroom, once we get back up and running, now that parents get a taste of what it's like to be the educator at home. But, now we've had to move to remote learning, distance learning, for our kids too and found the importance of having important IT infrastructure that can handle that remote learning. So make sure they have broadband in areas that maybe it didn't have good broadband before, it's going to become an attention getter for the Congress, I think, and members of Congress can say, Hey, we need to provide resources for expanding broadband and beefing up and strengthening our IT and cyber infrastructure.

Bryan Clark:

Absolutely. I think we're all learning that lesson right now, watching and having to deal with our own work and also our kids trying to be educated online, which brings up the innovative approach has been necessary, lots of teachers are innovating.

When it comes to defense innovation, one of the concerns that is starting to be revealed is efforts to develop new capabilities through experimentation, R&D. So with innovation on the military side potentially slowing, it seems like maybe our adversaries are not necessarily facing that same set of headwinds, we may risk falling behind in military innovation. Are you seeing that as part of your chairmanship, on the Intelligence, Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee, and what, if any, are your concerns about the impact of coronavirus on innovation in the military?

Rep. Jim Langevin:

Yeah. So, you raise a very important point right now and I do worry that we lose our technological edge and we're not there yet, but there is a lot of important R&D work. But right

now, I know many of our enemies and adversaries are working hard on their own R&D programs. China, by way of example, is spending significant amounts on R&D.

We have not kept up with our R&D spending. I think it has hurt in the long run, but it's time to turn that around and I'm a big advocate for research and development programming. I do worry though that in the very near future, China will, even though I believe they're spending about or more than us, say, in average, I think in real dollars, they're going to overtake us in the very near future and that should concern us all because our edge is in our ability to innovate, outpace our enemies and adversaries, and if we don't keep pace with research and development programs we ignore that at our detriment.

Bryan Clark:

Yeah. That's certainly a concern coming out of this. Also, on the backend, there's already been discussion in defense intelligence about potential reductions in defense budgets, on the backside of the coronavirus response, due to concerns about the deficit. R&D sometimes takes one of those hits and also, the ability to invest more broadly in basic science at our universities and labs where they maybe do some of the initial research that eventually supports the military investment.

Do you think that the Congress is going to try to take action to try to beef up R&D from the government side in an effort to shore up what might be lacking on the civilian side?

Rep. Jim Langevin:

Yeah, I would certainly hope that that is the case, especially by the way as it relates to, not only technology development, but things like vaccine development and such, and I want to point out, for example, on the R&D front, work that DARPA, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency has done, years ago, that is relevant right now.

Many people may not realize this, but we talk about both the testing equipment that's out there, the early stage vaccine development, and in fact, at least one or two of the human trials, even the antivirals that we're looking at right now to combat coronavirus, many of those had their roots in DARPA research and funding.

And so, the first vaccine that underwent human trials came from DOD funding and specifically, this was, again, from a DARPA project and notably, all of the ingredients for this vaccine are made in the U.S. Normally, some come from overseas, but DARPA is also working to be able to rapidly scale the coronavirus vaccine, once we have the formula and this technology stems from 2012 when they produced 10 million doses of H1N1 vaccine in a month. And again, all DARPA enabled work at the very early stages. And as you can imagine, it's going to be essential to quickly produce and distribute coronavirus vaccines on a scale that we have never done before.

And so, just to give context, the CDC produced about 160 million flu shots this past flu season, which is really just half of the U.S. population and under non-emergency conditions, so it's encouraging that DARPA is already thinking about how we're going to go to rapidly scale. But again, these are just examples of how early research and development pays off. That has to get the attention of legislators in Congress and I'm going to make sure that my colleagues hear the important work that was done early on and why investing in R&D is essential.

Bryan Clark:

Mr. Chairman, I think that brings up a great point, is that these biohazards can also be weaponized, that we may, we're seeing right now with COVID-19, something that is, by all accounts, naturally occurring, but the question is, could a capability like this be used by a potential adversary? I think the coronavirus has revealed that maybe it's not going to be, that may not be an Ebola-like, catastrophic, acute illness that's used but instead maybe something more contagious and pervasive that really kind of shuts down the economy over time, as opposed to something that takes out a bunch of people very rapidly and then moves on.

Rep. Jim Langevin:

Sure. Well, biological warfare, of course, is not new and there are cases throughout history of actors using disease to defeat an adversary and sadly we get Natives in South America died from disease when the Spanish conquistadors arrived. The British distributed blankets with smallpox to Natives in North America and there's other times. Saddam Hussein using chemical agents and warfare against his own population and other bioweapons programs that have been conducted around the world over the decades.

It certainly, it does worry me that you could have an enemy or adversary, especially in this era of dual use technologies and also things in research like CRISPR, there's that capability that it makes it possible to alter DNA or taking a pathogen that exists naturally in the environment and then, potentially, weaponize it.

So the one thing, it's difficult because with bio weapons is you can't control them and if an enemy obviously puts it out there, it could very well easily come back on them and cause significant death in their own populations, but that assumes a rational actor some way, or an irrational actor, but rational in the terms of someone wouldn't do that because it could blow back on them.

But what if the individual didn't care? If you had individuals on 911 who were willing to fly planes into the World Trade Center and kill themselves, do you think that they would care that they would get this biological weapon and that it might go around the world? Obviously, I don't think that they would care. And so, we need to worry about those types of biological agents that could go around the world.

The things that... what worries me the most and keeps me up at night, is biological warfare that could potentially just be contained to a certain environment, over a certain location, over large distances, that there wouldn't be that blow back. I worry about things like weaponized, aerosolized anthrax, and how that could be easily dispersed.

And yes, it was once described to me, by Richard Danzig, former Secretary of the Navy, when he said weaponized aerosolized anthrax in something the size of a fire extinguisher, sprayed from the top of a tall building, would create a plume about 50 miles wide, a hundred miles long and there would be, untreated, there would be about a 90% death rate.

And so, those things, those types of weapons, clearly would worry me or any reasonable person. And so, it's important that we invest in R&D for counter measures, also detection quickly and if you have good intelligence, perfect intelligence, that's always going to be the pointing tip of the sphere. So having intelligence community that is geared toward gathering that intelligence, but also biosensors that can pick up these anomalies quickly, and then, hopefully,

we can respond but also counter measures that we can put into place quickly to save lives and prevent the attack from being successful in the first place. That's where R&D comes into play. It's why good intelligence comes into play. All of these things are very important.

Bryan Clark:

It's interesting you bring up the case of anthrax and the use of sensors and countermeasures. One of the challenges in responding to bio warfare threats has been the prioritization of efforts. So you can invest in countermeasures like treatments and vaccines, but they usually have a shelf life and sometimes it's not feasible to vaccinate the whole population of potentially affected people. PPE is expensive and we have to position it correctly and R&D for sensors have to be developed in that position. Have you and the committee been thinking about what should the relative priority be for where these investments should go, as we start to put more money into [inaudible 00:25:40].

Rep. Jim Langevin:

Yeah, sure. And we work very closely, obviously, with the Defense Threat Reduction Agency and other bio work. This is something that the subcommittee has looked at, we've held hearings on, and we understand the need for continued investment in these areas, so that, and in other areas.

With the Department of Homeland Security, I sit on the Homeland Security Committee as well, which you pointed out, and there is another area where there's a crossover between the work of the Department of Defense, but also the work of the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Health and Human Services, and better coordination response is essential.

I was disappointed when the group on the National Security Council that was responsible for pandemic related issues was disbanded by the Trump Administration. That was troubling and certainly I think we're paying somewhat of a price for that now. Better coordination and good intelligence always has to be a priority.

Bryan Clark:

So one theme that comes out from the discussions we've been having and the work that you've been doing is it seems like the threats facing us from a national security perspective are increasingly being applied against the nation as a whole. So when we think about the impact of this current pandemic, the Cyberspace Solarium Commission's findings regarding the continuity of economy and also the threat of bio warfare, to what degree do you think we should be rebalancing investment, or should DOD be taking a more active role in issues closer to home that are threats to the nation? How do you kind of square that?

Rep. Jim Langevin:

There's always going to be coordination, there should be coordination, between Homeland, Defense and other aspects of national security. So coordination, I don't know the inter-agency working with the Department of Homeland Security, they are going to be the primary entity responsible for the civilian response and the government response, if you will, and liaise with the private sector, but then, calling on DOD resources where necessary, but it'd be under state

control or civilian control, if you will, you avoid the Posse Comitatus issues. But, we need to make sure that efforts are well thought out, well-coordinated.

Exercises are another important part in getting this right. If there are tabletop exercises that are conducted a couple of times a year on what you think are the most pressing and emerging threats, then you can fine tune your response and will be much more effective, going forward.

If we don't think about these things and war game them out, if you will, and practice exercising, ensuring we have good collaboration coordination, then we have to make this up as we're going along and that's not the time when you want to be figuring out what is the next step, what's going to keep the public safe.

Bryan Clark:

That certainly makes sense. The one related issue that I think the Cyberspace Solarium Commission looked at was the role of disinformation. It seems like, as we're facing threats that are increasingly geared towards the population as a whole, towards the economy as a whole, that there's a role for adversaries to use disinformation as a tool to disrupt our response, to destroy our unified effort, potentially even impact our plan for the response to the next crisis that might be introduced. Have you, in the committee, been looking at how to deal with disinformation, what are some potential strategies that the U.S. can mount to counter?

Rep. Jim Langevin:

Yes, and you raise a good point. Disinformation is something we're seeing right now. We saw that in the 2016 campaign, the presidential campaign. We saw it again, efforts attempted in the 2018 elections and I know that the Russians are going to be back at it again for the 2020 election. So understanding the importance of protecting against disinformation is absolutely essential and I often argue that a couple of the best defenses on this are having educated public, so teaching more civics in our schools, and I actually had a provision in the last National Defense Authorization Act to provide for creating, working with academic institutions to develop a curriculum that is focused on building in resilience through teaching civics education. And so, hopefully we'll have some deliverables on that very soon.

But also, educating the public about digital literacy and we're working on some things in the National Defense Authorization Act right now to promote digital literacy, being able, encouraging the public to discern when something is disinformation, misinformation, because we're seeing it happen right now, even in this, again, with the coronavirus. We're seeing things that China is doing, for example, and we actually had a briefing with my subcommittee on that issue. We had an outside group that found evidence that China was actually suppressing certain keywords or phrases, the early stages of the coronavirus. And so, it was blocking information from getting out on the internet and that's the type of thing that we should be attuned to and certainly worried about.

And so, good intelligence on that issue is important and making sure that we're responding appropriately, but it's really important that we understand that disinformation does exist and we need to take steps to combat it.

Bryan Clark:

So some of the actors that are doing these disinformation campaigns, as we saw in the last election, are your government sponsored, state actors, or actual members of a foreign military, whether it's China or Russia or whomever. The Cyber Command has been, under the Trump administration, articulating a more aggressive strategy for how to maintain superiority in cyberspace, which involves more active measures, more active operations against adversary networks or adversary systems. Do you think, has that been effective, or do you think that will continue to be an effective approach to complement what you just discussed about improving the resilience of our own population to cyber threats?

Rep. Jim Langevin:

I do think that making sure that they are right balanced and right-sized is important. Make sure that they're well trained, capabilities are top notch, and that we know how to use those capabilities effectively.

Certainly, they have a role to play in this layered side of defense, a very important point, defending forward is essential. But also, we need to build resilience into our own systems and networks to deprive enemies and adversaries of the benefits of attacking our networks. In the past, they could do so really undeterred, unanswered, and the risk for them was low and the payoff was high, so why wouldn't they keep doing it? In the Cyber Solarium Commission report with the new layered cyber, the defense and imposing costs on adversaries and reducing benefits to any cyber intrusion or attack that would take place is important.

And then, working with international partners, of course, to strengthen cybersecurity through a use of norms, international norms, encouraging responsible state behavior in cyberspace and punishing bad actors when they violate those norms is important. So I do think there's an important role for U.S. Cyber Command to play and good oversight is important to make sure it's done the right way and that's part of the work that my subcommittee does on Intelligence, Emerging Threats and Capabilities, subcommittee that oversees both U.S. Cyber Command and NSA, and we want to make sure that we get that balance right.

Bryan Clark:

One of the other areas that, in a potential conflict, that we've looked to as a way to impose costs on enemies is undersea warfare and I would be remiss, as a submariner, if I didn't bring up submarines and undersea warfare. Rhode Island has the Navy Undersea Warfare Center, Newport, and also, obviously, right next door to where we're building submarines in Connecticut, at Groton.

So how do you see the importance of undersea warfare, going forward? And then, how about the balance between shifting more systems to unmanned undersea systems compared to our continued development and construction of submarines?

Rep. Jim Langevin:

Sure. Well, I hope we're always going to see a robust building of submarines. As you may know, we build the world's best nuclear submarines and they start right here in Rhode Island. We are

right now building the Virginia-class submarine, and it's an amazing national security platform that does important work in national security for the nation.

And we'll soon be building the Virginia payload module, which has an added section, added capabilities, in the submarine. And then soon we'll be producing the Columbia-class program that will be the Ohio replacement program as part of our strategic nuclear triad with the most survivable legs of the triad, important work in national security, of course. So very proud of the work that we do here in Rhode Island on submarines.

But I'm very happy, we're very proud of the work that the Naval Undersea Warfare Center does and the capabilities that they are developing, both in terms of sensors, but also unmanned autonomous systems and we are seeing a huge growth in development of those undersea systems, both by the United States and our adversaries, by the way. And so, they will become more important going forward, not less important, for sure.

Bryan Clark:

Absolutely. I agree. Thank you very much, Chairman Langevin. We really appreciate your time. Before I go, I didn't want to cut off any opportunity, if there's anything else you wanted to talk about before we go, but we really appreciate you taking the time today to talk about the role of technology in future operations.

Rep. Jim Langevin:

Thank you. Well, it's one of the main reasons that I really wanted to, and I enjoy chairing the Intelligence, Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee. I think it does among the most important work in the area of national security. It's so important for our nation and our security and so important for the role our military plays in national security and I want to make sure that we are always identifying those areas. We are, the United States, has a strategic and tactical advantage and that we do everything in our power to maintain that advantage and, in areas where our enemies and adversaries have undermined our advantage and have gained an advantage over us, I would do everything we can to undermine that advantage, turn it around, flip it around in our favor.

I want to make sure, always, that we are never sending our war fighters into a fair fight, they have every advantage possible and much of that work that's done comes out of the Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee, especially on research and development side and developing good intelligence. So all of these things are important. It's an honor to serve on the subcommittee. I have a great ranking member, is Elise Stefanik from New York. She and I work hand in glove together and very dedicated members of the subcommittee and the staff and it's an honor to be serving in Congress, even though it's a very challenging and difficult time, it really is an honor to be working there.

I hope everyone, by the way, will stay safe and healthy, follow the CDC guidelines of social distancing, frequent hand washing, and where possible, wearing masks in public and just be safe. We're going to get through this and we will do it together.

Bryan Clark:

Thank you, Chairman Langevin. It's been great talking with you today and please stay safe. We appreciate the work that you're doing on Congress and then also back home in Rhode Island.

Rep. Jim Langevin:

Thanks, Bryan.

Bryan Clark:

Thank you, everybody, for joining us today and stay safe.