



America's Role in the World Amid a Pandemic: A Discussion with Former Under Secretary of Defense Michèle Flournoy

TRANSCRIPT

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Rebecca Heinrichs:

Well, hello everybody. Thank you for joining this video event, virtual event with myself, Rebecca Heinrichs. I'm a senior fellow at Hudson Institute and I have the pleasure of being joined by Michele Flournoy. She was the under secretary of defense for policy for President Obama from February 2009 until February 2012 and she is the co-founder and managing partner of WestExec Advisors and former co-founder and chief executive officer of the Center for the New American Security, CNAS, where she currently serves on the board. Thank you so much for joining us virtually to make sure that the show would go on. Thank you.

Michèle Flournoy:

Thank you so much. Good morning everybody and thanks so much for adapting and joining us on Zoom.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

Well, what we'd like to do this morning is we'd like to have a conversation about how the United States is managing during this global pandemic and what it means as the United States continues its other obligations, one, to protect and defend the United States, but also what this means for America's role in the world. We'd like to begin the conversation there, and I'm going to turn it over to Michèle to give some opening remarks, and then she and I will engage in a conversation. If you do have questions based on what you hear this morning, please email your questions at events@hudson.org and my colleagues will get those questions to me and I hope to ask those at the end of our conference. With that, I'm going to turn it over to Michèle.

Michèle Flournoy:

Great. Thanks, Rebecca. So I do think this crisis is going to have a profound impact on both the reality and perceptions of US leadership globally going forward in three ways. The first is, in contrast to the behavior of its predecessors, the Bush administration handling the financial crisis or the AIDS pandemic, the Obama administration handling the financial crisis, and then things like H1N1 and then Ebola, this administration has not stepped in to really coordinate and bring together the international community to respond. And it's really a very striking contrast to both prior Republican and Democratic administrations.

We saw that even though the US currently chairs the Group of Seven, the G7, President Trump did not exercise leadership and call that group of the most powerful nations of the world together to coordinate an international response. It took Emmanuel Macron pestering him to try to get the G7 moving. Similarly, G20, the United States did not lead the convening of that forum virtually to coordinate a response. That was left to Saudi Arabia. And so when the US creates that kind of vacuum, you see others starting to fill it. I thought it was ironic and somewhat embarrassing that China was the one to step up to provide assistance to our NATO ally, Italy, in its time of need. So the US has been missing in action, in my view, and I think people won't forget that. It's a missed opportunity.

The second is the economic impact. I mean, I am not an economist, but I was just reading this morning a projection from the St Louis Reserve Bank that you could see 30% unemployment on a temporary basis, 50% decline in economic output. What I worry about is our economic strength is the foundation of our power and influence in the world. And I worry that we will come

out of this less able to invest in the drivers of American competitiveness, research and development, science and technology, STEM education, 21st century infrastructure, adapting our military and our state department and other instruments to a much more competitive world. And then finally, I think it's going to have an impact on our soft power.

So much of our influence in the world has come from the fact that we've been a model, an inspiration to others, a power that others want to emulate. And given the administration's early mismanagement of this, the lack of trust that people have in what the president says and the lack of performance do in to underinvestment in our public health system and our preparedness, I do think it's not an inspiring model for the rest of the world. So I worry that this crisis, obviously, first and foremost, it's hurting Americans here at home. It's hurting our economy, but it's also going to be hurting our ability to lead globally, and when we can't lead globally, we can't protect our interests and our values around the world as well.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

I think that gives us a good start. We're in the middle of the administrations dealing with containing and then mitigating the effects of COVID. I guess from my perspective, I'm having a hard time even knowing how hard to judge because we're in the middle of it. I think it'd be easier for me, from where I sit, to know, once we get through it, have some of these decisions that the administration made, where they too slow or were they just right or were they too aggressive? It's hard because it is a new virus and when I go back and I look at President Obama and the Obama administration's handling of H1N1 and Ebola, there are some things I think we can learn from, but they're very different viruses.

They require different responses, I think globally, especially in the case of Ebola. For me it's hard for me to know, is the United States looking so internally, being so focused on what the United States does for its own people out of necessity because of how contagious the virus is, because we're not quite sure what the fatality rate is. We don't really know how long it's been in the United States. And a lot of that comes from how slow China was in providing the information that we needed about the strand. We really, as far as I can tell, we took notice of what was going on because we saw the massive quarantines, unprecedented quarantines that was going on in China and that was whenever we really started getting the red flags.

Can you then turn and talk about China's behavior in this? I agree with you that it was cringy for me to see China providing aid to Italy, but I guess my cringe came from a different place. It was more of a place of frustration that it was China that caused so much of this problem and misery and then they're the ones that want to turn around and provide aid when so much of this could have been prevented or at least mitigated if China had been a much more responsible international actor. Can you please talk a little bit about China's behavior in all of this?

Michèle Flournoy:

Sure, sure. I think it's a very important point. China would like us to forget all that early behavior and just now come in and save the day with providing people with masks or ventilators or assistance and so forth. First of all, let's start with its own public health practices. China has been the source of SARS. It's been the source of coronavirus. It continues to allow these wet markets to exist, which often end up being the sources of these viruses going from animals to humans in the first place. Second, they were very closed. They did not share information. They

did not give the world an accurate picture. They were far more concerned about how the information would reflect on the regime as opposed to sharing the information to have maximum public health coordination and response.

So that absolutely hurt us, or hurt the Chinese people first and foremost, but us as well. And then I think they... and then actually persecuting people who spoke out about it and so forth. So I mean, obviously, that's very problematic behavior. And the thing that bothered me the most is hearing from friends, American friends who live in China, that the official information organs are now propagating this conspiracy theory that says that the US military started the virus, they planted the virus in China and that's how it all started, which is just nonsense. And yet Chinese official government organs are spreading that conspiracy to try to divert attention from the regime, from Xi's handling of it, to an outside enemy. So I fully agree that there's a lot to criticize in China's handling of this. My only point is that this should be a rare moment where we're trying to cooperate. We have a shared interest in dealing with this pandemic, and even with our allies we have not been consulting deeply to coordinate a response.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

I would definitely agree with you that if there is work, and I believe that there is, and I've been told there is work being done with allies but it's being done maybe more quietly or at lower levels, and it would be great to take advantage of this and demonstrate that there is great cooperation. And that though I share the sentiment of this administration that we need to prioritize the wellbeing of our of your own citizens, and everybody ought to do that, but that doesn't mean to the exclusion of where you can find areas of cooperation. And this is part of what it means to be an ally when these crises do happen, that we can come together and find ways where we can cooperate. And I think it also underscores the point that that allies are not merely transactional.

That it's not merely, these are not merely business partnerships, that these are political alliances, meaning we do have shared values and shared security interests, and so we should, at times like this, come together to the best we can. And hopefully, ideally, the United States would be the one taking the initiative and coming up with some of these solutions. And we are seeing some of that. I think perhaps there's a fair criticism that it's been lagging, but you do see now some of the testing kits that the United States has been able to come up with seem to be even better and more sophisticated than what we have out of South Korea, which really has been the gold standard so far at producing and getting these testing kits out there to their population so quickly.

Michèle Flournoy:

I would say, I think we tend to focus on the process management of the crisis. But so much of our positioning to deal with a crisis depends on the months and years of investment that we either make or don't make in preparedness. Sadly, this administration and others before, has made some pretty draconian cuts in our public health system, funding for CDC funding for other line items. And when you think about bio terrorism or pandemic, the early warning system is our public health system. And if it's not fully prepared and resourced, if we don't have robust

stockpiles of needed materials, we're in trouble no matter how the crisis is managed in the moment.

I do worry about that Americans don't understand the connection between those public health entities and our ability to protect Americans and save lives when a pandemic like this hits. Every administration I've known previously, I'm not aware of whether it's happened in the Trump administration, but maybe you know. Every other administration I knew, Bush and Obama, conducted regular exercises at the deputy and cabinet level of crisis scenario, kind of tabletop war games, how would we handle a crisis, a public health crisis like this? You've got to invest in the system, you have to exercise the system and then yes, in the moment you need good management of it as well. But if the investment isn't there, you're really starting on your back foot and it's very, very hard to catch up in the moment.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

I think that point is well taken. I do think too, it has been remarkable to hear Dr. Fauci repeatedly point to, I think he'd been very clear about some of the problems to, the systemic problems with the FDA, as to why it's so sluggish and so hard to get some of these, not just therapeutic solutions out there, but some of the other types of equipment that we need for our health care professionals who are really kind of on the front lines of this now. And it does make me wonder, we've got to be taking lessons learned from this. And maybe because COVID 19 is not going to be the last pandemic that the United States faces.

And it's sadly, not going to be the worst one. From what it seems now, that it could be a lot worse, and so we're going to have to take some very serious lessons learned from this and make sure that, for instance, we far more respirators reserved and masks and the things that we need for our healthcare professionals so that we are not so flatfooted. And then a lot of this, the harm to the economy, I think is because we had to take much more sweeping precautions to protect the American people because of the lack of some of these things that we do have. And so you can't see the bite that we're feeling in the economy and it's because we didn't have some of these things on the ready.

Michèle Flournoy:

I do think, if I could just add one more point. I do think it's also one of the lessons learned is going to be for a number of businesses. Historically, we've looked at our supply chains for national security, defense firms and so forth, and we've made sure that we... Well, have done a reasonable job but could do a better job of making sure that we have stockpiles of key items, we have US sources of key materials, you have redundant sources. We haven't done that in the medical supply chains. And I think this experience will cause a lot of people to say, "Why is it that we are so dependent on overseas suppliers for things that Americans need in a pandemic crisis like this."

Rebecca Heinrichs:

And I think that that goes back to one of the themes that appreciated in the Trump administration's foreign policy is this emphasis on sovereignty. And it's not just about energy independence, which I think is important. It's independence in our supply-chains for something like this. You don't want your country in a crisis like this to be dependent on foreign supply-

chains, especially if that other country is China. And so, we definitely, absolutely want to foot stomp that and agree with you there that that's something that we need to be better at.

Last point, we can move on from there. I know that the National Security Council has been, the current one has been very forceful or at least Ambassador Bolton and then Tim Morrison who headed the directorate that handle pandemics and the threat from bioweapons, or the biothreat, whether naturally occurring or manmade. And what he and Ambassador Bolton have both said is they have been preparing for it. They've been running through scenarios and cooperating with other partners, and they have been prioritizing the threat of pandemics. And it was in the national security strategy. I don't know about all the minutia about what that looked like on a practical basis, similar to what you said in the tabletop exercises, et cetera. But according to them, a lot of this stuff was ongoing.

I think what was lacking perhaps is the implementation, the supply-chain problem, which is a long, hard problem and hard to correct. And also, again, not to be a one trick pony, but I have a hard time moving past how long China delayed getting the information to us that we needed to the WHO and to the CDC to even be able to understand just how hard this problem is. And I think there are definitely fair criticisms of this administration, but it's really hard to get past just how bad and irresponsible China was in all of this.

Michèle Flournoy:

I would say, again, I agree that the criticism of China is well deserved. But I do think you can go back and look at when the intelligence communities started raising the red flag on this. And unfortunately I think those red flags were not necessarily taken as seriously as they should have been back in January. I don't know if that's because of the president's distrust of the community. I don't know if people were not raising it to him with the sufficient urgency, but we did have information that should have prompted an earlier US response. And again, I think that even the NSC reorganization, when you put more topics, more areas of responsibility under a single person, it's going to reduce the bandwidth that's given to a particular topic. But I think the most important shortfall was this lack of investment. The fact that we were not adequately funding the response mechanisms and we weren't adequately exercising those response mechanisms to really have high confidence in dealing with something like this.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

I will say too, it's hard to know exactly where the fault lays, because I definitely think that our response should have been quicker and it seemed like a slow train wreck coming. You could see it even from just my couch watching the news really. And it was just a few people who were in the media who were sounding the alarm early. One of them was Tucker Carlson, who kept saying, "Mr. President, you can see what's going on in China. You've got to do something and take it seriously." Even as President Trump was ... It seems like the concern was there was still a concern about how badly are we going to disrupt the economy for this. And it took a lot of, I mean it was a political judgment and wisdom or lack thereof there, I think as the information was unfolding before us.

And I think that there was an error in judgment early on to the extent that's because of the lack of information his team was providing him. That's where I'm a little bit uncertain. I think that they were, from my view and from what I've been told, they have the best information they had as it

was coming. And then it was just a matter of how the political leaders were going to take that information and decide what to do with it.

Michèle Flournoy:

My impression from all that I've heard is that he was getting the information but discounting it until it finally was so ... when the virus showed up here and then you couldn't really ignore it in the same way.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

Yeah, I think that probably is fair. Okay. So, I've got so many questions just pouring in on this subject. We haven't even moved on to Afghanistan and I want to be able to talk about those other things. So, here I've got one question and I think it's a fair question, a little bit tough. The question is, has the United States given up or lost its status as the leading nation or do you see some of these, from your perspective, these errors, how damaging are they? Do you think that they're just an error in this time and place, but has this really harmed American standing in the world? And I'm going to couple that with another one here. In your experience, what can DoD should do domestically? So DoD in particular, do domestically to help with ongoing logistical problems resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak? So, we'll just take those two for now.

Michèle Flournoy:

So, I do think there's been damage being done to the credibility of US leadership for a while now. So this crisis is not a single point of experience. This is part of a larger trend I think that many of our allies see where they don't feel, if you spend time in Europe or even in Asia, when there's a gap between US words and US deeds, whether it's in Syria, whether it's in this situation, whether it's in other situations. They start to doubt whether they can rely on the US as the indispensable ally that we've been for the last 75 years since World War II. And so I do think this is adding to, it's like one more case where it causes people to question.

And I think for a lot of our allies, they don't know if, is this a philosophical shift from one administration that's focused on America first and is not as focused on allied relationships and multilateral institutions and leading in those contexts? Or is this a shift of the American people and how they pursue advancing their interests, and this is a new America that they're going to have to live with? And I think there are a lot of, what I see right now is a lot of allies hedging their bets. What if the US is no longer a leader we can rely on?

So I think whoever the next president is, whether it's a second Trump term or Vice President Biden or whoever it is, one of the top agenda items is going to try to, I think repair some of that perception. But I don't think it's going to be easy or happen overnight. I think it's going to take a lot of work over a number of years to recover that trust and that standing.

On the DoD piece, so DoD has a number of things it's got to do right in a crisis like this. Number one, it's got to take care of its own people. Make sure that this virus doesn't sweep through the military and create a huge problem of readiness. Number two, it's got to stay vigilant in terms of deterrence. When the United States is inwardly focused and distracted, understandably so, it's a great time for troublemakers around the world to make problems and to take aggressive or coercive actions so they've got to be vigilant there. And then lastly, they do need to support civilian authorities where they can. I think some of that we're seeing in terms of deploying the

hospital ships, in terms of offering supplies, and so forth. Whether there's a need for logistics and so forth is I think an open question. It depends on how bad things get here.

The thing you have to be careful of is the bulk of our medical capacity in terms of personnel is actually in the Guard and Reserves. When you call those people up, you're actually pulling doctors and nurses and medical professionals out of their local communities and sending them wherever. So we have to be very careful about that. The thing that I don't understand is, as the world's greatest tech innovator, why are we in a situation where we don't have the software tools that allow a mayor in a city, a governor of a state or the head of FEMA nationally to be able to see on a dashboard every morning or every minute where are the shortages, where are the supplies and how are we going to reallocate resources to have the greatest impact in lowering the spike of cases in this at pandemic? I mean that should have been something that we should have in our back pocket. The fact that we don't have it in this crisis is mind boggling to me.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

Well and it goes back to that's what I keep coming. Why don't we have this and why don't we have that? I keep going through the same things. Or why don't we organize this and do this? And a lot of it though, again, and I don't know how much of this though we could have learned from ... I mean really I think the swine flu is a better illustration than even Ebola. I think Ebola was such a different kind of problem than the current virus that we're dealing with domestically. But H1N1, I think that there's more similar in the way it's affecting the country. And I just wonder, I'm sure somebody watching probably knows the answer to this, but did we fail to take some lessons learned even from the end of the Obama administration maybe, in the beginning of this administration?

Surely there's been, I mean, we're three years into this administration, so it's impossible to get away from seeing that they dropped the ball in some respects, but it seems to me that there was enough time lapsing there that we could have learned from these previous viruses and done something like this to be better prepared. And that goes back to your previous point about what a health crisis will do to this country, and why we need to be better prepared for one.

Michèle Flournoy:

Yep. I think one issue is we are defining national security too narrowly. I mean dealing with pandemics and safeguarding the health of the American population from a threat like this should be part of our national security thinking and rubric. But when you go to Capitol Hill, the color of money, the politics of different colors of money really matter. A vote for a defense dollar is a patriotic act. A vote for the CDC or a vote for public health hospitals in the past has not been seen as a patriotic act. Maybe this pandemic will change that, but we have got to think about public health preparedness as a part of our national security going forward and investing.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

I have sensed, I think, and I do think to President Trump's credit, especially in his response to the massive stimulus bill that was just passed, he demurred, when a reporter was asking him, trying to present an opportunity for the president to criticize the other party for some of the things that were in that. And he actually, I think to his credit, took the opportunity to not be

partisan and to go back to that patriotic feeling that this is the nation's crisis and it really is time regardless of how poor everyone has been and behaved from a partisan perspective leading up into this moment, this is a national security crisis and it cannot be a partisan solution.

Do you think see how we can do this better from a bipartisan perspective and rise above it and have this patriotic response to provide solutions for the American people?

Michèle Flournoy:

To be fair, I think he's evolved in his rhetoric.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

Definitely.

Michèle Flournoy:

Early in this crisis, his rhetoric was quite partisan, criticizing Obamacare and so forth. I think he's been advised and has evolved to a more presidential approach, trying to restrain his instincts and be more whatever. I will say, the bright spot that I saw in this morning's paper is we had a unanimous vote in the Senate for this bill.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

Yes.

Michèle Flournoy:

About time. We're coming together. We're trying to do the right thing for the American people. I think you're going to have a very similar result in the House. And I think the question will be how quickly can we execute this to actually get some relief to Americans. But I hope that this crisis will cause us to step back and say, "Enough of the partisan mudslinging. We're all in this together as Americans. How do we move forward with a greater unity and a greater sense of common purpose?" Again, another bright spot is reading all the stories of Americans helping each other, bringing groceries to the shut-ins, finding ways to reach out and help each other neighbor to neighbor as some people are really suffering.

So that's a bright spot and maybe that can, as we head into the election season, have us all think a little bit more carefully about what flavor and what kind of leadership do we want going forward as Americans. Do we want someone who can help us become more unified? Do we want to demand that of our leaders at all levels, of enough of this? We have got to come together as a nation.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

Do you see, and I don't want to put you on the spot, but I think it is fair to say that President Trump's rhetoric in the beginning of this crisis was still run of the mill partisan and that he saw some of his biggest challenges facing him, rather than it being COVID, it was the Democrats, and that that has changed. And now he understands this is a very serious test of his ability in leadership to get the country through this. And so his rhetoric has changed. Do you think then that there is some criticism to be put on some of the vitriol that has come towards him and his

leadership, partisan vitriol, and even some from the media as he tries to navigate this? Do you think that that is a fair criticism?

Michèle Flournoy:

Well again, I think that as we've discussed, I don't think the first four, six, eight weeks of this crisis was handled well. He did take a very partisan approach, political approach to it. And so I think a lot that's what sort of started this criticism. As you said, ultimately we'll see. We'll be able to look back on this and make the judgments about how well it was managed. But I certainly, I know that I am not, from just a citizen's perspective, I don't feel very reassured right now that we're in good hands and doing everything we can to manage this. And so, I do think this is a test of Trump's role as commander in chief. And I think so far it pretty mixed, if not negative results in my view. I would, from the global perspective and to even the domestic perspective, that's my own perspective. So I think a lot of the criticism as nasty is the tone has been, in some quarters, the substance of it is merited in my view.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

Here's a two, I'm going to couple these together, questions coming in. I want to make sure that our viewers are rewarded for tuning in and getting an opportunity to ask you. So two questions. One, how effective do you think that was and wise do you think it was for the president to close down the border from China pretty early on in this. Though some of his other actions may have been maybe fair to say it was slow. That one was pretty forward leaning, on that one.

And then the other question, is from Radio Free Asia, so I want to make sure we get to this. What are some takeaways from the president offering to help North Korea during this time? And then tagging onto that, how do you view these really tough sanctions that the United States has on Iran and North Korea in particular during this time? Both countries wanting sanctions relief. Do they have an argument there or should that not happen simply because we are in this global pandemic?

Michèle Flournoy:

Yes. Well, I actually do think that it was smart to restrict the travel of people back and forth to China early on. And then subsequent restrictions. I think I would have liked to have seen particularly with the restrictions that involve our allies, to have had more consultation and to do this together, as opposed to sort of announcing things unilaterally and surprising close allies. But in terms of help to North Korea and Iran, I think they're somewhat different cases. I think in the case of North Korea, the president still hoping both to get them to the table for some kind of deal. And I think he sees this as offering some small olive branch to offer assistance.

I don't think we should lift the sanctions. I do think we have to be very careful about watching provocative behavior. We've already seen Kim Jong Un and resume some missile tests to kind of try and get attention from the international community, while we're preoccupied with other things. So, I would not touch the sanctions regime overall, but I might, I think it's fine to offer them some exceptions or waivers for medical supplies and so forth, if we thought that could help them get back to the table.

In Iran again, I think it's a much more dire situation. A much more populous nation, in the heart of the Middle East. The Iran problem is creating, is basically spreading the virus to all of the

neighboring countries. There again, I think it's worth having a policy discussion about whether some kind of medical assistance should be allowed or supplies should be allowed in to help the Iranian people. The Iranian people are not our enemy. Long-term, they give us the greatest potential to change this relationship over time. But the regime again, I don't think we should be lifting sanctions on the regime, given their continued bad behavior, continuing to target Americans in Iraq and so forth. But whether we can carve out some kind of channel to provide not money, but supplies to get to the Iranian people. I think that's worth examining.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

I would just say I know that these sanctions that the United States has had against the Iranian regime has had humanitarian exceptions. I know the regime continues to say that those exemptions are not effective because of the way that they're being implemented in other countries then not wanting to invest in some of these things because of how unpredictable and unsteady the economy there is. But again, I've written about this, the blame rests with the regime. Those exemptions still are there. I would agree with you that this is an opportunity, I think to provide aid and help to the Iranian people. So far, to my knowledge, it's the regime that has burned US efforts to try to do that during this moment. But I do commend and appreciate that the United States has made that distinction that you just made, that the Iranian people are not the threat. And that we have great hope in them and that the problem is the regime. And obviously the Iranian people are the ones that suffer the most because of the regime's bad behavior.

But I want to kind of stick on this issue with Iran too, because even though we deal with this global pandemic, we still have these other hot spots that the Pentagon still has to deal with. And it barely made news because of the COVID-19, but the Iranians are still using proxies and firing short range missiles and other rockets at US forces. How should, and then I want to do Asia pivot here real quick. We're trying to focus on INDOPACOM and that was something that you have pointed out to me in the past too. That the Obama administration should deserve some credit for trying to steer us in that direction earlier on.

But I do think it's the Trump administration that's trying to forcibly kind of make this happen and make some big muscle movements from a force posture perspective. In trying to get us some of our military assets focused on the INDOPACOM region. We still have to deal with Iran though in the Middle East. What should we be we doing, are we doing it right, are we missing the mark, how do we protect US forces that are still in the region appropriately, even as we try to draw down the presence of US forces in the region?

Michèle Flournoy:

So if you think about longterm security interest, I do think rebalancing more of our attention and our capabilities to the Indo-Pacific is strategically wise. But we can't abandon the Middle East. We have vital interests. We have important interests and allies and friends there. So I think it's really a question of how do you reestablish deterrence at more modest levels of continuous presence in the region? And I think one of the mistakes I think the administration made is Iran started launching the series of provocations. First attacking a tanker and then shooting down a US drone. And then you had this series of escalatory steps that the US really chose not to respond to until, an American was killed. And we did respond. And I think we always should respond when American's lives are lost.

But I think we should not wait. That's a very high bar. I would like to see us establish deterrence at a lower level of provocation, that makes Iran pay some price when it violates international law, it threatens our interests, our allies interests and so forth. And so, but right now what we've gotten into is we deter by sending more forces to the region to try to reassure everyone. I'd like to see us reevaluate to say, "Let's focus on getting counter drone capability into the hands of our partners in that region as an urgent matter." That's going to do a lot more for Saudi confidence, for Emirati confidence, for others, Qatari confidence, than sending another 10,000 soldiers. So I think we need to really think about how we deter and how we posture. And then to allow to free up some of those resources to eventually be refocused on the Pacific.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

And then also one of the things I've been thinking about is even as we are drawing down troop levels in that particular theater. You just mentioned drones, I also see, because we really are kind of in a new missile era. Missiles enable countries like Iran and North Korea to coerce and threaten the United States from a distance and more cheaply than they would because they don't have the same kind of air force and Navy etc that the United States has.

And so it seems to me like we should definitely be investing more on air and missile defense assets. That there's some kinds of military assets that lend themselves, especially in this moment and in the years and decades ahead. We have got to get better at making sure that we have sufficient numbers of them and that where troops are deployed in those regions, where they are within range of of Iranian missiles, that they do have the proper air and missile defense systems available to them. And then also the US homeland that we need to be building better defenses so that we can empower US diplomats. If they are going to pursue this path of trying to negotiate something with the North Koreans in particular because the North Koreans haven't stopped building their missiles and their nuclear program, as the Trump administration has tried to engage with the Kim regime.

Michèle Flournoy:

Yes. No, absolutely. I think air and missile defenses are a key thing that we can help our partners build their capacity. And I do think in our lifetimes, probably shorter than that, we're going to see real technological disruption in this area, where you're starting to see directed energy, high energy lasers. Rather than hitting a missile with a missile, we're going to start being able to do it at a much more cost effective, offense, defense, ratio if you will. And that's going to dramatically improve our capacity to defend ourselves, our troops, our allies.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

I think that's right. And with that too, moving onto this new technological breakthrough and these new things that we're going to need in order to handle this new very complex threat set, with all kinds of different missiles and hypersonic weapons systems and other kinds of advanced capabilities. We need to have a more robust space infrastructure so that we can see and track these things. And then, as you just mentioned, we're going to have different kinds of interceptor capabilities with new advanced technologies, but we got to be able to see these things. And so this administration continues to tout that we're moving in that direction, that we're going to have this robust space tracking sensor layer that provides birth to death tracking. But we haven't had

that yet. And that's something I think we need to do sooner rather than later to get on the front end of this deterrence spectrum.

Michèle Flournoy:

Yes. I think one of the things that is really challenging, we are so used to being the dominant conventional military power and other countries have spent years thinking asymmetrically against us. How do they undermine our strengths, explode our vulnerabilities? When you move into Indo-Pacific theater which is China's backyard, they're always going to be able to field more quantity than we.

So we now have to shift our mindset to think asymmetrically about how do we bolster deterrence, either deterrence by denial, being able to stop them from aggression when it starts, or by cost imposition. Really be able to hold at risk things that they value like their naval fleet for example. In a way that would make them think twice and say, "Well, maybe we don't want to invade Taiwan today." So, but that's a very hard mind shift. And it needs to be supported by very robust technology, innovation, experimentation, concept development. And I do see the early work in the marine corps and the air force and the other services. The army rethinking, "What is my role in Asia?" And the navy too, but it's not happening with the speed and scale that we need to happen. So, I'm hoping that will build some momentum to focus on how do we deter China?

Rebecca Heinrichs:

I totally agree. I know, I've in so many of these meetings before everybody was in their homes, kind of hunkered down. In so many meetings talking about, how do we now make up for this, what I call deterrence gap that exists that the Chinese have been exploiting. And it just seems that we're thinking about it too slow. It just seems like the timeline is just not fast enough. That we need to be thinking about how are we going to complicate the calculations of the Chinese now? So that today is not the day that they decide to take Taiwan or to become more provocative with some of our other allies and partners in the region. And back to COVID again too, I think that there is an opportunity to point out of the great work that the Japanese, the Taiwanese, the South Koreans have been doing. The Hong Kongers that had handled this problem so much more humanely and quickly that there are some takeaways I think.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

Taiwan keeps coming back to me. It seems like we should be really using this moment too to highlight the difference in the way the Taiwanese have handled this as opposed to the CCP and China. And then our partnership from a hard power perspective needs to be working with these partners. That's part of great power competition is partnering better and more closely with the Taiwanese and Japan.

Michèle Flournoy:

I think there's a great PhD thesis or think tank project doing a comparative case study of how different countries responded and what lessons learned and best practices we should take when all of this is over.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

And even now though, if we want to point to some of the things that other countries are doing. I would just encourage people to look to Taiwan rather than China. Even if there are some things that the Chinese might be doing to get control of the virus. That they're going about it in a way that a liberal democratic country like ours is simply not going to adopt those practices. We're quickly running out of time, I want to talk in particular about Afghanistan. Secretary Pompeo just went to Afghanistan to try to put some pressure on the political players on the side of the Afghan government to try to get, for lack of a better more articulate way of describing it, get their act together to try to negotiate some kind of... I don't even want to call it a peace deal because it's not really peace, but some sort of calming, lowering of violence and getting some stability in the region so that the United States can draw down and move on.

Also, we want stability for the Afghans and we don't want to have Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. We don't want the Taliban to resume and to sort of take back over the government again. How do you see the problem there? As you and I were chatting. I went back and read some of your testimony in 2010 because you were there, correct me if I'm wrong, during the surge, during President Obama's surge in Afghanistan, and trying to give it another go of it, and tried to give the Afghan government the best shot they had at making it. How do you see where we are, and is it time to finally just pull the plug regardless of whether we get some kind of satisfactory political sentiment coming out of the Afghan government?

Michèle Flournoy:

Well, I do think that all sides are tired of war. We've had 20 years of it, nearly. The Afghans have had basically 40 years of it. He left it up to the Afghan people, they want this to end. Neither side can win on a battlefield militarily, negotiations are our best chance. What is upsetting to me right now is you have two Afghan leaders, President Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah who cannot seem to get beyond their personal, political interests of the moment to have a chance to make history for their country and to bring a unified Afghan coalition that includes not only the government, the opposition, civil society, women, youth to the table and negotiate some kind of end to this war that safeguards the rights of the Afghan people and get to some kind of outcome.

They are way too focused on their personal, political fortunes and missing the fact that they both have an opportunity to go down in history as the Afghan leaders who brought stable peace to Afghanistan long term. I would hate to see us pull the plug and just get frustrated and leave. I think that would be detrimental to our interests.

You've already seen ISIS taking up residence in Afghanistan, doing external attack planning against us and so forth. You're going to recreate a civil war and a mess that will reach out and touch American interests. Afghanistan is extremely dependent on the United States and the west for aid and assistance, whether it's building the Afghan forces or supporting their economy. I do think we need to use that as leverage.

I think, Secretary Pompeo, I'll give him credit for putting that on the table to say, "Look, we'll assist you in getting to a reasonable peace. We're not going to support you fully if you're stopping that process from moving forward." Obviously, we have to test the Taliban's intentions and seriousness to deliver, but we've got to get to the table to do that. We've got to get the Afghans to the table to do that.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

I wish we would have a whole other hour just to talk about this one question, because the question whether or not President Trump is an anomaly with the America First, or whether there's something else going on.

My view has been that what the president is tapping into is something, that it is a reaction to an overambitious view of what the United States could accomplish globally, especially in terms of rebuilding countries and trying to make them liberal democracies where they were completely resistant, and that this is a response to that, a correction to that, because you see that with the popularity of Senator Sanders as well, and even Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, even the degree of popularity that she has and some of these other candidates... Even Vice President Biden is changing kind of the way he talks a little bit about what America's ambitions should be like abroad.

Of course, we all I think America is, I think we are the world's leader in so many different ways, but what does leadership look like then, especially democracy and human rights? Is there a lesson to be learned in what we've tried to accomplish in Afghanistan and even Iraq? How can we more prudently consider those things that we care so deeply about, but that we're realistic about it and still putting first and foremost the safety and security of the American people?

Michèle Flournoy:

I think this is a key question that we need to do some serious lessons, well, in thinking. As Americans, we love to just move on and put a bad experience in our rear-view mirror, and we're onto the next thing. I think what we need to understand that military intervention is not a great way to establish democracy, and countries that have no experience of it, no civil society sort of readiness for it, and so forth.

I think this question of how do we assess our partners realistically, how do we assess the environment? How do we moderate the ambition of our aims to be realistic and appropriate to what's possible? These are all questions that we need to grapple with as we think about future uses of the military. Actually, Vice President Biden, at the time, he was criticized for advocating for a more limited counter-terrorism approach in Afghanistan as opposed to the broader counterinsurgency that was undertaken.

I think a lot of people are now coming around to that position in terms of, should we have had more limited objectives in Afghanistan that really focused on just preventing the terrorist threat as opposed to trying to transform the society?

I think that's a worthy debate to have, I hope we have it, but I also hope that we don't just cut and run. I think we've seen that, that doesn't work; didn't work in Iraq, hasn't worked... we were at risk of doing the same thing in Syria. We certainly don't want to do that in Afghanistan. We want to reduce our commitment, but we want to do it in a way that's smart and that safeguards our interests in the process.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

I've been chewing on this particular subject and I'm reading Secretary Gates's autobiography. These questions, he was grappling with these, and really the Congress was getting really tired of it and not feeling comfortable allocating the resources that the effort needed in Afghanistan

and Iraq because they were already very, very frustrated with the lack of political process, and as you mentioned, the societal problems there, just the infrastructure, the societal infrastructure not being there to actually have a lasting sovereign government there. Really, it was even early on in the Bush administration's term where you could see the scope of what we were trying to do growing even though it was supposed to just be a counterterrorism operation at that point.

Michèle Flournoy:

You can't underestimate the impact that Iraq had on Afghanistan. We were two years into this Afghanistan project, and by a lot of accounts sort of achieving our more limited objectives and getting to a better place, but when the administration chose to go into Iraq, all resources, bandwidth, attention, focus all shifted to Iraq and Afghanistan became a back burner sort of the economy of force mission. I think that, that was the point where we really lost the opportunity to get to some reasonable outcome in Afghanistan much sooner. The whole question of how you manage multiple priorities and allocate and manage risk, I think that is worth examining as well.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

Well, just in closing here, I've got one question that came in that said, wanted to fact-check me saying that the Congress did appropriate more funds for the CDC even beyond what the administration requested for, so that has been up. I laughed. I thought "Did Mitch McConnell send that fact-check?" We wanted to get that on the record that the funding has actually gone up even as the request from the administration has gone down. One last point I wanted to make was that, I really do hope that this coronavirus episode, I hope that we end it quickly and that we can take care of the American people well and that we don't see the worst case scenarios or even anywhere near that, that some people are projecting.

From a foreign policy perspective, it does seem to me like this should be a big lesson learned that Belt and Road is not something that other countries should invest in. I think we'll learn after this is all done how much Italy's cooperation with the Chinese affected how badly they've been hit I think in all of this. I think that we need to take advantage of other opportunities for the United States to step up and say, "We are the better partner to cooperate with and count on." It's not the Chinese, and it's because of the nature of Xi's government in this great power competition that we're in the middle of, we need to do a better job of making it clear that we are the ones that you can count on and that the Chinese are not only not trustworthy, but bad for your health in so many ways, I think.

Michèle Flournoy:

I think we need a United States answer to Belt and Road, and it's not going to look like Belt and Road. It has to be based on a strategic assessment of, which of these Chinese activities do we really care about and, fine, go spend your money there. We really don't care. It doesn't affect us, doesn't worry us, it's fine. For the ones that matter, as in the space where we want to compete, I think we need to think asymmetrically and say, "Okay, China, go build your bridge or your soccer stadium," whatever, "but we're going to lay cable and bring the internet to this country." Or, "We're going to make sure this country understands how to let contracts so that it's not a crap process," that they don't become deeply indebted to China for modest results.

I think we need to compete, but it's not symmetric. It's not everywhere. We have to kind of pick where we want to do it and how. I don't know if this is kosher or not to sort of advertise another think tank's work. CNAS has just done a great study suggesting what should the American response to Belt and Road look like? I'd refer people to the CNAS report. I'm sure you all have done some good thinking on that too.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

Yeah. We've got a landing page for all the work that Hudson Institute is doing right now on COVID in particular, and what sort of lessons we can already start to learn from this experience. Please go there, you can go to Hudson Institute's website to see all the work that we're doing [at www.hudson.org/coronavirus].

I just want to thank you so much for making sure that we made this happen. Hopefully, those who are watching have some things to think about. I love the spirit of patriotism and civility and goodwill. I hope that we can come up with some of these solutions moving forward for the country. Everybody should stay well at home, stay in your house. Certainly praying for a safe and quick end to this pandemic. Thanks again so much Under Secretary Flournoy for your finesse and then also for your time with us this morning. Thank you.

Michèle Flournoy:

Thank you and thank you for hosting and putting this together. Everyone, stay healthy and safe. Prayers and thoughts to everybody.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

Thank you.

Michèle Flournoy:

All right, bye. Bye.