

Foundation for Defense of Democracies  
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Conversation with Representative Mac Thornberry

Speakers:

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Moderated by: Bradley Bowman, Senior Director, FDD's Center on Military and Political Power*

BOWMAN: All right. Well, good morning. My name is Brad Bowman. Senior director of the FDD's new Center on Military and Political Power.

I want to join Mark and H.R. in welcoming everyone here today and everyone who's watching online. Thank you all for joining us for our conference. And most of all, I want to welcome Congressman Mac Thornberry for being here.

Sir, thank you.

The congressman is a fifth-generation Texan and a lifelong resident of Texas' 13th District. While he represents his constituents and neighbors in the 13th District exceptionally well, he is also one of our nation's most effective, credible and serious leaders on national security. The primary means by which he exercises that leadership is on his -- is on the important and powerful House Armed Services Committee. He has served as the senior Republican on that committee since 2015, first as chairman and now ranking member.

The U.S. Senate, with its byzantine rules and sometimes less than rapid processing of legislation, is a common object of frustration, as I understand it, in the House of Representatives. But despite this occasional tension between the two chambers, the two sides have held -- Ranking Member Thornberry is viewed on both sides of the Hill and in both chambers as someone who does his national security homework, knows the issues and speaks with authority.

He is an unapologetic advocate for American leadership, international engagement and military strength. I can't think of a better individual with whom to have a conversation as we formally launch FDD's new Center on Military and Political Power. Welcome, sir.

THORNBERRY: Thank you.

BOWMAN: Thank you for being here. If it sounds OK, sir, I thought maybe we could start our conversation kind of general and then get more specific.

I've noted that in recent months and -- and in -- in the last few weeks, you've been speaking about what you called the 70-year consensus. If you wouldn't mind, what is the 70-year consensus? Is it under threat and what should we do about it?

THORNBERRY: Yes. First, congratulations on the new center. And -- and part of the answer to your question, I think, reveals the importance of having a serious, deep thought and -- and suggestions on national security issues. I -- I am concerned that too much -- especially today with all of this information coming at us at -- at constantly a blinding speed, we may miss the forest for the trees.

And the forest I'm talking about are -- is the remarkable decisions that the United States made after World War II, to be engaged in the world and to have the strongest military in the world. It ran counter to our culture, counter to our history, counter to our geography and, yet, the horror of World War II caused us to do things that were not in our nature.

And if you step back, again, looking at the forest, the last 70 years have -- have been no cakewalk. But it has been the most remarkable period of human progress ever, arguably. And now, you have revisionist powers like Russia, China, of course, who want to tilt the playing field in their direction.

And -- and most importantly, you have debates in both political parties here at home about those two decisions; about whether we ought to stay engaged in the world, about whether we ought to continue to have the strongest military, or why don't we just let other people take it? And I am concerned that many of the American people do not appreciate how their daily life is better and safer because of this bipartisan consensus that's existed for 70 years and that it is more under threat today than it has ever been.

So, that's part of the reason I'm getting out of Washington and -- and going to visit with some folks who don't necessarily follow national security day-by-day to try to remind them of what we've done but also about how their business, their life is better because of it. And encourage them to participate in deciding whether we stick with these two decisions because that's where it will be made, not in Washington but in the country.

BOWMAN: Thank you, sir. If one -- one might argue that if we're going to successfully defend this international order that Americans helped create and that we have been the primary beneficiaries of, there's going to really have to be a pivotal role in Congress, as you know far better than me. If you wouldn't mind, can you speak to the level of national security interest and expertise that you see currently, including among more junior members, and how that's important to defending the interests you've discussed?

THORNBERRY: Well, the first thing is, in the last -- especially the last two, maybe last three elections, we've had some remarkable younger members, many of whom have served in the military, served in the administrations, who have come into Congress.

And it has been a welcome shot of not only expertise, but of commitment to not getting defined by parties but by trying to do the right thing for national security. And I realize we have more of them on Armed Services Committee probably than most, so I'm -- I'm seeing the best of the best but it is very encouraging.

The flip side is I am concerned that we all face a world which national strategy commission, everybody else, says we face more complex security threats now than at any point in our history. And so, if you don't come with that sort of background we don't do a very good job of helping newer members of Congress understand those threats.

We don't -- I was talking even last night with some freshman members. We don't even help members understand that, with their election certificate, comes a security clearance, and here's what the responsibilities and -- and duties and -- that go with that are. So, I think internally in Congress, we need to do a better job of preparing members, especially newly elected members for that part of their responsibility that is beyond the experience of many of them.

BOWMAN: Thank you, sir. How do you think the broader think tank community in Washington can support that effort more effectively?

THORNBERRY: It makes a big difference. I mean, there is tremendous work that goes on all around -- all around the city.

But if -- if you're a new member of Congress, you're trying to figure out how to hire staff, about what the next vote is, about all the people beating down your door for 15-minute meetings who want something or, you know. And so, the real challenge -- and we all face this to some extent in our daily lives -- is carving out time so that you can focus more deeply on something that really matters.

And -- and it's really hard for new members, it's hard for old members and -- and, yet, that's part of the reason, I'm afraid, that just the busyness of our daily life, aided and abetted by social media, is -- poses the danger of us forgetting what's really important and the bigger, longer-term things.

And so, that goes back to what we were talking about a while ago but it -- but I see it every day in -- in Congress.

BOWMAN: You mentioned the National Defense Strategy Commission and I believe you appointed two members to that commission. It was co-chaired by, as we know, by Eric Edelman and Admiral Roughead. That was our first event at CMPP, with both of those gentlemen.

THORNBERRY: Yes.

BOWMAN: And as you know far better than me, the National Defense Strategy of 2018 really focused on the great power competition that we're in with China and Russia.

I'd be interested in your thoughts on where we're at with that competition with China and Russia. How serious is the threat and how is the Department of Defense doing in adjusting to this -- this dynamic and serious competition that we have with China and Russia?

THORNBERRY: Well, I think the threat is very serious. And by threat, I mean each of them, in their own way, want to weaken and undermine the United States and promote their own interests, which usually come at the expense of the United States.

And -- and again, this is not just about where there may be bases or something. These are the sorts of things that ultimately go to the quality of daily life for Americans and for people around the world. And I think folks like me need to do a better job of helping American people who don't follow it every day understand that.

So, I think the -- the -- the new National Security Strategy is definitely on the right track. It -- and -- and I think the Department of Defense is doing pretty well in shifting priorities in order to implement the strategy; it's not perfect but I think they're doing pretty well.

The challenge is as, you know, Easter Sunday reminds us, it's not like you can quit worrying about terrorism...

BOWMAN: That's right.

THORNBERRY: ...in order to do this. We have to -- have to do it all.

The challenge also is that -- one of the challenges is that if President Xi says, "I want a counter-space capability, I want hypersonics, I want artificial intelligence," it happens. Or they - they move out and they do it.

In the United States, we have more challenges. We have at least one company that says, "No, we don't -- we're too good to do business with the Department of Defense. We may benefit from all that it provides us but we don't really want to business with you."

And -- and -- and much of our innovation occurs in the private sector. And yet, we have a DOD bureaucracy that's notoriously difficult to do business with, especially for small- and medium-sized companies.

So when it comes to great power competition and the innovation that's required to meet the challenges posed by Russia, China and others, we've got some internal reforms to do to improve our position and to take advantage of the tremendous innovation that -- that goes on in this country. And that's what we've been working on for the last few years.

BOWMAN: I think of strategy as the coordination of ends, ways, and means. And I think -- my sense, with deference to you, is that the National Defense Strategy did a good job at establishing the ends or the objectives.

Express -- the National Defense Strategy Commission expressed some concerns about the operational concepts to achieve those objectives. And then the means will ultimately be the Article I branch of government. And you've been outspoken on the level of top-line funding that is necessary to fund the National Defense Strategy.

At what point do you believe that the Department of Defense would not be able to implement the National Defense Strategy in terms of a top-line number?

THORNBERRY: Well, I take -- I have used Secretary Mattis' and General Dunford's repeated testimony before Congress. That, three to five percent real growth in the Defense top-line is the minimum required to prevent losing further ground...

BOWMAN: Real growth.

THORNBERRY: Real growth. It is the minimum to prevent losing further ground to Russia, China in some key areas. So that's -- that's the benchmark that I have been relying on. And -- and even that requires us to be more efficient within the Department of Defense to get more value for the taxpayer dollars. And that's part of the acquisition reform that we've been working on, the -- the past few years.

So even if -- if you could -- if I could snap my fingers and get three percent real growth for the next 10 years, it doesn't mean everything is solved. It's just a minimum top-line that is necessary in order to have the chance to take advantage of the innovation and -- and the -- use the force structure and so forth needed for this great power competition.

BOWMAN: How would you respond to an American that says we're spending too much on defense already?

THORNBERRY: I would say, number one -- most people don't know this -- it is -- we spend 15, 15 percent of the federal budget on defense. It's about 3.2 percent of our national gross domestic product, which, except for a couple of years before 9/11, is the lowest it has been since the end of World War II. So if you look historically, we are at or near historic lows in how much we spend to -- to defend the country.

And -- and -- and again, that's part of the reason I think it's so important for me, and -- and hopefully others, to go out into the country and say, look, it's not just about moving ships around and it's not even just about preventing terrorist attacks here at home. It's also about whether you can make sure that -- that global commerce occurs. It -- it -- it has direct effect on your daily and -- daily life and quality of life here at home.

And all in all, it's a pretty good deal. So not only is it 15 percent of the federal budget it's less than 1 percent of the people in the country, who serve in the military and help safeguard the rest of us.

BOWMAN: Speaking of cost and what we can afford, you've also been outspoken and the recent strategy documents have emphasized the importance of nuclear modernization in our triad and nuclear deterrents. How would you respond to someone who says we can't afford to modernize our nuclear triad and the associated command and control structure?

THORNBERRY: Well, I hate to confuse people with numbers but at no point does nuclear modernization -- including the weapons themselves, which is a part of the Department of

Energy -- require more than seven percent of our defense budget throughout the whole period that it -- that it is required to modernize them.

And in -- in some ways, we have been coasting off of the military buildup of the Reagan years. And unfortunately, we've been coasting so that the bills to modernize those systems are coming due at the same time.

And yet, you know, step back 70 years. There has not been a nuclear weapon used in war since Nagasaki. Now, is that a track record that you are confident enough to -- to walk away from? I'm not.

And as I see what's happening around the world with nuclear modernization that is going on with Russians, Chinese and -- and the, obviously, North Koreans and potentially others as you all were just talking about. I want to make sure that we have a strong enough deterrent so that no country or no entity thinks that they can blackmail us.

BOWMAN: Chris Brose, Chairman McCain's former staff director, whom you know well, recently posted an article on *Foreign Affairs* that a lot of people are talking about that makes several arguments, one of which is basically we're buying the wrong stuff.

So you -- you've been a leader on making sure the Department of Defense has the -- the sufficient resources, but there's also the question about the program of record and how they spend those resources.

I don't know if you've had a chance to read that article, but interested in your thoughts, in terms of are we spending too much money on a few multibillion dollar targets that the Chinese and Russians are going to target with million-dollar mass attacks?

THORNBERRY: Yea. No, I -- I think the thrust of Chris' argument is exactly right, and we talk about it, for example, in space, a few billion-dollar satellites in -- provide inviting targets and a sort of dependency that increases our vulnerabilities, what we need is more lower cost distributed sorts of system, and that's true in every domain that we fight.

I -- I think the challenge I have with -- with his argument is that it assumes you can quit doing this while you go to -- to these new, more distributed systems. You know, we -- we probably all use the metaphor -- overuse the metaphor about changing the engine of the plane when it's in flight, and yet that's kind of what he's -- seems to be asking us to do.

So you know, back to what we were talking about a while ago, the challenge of our time is that we have all of these national security threats all at the same time, and we don't really have the luxury to say, "No, I'm not going to worry about that anymore." We have to worry about it all.

So I think he's absolutely right, we need to be moving in this direction. The question is how quickly and how precipitously you can stop doing this so you can do this?

Again, I -- I think it supports my argument that we've got to have -- make sure we have the resources to -- to invest in the future while we make sure that what we have in the present, the planes, the ships and so forth, are adequately maintained so that we are providing the men and women who are risking their lives for us the best that this country can offer right now as well as in the future.

BOWMAN: There seems to be no doubt that we face a severe great power competition, as you've laid out, with China and Russia, but as you -- as you've also suggested, we face a continued Jihadist Islamist terrorist threat. And there's a suggestion that we're just going to kind of "make do" in the Middle East. And I -- I wonder if we're only one mass casualty attack away from some of those basic assumptions being challenged.

How do we effectively compete against China and Russia, but also protect our core national security interests in the Middle East? How do we do both of those things?

THORNBERRY: We have to. I -- I think that was -- that was one of the misconceptions, and -- and some of the Obama Administration people will argue -- but -- but the idea, at least at the beginning, was a pivot to Asia, and -- and the idea was you would pivot away from the Middle East towards greater resources, but -- but for some reason the Middle East keeps drawing you back in, and -- and -- and does not allow you to pivot away.

So we absolutely have to have greater attention focused on Asia, and a majority of our military resources are there today, but we can not turn away from the Middle East, as, you know, the events we read about in the paper today keep -- keep reminding us.

So -- so again, that's -- that's -- that's part of the challenge of our time, you -- the world is too dangerous for -- for us to say, "I'm not going to worry about that anymore," because what we choose not to worry about is exactly the thing that will jump up and -- and bite us.

And -- and make no mistake, as we go along the way, it's not just Russia, China, but as we've seen in the last week, Iran and North Korea are testing us all the time to see what they can get away with, to see what our reaction is, to see whether we have the will to stand up against them. And -- and that testing, in whatever part of the world, is -- is going to help determine what sort of world we live in.

BOWMAN: Last year Congress passed the Defense Authorization and Defense Appropriation on time, before the beginning of the fiscal year, I believe in what a -- the first time in a decade, if I'm not mistaken.

THORNBERRY: In a little bit longer, yes.

BOWMAN: In a long time -- too long. Do you think Congress is going to be able to do that again, and how important is it that they pass the Authorization Appropriations on time?

THORNBERRY: It makes a tremendous difference. Everybody from the secretary to a plant manager of a subcontractor will tell you that having actually 12 months of funding that you

knew was there enables them to be tremendously more efficient, get much more productivity and -- and more value for the taxpayer dollars. So it makes a big, big difference.

We can do it again. It's not that hard. We had both parties agree that the 20 percent cut on the defense budget from 2010 to 2017 was too much and it hurt our service members. So we -- we -- we were able to turn the corner, and -- and again, I think the -- the testimony, which really hadn't been contested of 3 to 5 percent real growth is something that you could -- you can easily get both parties to agree to. You would probably have to put that with more domestic spending than I would prefer, but I'm willing to make that trade for the -- for the country's national security.

The danger is if extraneous issues get tied in, and -- so, I don't know, there's some political jockeying going on. I'd say the good news is there is a forcing function, which is the debt limit, which has to be acted on, probably -- most likely before the end of the fiscal year.

So I think we do have a real opportunity for a 2-year cap deal, a decent defense number again, and that will do as much as anything, not only in substantively rebuilding and -- and helping prepare for the future, but sending a message to our adversaries that we're going to stand up and defend ourselves. And we're not going to get gridlocked in a way that you can take advantage of.

BOWMAN: Lastly from me -- the ranking member has graciously agreed to take a few questions, but the last question from me is, what are the one or two -- as ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee, what are your one or two top priorities for this year's defense bill that you're particularly focused on trying to achieve and -- and push through Congress successfully?

THORNBERRY: I -- I think we've hit on them. Number one, you need a decent top line on time. Number two, I think we continue to need to make it easier for a -- for all sorts of companies to do business with the Department of Defense, but especially the small and mid-size companies that are just excluded too -- too much.

So next week I'm going to introduce a discussion draft of acquisition reform for this year. I've done that each of the last 4 years, and I solicit feedback on what people think is good, bad or ugly in it, and then we'll -- we'll try to continue to reform the department in a way that will improve our innovation, but also get more value for the taxpayers.

BOWMAN: And simultaneously try to hopefully catalyze and secure our National Security Innovation Base against some of the challenges we've seen from China so far?

THORNBERRY: Yes.

BOWMAN: Well, thank you sir. All right. Questions from the audience. I'll look to -- look to Erin to -- wait for the mike please. If you wouldn't mind telling us your name and affiliation please? Thank you.



QUESTION: Certainly Farhad Pouladi with the Voice of America Persian Service. My question is in regards to the 1-year anniversary of the President Trump Administration exiting JCPOA. We just heard National Security Council member talking about a desirable deal with Iran.

What it -- makes a desirable deal that makes it a treaty that is -- that could be ratified in Congress -- what -- what would the -- elements would be in regards to enrichment and in Iran's ballistic missile program?

THORNBERRY: Well, I can't list for you -- I'm -- I'm not a treaty negotiator.

But what I would say is the concerns with the additional -- with the original JCPOA were that it made it too easy for Iran to rekindle its nuclear program. That it did nothing on its missile program. And it did nothing on its nefarious activities around the region.

So I overheard Tim say if Iran chooses to act like a normal country, we will treat it like a normal country. And I think that's a good summary of -- of what could easily be verified.

The only other point I'd make is verification is very important. You know, back to President Reagan, trust but verify. And I think having the ability to make sure that if Iran promises to do something, they are actually doing it. And there's not something else going on underneath the table, I think that's an important element too.

BOWMAN: Thank you. Another question? Sir, you were talking about continuing to address the Islamist Jihadist threat. What are the implications of what you said for our Afghanistan policy? Obviously, the administration's in the midst of negotiations right now.

What do you -- another way to put the question, what might be the consequences in your mind of a premature calendar-based withdrawal from Afghanistan?

THORNBERRY: We have seen what happens from a premature withdrawal from an area where there are terrorist organizations. And -- and the consequences are that a even more dangerous terrorist organization can spring up as a result.

We saw that in Iraq and Syria. There are a number of terrorist organizations -- active terrorist organizations -- that have a presence in Afghanistan today. And so a premature withdrawal, when the Afghans are not able to secure their territory themselves, would pose a significant danger again to us.

You know, this -- this gets to, kind of, part of what we were talking about at the very beginning. A survey last fall found that 60 percent of the American people did not know who we fought in World War II, who the enemy was. Sixteen percent of the House and 18 percent of the Senate were not in office on 9/11.

BOWMAN: That's right.

THORNBERRY: So I mentioned we've got some outstanding people who have been on the forefront on the fight against terrorists who have come into Congress, and that has been tremendous.

But I can tell a difference between the folks who may not have been here, may not appreciate the tough decisions, the sacrifice, all that's gone into the last 18 years of preventing a second 9/11.

And -- and so I just think you've got to step back and reflect a little on history and what has happened before you take precipitous action like a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, because the danger is we would face a similar sort of situation again.

BOWMAN: General McMaster mentioned in his remarks consolidating military gains. You know, there's no military force better in the world than the United States. But sometimes -- often we struggle with what comes next, and consolidating those military gains with all tools of American power.

Do you agree that there's work to be done in that area and how do we -- how do we achieve that? How do we get better at consolidating those military gains?

THORNBERRY: Yea, I think there's tremendous work to be done in that area. I often get asked about whether I support the administration's proposed cuts at the State Department, and foreign aid and so forth, and -- and I don't. That is an important tool of American power. But at the same time, those tools need to be updated and reformed so that we get better value of them.

And -- and I think -- I'm just reading a book now by Michael O'Hanlon that -- about how we need to have better use of economic sanctions as a tool for national security. We're too siloed in -- in different areas. And so rather -- it is hard for us to have this kind of overarching strategy to -- to deal with a particular problem, it's -- it's not hard at all for Xi or Putin to do that.

So we've got to overcome -- I mean, and we're not going to be like them, we shouldn't be -- but we need to overcome some of the rigidity in our system so that these other tools are more available and more effective and we don't have to look to the military to do everything.

BOWMAN: Thank you. A question from the audience? Yes, sir.

QUESTION: Yes, Chairman Thornberry -- excuse me, Ranking Member Thornberry now, Jameson Cunningham with Americans for a Free Syria.

Thank you for your comments about economic sanctions, the -- the need to be engaged in the Middle East as well as the need to respond when our adversaries test us. And I think that's happening right now in the northwest of Syria regarding Assad regime and Russian aerial attacks on civilians in the northwest.

And so I -- you know, there's a ceasefire that President Trump tweeted about six months ago that, sort of, his tweet said we can't have a humanitarian catastrophe there. And a ceasefire

was reached, which is now being violated. There's been bombing of hospitals over the past week and a massive movement of civilians.

So I guess, my question is related to economic sanctions. There's a bill H.R. 31, the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which is widely bipartisan, the president has asked for it, both chambers have asked for it. It's been, sort of, a victim of its own success, being attached to other, unrelated provisions.

So I guess the question is, as you consider NDAA, is that something that might be worth including to ensure that the Assad regime's war-making ability and the war-making ability of -- excuse me, Russia and Iran is -- is -- is stifled in the northwest and throughout the -- the country?

THORNBERRY: Yea. I think we definitely ought to look at it. In order to attach something like that to the NDAA, we have to have the approval of the committee of jurisdiction, which may come or may not come.

But just to highlight that example for -- for just a second, there are a fair number of things that most everybody agrees we ought to do. And yet, for some reason, legislatively they keep getting all balled up in some things about which there is disagreement. And -- and I think if there was a willingness to -- to accomplish some things, rather than just throw spitballs at each other, there could be some real progress in a number of areas, especially in national security.

And I hope we do better because I think most of us did not go through all the things that are associated with an election campaign to sit around and throw spitballs at each other.

BOWMAN: Great. Well, please join me in thanking the ranking member for being here today. And...

(APPLAUSE)

BOWMAN: ...it's been a real honor to have you, sir, thank you so much.

THORNBERRY: Thank you.

BOWMAN: We're going to go on to have a brief break, I believe -- Erin? And then we'll start with our next panel.

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