



Defense Orientation Conference Association

POST CONFERENCE NOTES

Virtual Conference - Friday, November 20, 2020

Post-Election Update and Impacts on National Security

Post Conference Report

(All presentations were UNCLASSIFIED)

This post-election update was prepared to update DOCA members on the impact a new administration can have on national security, other interests, and foreign affairs. Speakers presented unique perspectives regarding potential impacts on national security issues that the nation can expect in the months following the presidential election of 2020.

“Transition Challenges”

The first presenter, a veteran of presidential transitions, worked on his first campaign and transition in the 2000 election when President Bush was elected. He described his experiences with transition vetting of nominees for all the key positions. In need of a quicker process, they would first eliminate anyone who was an unknown to the team in the room, underscoring that networking and familiarity were more important than actual qualifications during this first phase. He mentioned how these processes show just how separated the *elite* class is from the rest of the country. In his experience, this was how it was for all political transitions, from either political party, until the Trump administration transition.

Transition challenges come with any new elected President. The speaker gave his perspective into the 2020 transition environment, and opined on when an official declaration of the president elect should be made. He worked to maintain political balance, but was not shy regarding his support of President Trump and his administration. At the time of the conference, he stated that Biden’s team was debating about the priorities and key appointees that would shape the new administration. The battles over personnel can be bitter and can mirror “knife fights”, and he coined two phrases--“personnel is policy” and “money carries policy.” Typically, if appointed personnel do not carry trust and commitment to the President’s agenda, they will not be backed with financial priority. Therefore, at this stage of the transition, Biden’s team is focusing on ideology and policy priorities first. The speaker said that the “soul of an administration” is determined long before the swearing in of the President.

The discussion then turned to how it was for him becoming a political appointee. There is very little interaction with the incumbent team, even in a same party transition. As he mentioned earlier, he was interviewed by a senior leader who knew of him, and it was clear through the questioning that having the same ideological position as the new administration was far more important than his resume. He then gave some advice for any current or future member of a transition team working to fulfill presidential missions to hold closely one’s personal morals and maintain integrity. Though there will be someone willing to promise more money for support, he cautioned not to be swayed by these pressures.



The current events of Fall 2020 will certainly play a role in the transition, but not in the actual process. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic will impact how the next administration plans to move forward with solutions, precautions, and mandates. Military budget priorities and decisions will be deliberated, along with weapon modernization, readiness, and defense issues. He posed that a new administration would also be debating elements of the Green New Deal.

“Future of U.S. Military Budgets and International Relations”

Both panelists had participated in the “*Strategic Deterrence and National Security*” conference in June, so it was nice to have them back. Because one presenter has taught 21st Century deterrence, nuclear conflict, space, and cyber, he touched on these topics frequently and defined the greatest threats differently than most. In his eyes, the national debt is among the greatest threats to our security since it hinders the country from more efficiently rebuilding the military. The other presenter recognized throughout the presidential debates that foreign policy is touched on far less than domestic policy. Trump has always chosen to avoid coddling foreign dictators and made head way in Asia and the Middle East, but Western Europe relationships were strained. Biden’s administration has claimed that they will be “good to friends and stand up to enemies,” and has shown that there would be a major shift in Middle East policy. Both presenters know that having allies and good relationships makes for strong foreign relations and national security.

Speaking of major threats to the United States, it was pointed out that the states are not united and the polarization and misinformation can be extremely dangerous. This polarization impacts the country’s ability to hold a solid front against all of the other broadly defined threats-- foreign (nuclear capabilities, cyber threats, trade, etc.) and domestic (national deficit, the industrial base, rare earth metals, climate change, etc.). The other perspective was a little more optimistic, stating that the U.S. will continue to work through their processes to achieve more freedom at home and more influence overseas.

Regarding a new DoD budget, one presenter does not expect a drastic swing in most key areas. Radical changes are not possible without a Democratic majority in the Senate [although yet to be determined.] A new administration might fade peripheral weapon system programs and replenish foreign policies/allies, but major shifts are not anticipated. One challenge he mentioned could be the actions of the *former* President as he felt he will likely not stay quiet or stop influencing his current party.

The other panelist’s optimism was evident again when he said that the probable Biden administration and its foreign policy would look more traditional. Although a new administration could impact recent successes in the Middle East, the 2020 Middle East is not the 2015 Middle East, and Biden’s policies would need to reflect the current threats and agreements. The first presenter believes that the first call that Biden should make is to President Netanyahu to calm the waters. Proliferation is not always bad, but proliferation between Iran and Israel could be catastrophic. The hope is that a new administration would have a *supported* bipartisan approach to foreign policy.

Both panelists stated that China is a significant threat but that they have their challenges too. They encouraged starting conversations with *our* circles of influence about many key areas, including rare earth metal acquisition, reducing purchases from China, and encouraging STEM education. Decoupling from China presents a delicate challenge for the new administration.

Regarding nuclear deterrence, the speakers agreed there will continue to be political discussion about stopping GBSD, the land-based missile part of the Nuclear Triad. One believes there would be more of a decrease in the size of the new ICBMs verses program termination. If the land-based leg of the triad was eliminated, the U.S. would be vulnerable.



“Political Landscape, National and International Security Issues, with a Focus on Russia and China”

The Ambassador talked of the “world we are entering” and not the “world we are leaving.” Priorities lie in the robust effort of counterterrorism while simultaneously pivoting away from the Middle East to focus those efforts on the greater power environments of Russia and China. DOCA members heard that, “Our strongest weapon as a nation is our ability to work as a unified people.”

Some say that the U.S. is entering into a *Cold War* with China, but he disagreed and explained that the “war” with China is a fight between democracy and autocracy. Compared to the rest of the world’s economic decline, their economy is rising by a half of a percentage point a year, but they are not without their own internal struggle either. To not overplay or politicize their threat he encouraged DOCA members to “divorce themselves from the fiery rhetoric.” The real questions are:

- Will traditional values drive conversation with China (human rights, religious freedom)?
- What is the agenda for the 20th party congress, the 100-year anniversary of the Chinese Communist party?
- What is the U.S. de-escalation strategy against hostilities?
- What does the U.S. do if there is conflict over Taiwan?

He also talked about Russia and its immense size and modernized weapon capabilities. He thought that Putin, with his ministry, must enjoy watching the U.S. be so polarized. He thinks there is confirmation about Russian interference during the 2016 presidential election and other past elections in the U.S. and other countries. He feels Russia (and other countries) will continue to meddle with our elections because they have not been held accountable. Undoubtedly, Russia is analyzing the change of administration, for they are familiar with Joe Biden. Similar to the questions about China, the questions to approach Russia and their status are:

- How is the U.S. prepared to respond to Russia’s inevitable provocation?
- Who assesses and analyzes the sanctions in place? What could go beyond sanctions?
- Can the U.S. sit at a table with the Russian leadership and solve the built-up problems?
- Will the New Start deal, established for arms control, be renewed February 5th, 2021?
- Is there a way to have an economic relationship with Russia?

He also addressed the current political divide in the country, he approached the topic humbly by stating that though any President alone might be able to unite the country, it is within the homes across America that can make the strongest impact. The U.S. did not become a leader of the world because they were divided or angry, but because they had unified goals. Leadership abroad may be reflective of the nation’s interpersonal relations, but the relationships the country builds abroad correlate with the national interests. In 2020, the national interests have shifted to allowing prosperity from home but maintained the desire for a strong civil society, robust economy, and flourishing military.

Socialism has been mentioned often when referencing the far left of the Democratic Party. He explained that there has been a pattern of flirting with socialism that flares up when there is a needed alternative to a challenging issue. Socialism is yet to play out, but he thinks the recipe for success in the U.S. is with the free civil society built from The Constitution and not on the actions of socialism.