Both major change and desired continuity can be expected.

Beginning with perhaps the most historically significant change we expect to see in President-elect Biden’s defense and national security organizations, we believe that the Nation will see the first female serving as the Secretary of Defense. Given the number of highly-qualified women who are on the short-list of nominees, with former Obama-era Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy, former Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James, former National Security Advisor Susan Rice and U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-WA) reportedly on that list, the probability is significant that the Biden Administration will bring us the first woman serving in
that cabinet post.

As to the defense budget, after three years of increasing Pentagon budgets but despite the exploding federal debt and deficit resulting from the need to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, we do not expect a significant change in overall defense spending under President-elect Biden in the short term. The incoming Biden Administration has essentially stipulated that geopolitical threats have become more challenging or uncertain so as to make major cuts in the near term unwise. Just over the last few weeks, North Korea has reportedly made headway in developing its submarine-launched strategic nuclear ballistic missile capability. And, after Washington asked China to close its consulate in Houston and Beijing retaliated by shuttering the US consulate in Chengdu, China continues to take an aggressive territorial posture in the South China Sea. Cutting defense will be even tougher if the Senate remains in the hands of the Republicans and with the reduced Democratic majority in the House.

Over the intermediate to long term, however, we expect that the pressure the progressive wing of the Democratic Party will bring to bear to reduce defense spending, will be considerable. Interestingly, this could be a replay of the post-end of the Soviet Union period in the early 1990s, when Progressive Democrats and Republican deficit hawks aligned to pursue the so-called Peace Dividend. While the geopolitics of this moment are vastly different, the swollen deficit as the result of emergency pandemic spending could once again align political opponents.

Nonetheless, we expect a Biden Pentagon to take a hard, realistic look at extracting savings and efficiencies from how the Department of Defense does business. This is particularly likely if former Obama-era Deputy Chief Management Officer Peter Levine, who also performed the duties of the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, serves in a position of responsibility. Everything from the Department’s back-office operations to its major weapon systems programs will be on the table. Under such a review, both retiring legacy systems in favor of new technology solutions, and cancelling acquisition programs still in early development and without a congressional constituency or those that do not help the U.S. prepare for great power competition with Russia and China, would be fair game. Interestingly, the desire to look at legacy systems in this context—a not uncontroversial proposition—was originally identified by the House Armed Services Committee’s bipartisan Future of Defense Task Force 2020. This appears to suggest that, triangulating with a Biden national security apparatus, the defense and national security policy center of gravity on the Hill may shift discernably to that Committee under Chairman Adam Smith, from the Senate.

Furthermore, we believe that defense acquisition and contracting management in a Biden Pentagon, will continue to support commercial procurement policy and regulations, especially those that engender access and cooperation with the national security innovation base. Especially if Obama-era acquisitions chief Frank Kendall; former Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Alan Esteves; or Pentagon senior executive (and current CSIS director) Andrew Hunter, are appointed to relevant positions of responsibility, we expect that the Biden Administration will continue seeing as a priority expanding the Pentagon’s access to technologies being developed by commercial and non-traditional defense companies,
which do not depend on the Department’s cost-plus research and development funding for their leap-ahead advancements.

In one area, there is certainty of discontinuity—a Biden Administration will cease major defense funding for the completion of Trump’s border wall. While congressional Democrats might be open to approving modest funding for the repair and upkeep of border walls and fencing, they will likely insist (and President-elect Biden will likely agree) to end funding for the hundreds of additional miles of wall that Trump made a top issue during his 2016 campaign and throughout his presidency.

Over the last few weeks, President Trump has clearly leaned-in in trying to score some foreign policy wins, particularly regarding troop deployments and treaty negotiations, in the run-up to Election Day. This highlights an important distinction in the approach each principal has/will continue to take to defense and national security policy. Biden will take to these issues an articulable worldview, grounded in the National Security Strategy and the analyses that derive from it. In the execution of that view, we will likely see the restored use of traditional diplomatic tradecraft. This will be especially true if we see others (including some Republicans) mentioned for relevant senior positions of responsibility in a Biden Pentagon, State Department or National Security Council, including former Deputy Secretary of State Anthony Blinken; Ambassador Nicholas Burns; Clinton-era Secretary of the Navy Richard Danzig; Kori Schake with the American Enterprise Institute; former Secretary of State Clinton’s Deputy Chief of Staff and National Security Advisor to then-Vice President Biden Jake Sullivan; Obama-era Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Christine Wormuth; former Principal Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Kathleen Hicks, or Richard Fontaine, CEO of the Center for New American Studies, are in fact appointed. The Administration’s support for, and leveraging of, international institutions and valued alliances will likely make Biden’s national security policy positions (even if one disagrees with them per se) engender comity, stability and predictability—so important to the maintenance of the international political economy.

Against this backdrop, we expect that President-elect Biden will call for an immediate extension of the New START Treaty with Russia, as the current treaty expires about a month after he assumes office. Moreover, given the dearth of analysis supporting Trump’s proposed withdrawal of troops from Germany, we expect that Biden will order a pause of those plans to review their costs and military benefits. Also, depending if the Taliban ceases recent hostilities and meaningfully resume negotiations, Biden may suspend major troop movements out of Afghanistan, as well.

Also, having withdrawn from the Cold War-era Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Trump Administration has moved ahead with plans to develop a nuclear variant of its submarine-launched conventional Tomahawk cruise missile as a deterrent to Russia. However, as arms-control advocates have highlighted that nuclear-tipped cruise missiles can be especially destabilizing inasmuch as they cannot be distinguished from their conventional cruise missiles versions, we expect that President-elect Biden will put that program on hold.

Finally, on denuclearization, we expect that President-elect Biden will have the U.S.
re-enter the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) if Iran returns to compliance and will try negotiating with North Korea. The key difference from President Trump’s approach would be that in seeking to rein in North Korea’s ambitions the Biden Administration will involve other allies and partners, including South Korea, Japan, and China.

On climate change policy as it relates to defense and national security, we expect a significant change in rhetoric between what we have seen from President Trump and can expect from President-elect Biden. We say this because, while Trump has conveyed considerable skepticism about climate change, the Pentagon under his Administration has sought and supported efforts, including funding, needed to address the Department’s “energy and climate resilience” operational requirements. That trend line will continue under the Biden Administration. But, we expect that the Biden Administration’s rhetoric on this issue will underscore the need to prepare and protect bases from floods, storms and energy supply disruptions arguably caused by climate change more vividly and cite that risk in support of Biden’s broader policy priority on combating climate change.

By far the most significant area of policy continuity between the two Administrations will be the recognition that, while the US emerged from the Cold War with a substantial military lead over any potential rival, the US has not kept pace with China’s and Russia’s military modernization. The Biden Administration will share the Trump Administration’s understanding of China as the United States’ foremost strategic competitor and the need to prepare for great power competition, as prescribed under the most recent National Defense Strategy. While Russia’s strategic nuclear capability and its continuing efforts to undermine democracy worldwide makes it a more immediate national security threat to the US than China, systemic economic factors, if left uncorrected, will likely have Russia recede as a global power over the long run. However, as the ODNI has observed, China and Russia are more strategically aligned today than at any other time since the 1950s.

With this in mind, we expect to see the Biden Administration continue pursuing, if not expanding, the whole-of-government approach that the Trump Administration has taken to circumscribing Chinese global dominance and Russian malign activity—particularly in the area of technology and innovation, as advancements in artificial intelligence (AI)/machine learning (ML), biotech, quantum and advanced computing, space tech and cybersecurity, among others, are making traditional battlefields increasingly irrelevant. Specifically, we expect to continue seeing the combined and enhanced use of various economic instruments of national power, including, trade (sanctions) policy; export controls; post-FIRRMA CFIUS; access to capital (especially to commercial technology startups and technology research institutions); economic development assistance; export financing assistance; policies intended to address supply chain management risk (particularly cybersecurity risk); insourcing initiatives, including domestic content preferences, etc., to address this policy imperative. A review of not only the incoming Administration’s policy papers but also the composition of its landing team make clear that a Biden national security apparatus will share the Trump Administration’s appreciation of the US homeland’s vulnerability to adversaries improving their ability to wage cyberwarfare against civilian infrastructure, financial institutions, and healthcare facilities and the need to prioritize relevant defense capabilities within both the Department of Defense
and the private sector.

Another major policy area of continuity will be the Trump Administration’s insourcing initiative, which both Administrations believe will be necessary to support the U.S. manufacturing base in vitally important economic sectors such as microelectronics. Also continuing, if not strengthening, will be measures that started under President Obama’s Secretary of Defense Dr. Ash Carter, but carried forward in earnest by the current Administration, to support and harvest for military use commercially developed emerging technologies, principally artificial intelligence.

If then-Secretary Carter’s Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work serves in a position of responsibility, the possibility that the Biden Administration will be especially aggressive in this area will be high, as Work has served as Vice Chair of the National Security Commission on AI during the Trump Administration. In that capacity, Work has been at the forefront of policy issues regarding AI, calling for the U.S. to set aside one percent of the defense budget (around $7 billion annually) for AI projects and creating a private-public partnership among the Pentagon, academia, and the private sector specifically to compete with China’s civil-military fusion strategy.

Over the law few days, an ad hoc group of progressive lawmakers, non-defense think tanks and anti-war groups have raised concerns about President-elect Biden’s defense and national security landing team over its “nearly unanimous links” to top military contractors and have formally appealed the transition team “to recruit a more diversified group of national security thinkers” and “bring some more progressive voices in.” Over the next few weeks, we will consider carefully how the President-elect and his top advisors respond to those concerns, particularly in terms of populating its defense and national security landing team and its short lists for top defense and national security posts in the new Administration—and the policy implications of such responses.

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