

Mac Thornberry
U.S. Representative from the 13th District of Texas

Project for Media and National Security
George Washington University

Defense Writers Group

June 11, 2019

DWG: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thanks for coming. Congressman Thornberry, it's an honor to have you here. Thank you for coming, sir.

Mr. Thornberry, we had the Chairman here yesterday and obviously it's markup time so I suspect the questions will mostly be on that. But I'd actually like to ask you about the Budget Control Act of 2011. I guess the best way to put it would be to ask you what is your message to your fellow Republicans on the question of whether they should vote to raise spending caps on social programs as a tradeoff with the other party in order to get the kind of solid defense budget that you want? What would you say to other Republicans because we both know some of them are not sure they want to vote for that.

Congressman Thornberry: I would say the first job of the federal government is to defend the country and one of the major accomplishments of the last two years has been to begin to rebuild and repair our military after it was deeply damaged by sequestration. And that that overriding responsibility for us, especially in a divided Congress, means that if we are to fulfill our duties we're going to have to take some things that we don't necessarily like or want. But that's the way life is. Nobody gets things just the way you want them. The question is, what's your higher duty? And are you going to meet that higher responsibility, which I believe is defense

DWG: So you're advising for them to vote for what level of increase in social spending accounts?

Congressman Thornberry: Obviously in a negotiation nobody gets

Thornberry - 6/11/19

exactly what you want, and it's a negotiation. And you've seen that from the House Democrats' opening bid, if you will, on the appropriation bills that they are bringing to the Floor this week. But the Senate has something to say about that. The administration has something to say about that.

And I also, I guess, would make this point. Again, one of the major accomplishments addition to a growing economy, I would say, is strengthening our military of the last two years. And we have seen the consequences of cutting our military with readiness problems, accident rates, and all the rest. It's not like these are just numbers out on a spreadsheet. This is real life, life and death at stake with these decisions that we make. And the Constitution puts that responsibility on our shoulders. It doesn't say the Pentagon builds and maintains armies and navies. It says it's Congress' responsibility. So we have to step up to that responsibility.

As I look at this year's bill, the question is, for me, does this continue the gains we have made in rebuilding our military and in being in a competitive position with Russia/China? Does it continue to move us forward? Or does it slip back? We're talking about the bigger budget, weighing the good, the bad and the ugly. If I look at this year's NDAA or this year's appropriation bill, it's weighing the good and the bad but as a whole, does it move us forward or does it slip backwards on the progress we've made? And I think that's the criteria by which I and Republicans and I hope Democrats use to decide whether they're going to be for the bill or not.

DWG: Otto?

DWG: I keep wanting to call you Chairman.

Congressman Thornberry: I answer to all sorts of things.

DWG: There's a lot of things worse than that. [Laughter].

Last year you authorized buying two nuclear carriers, Ford Class

Thornberry - 6/11/19

carriers. We've got two under construction. Even the one that's out there, the Ford itself, can't deploy with F-35, it's not operatable. The Kennedy is not expected to be capable of operating the F-35 or spending money to build that new 5th generation aircraft, and yet we're building carriers that can't handle them.

Are you concerned at all about the way the Navy is handling that carrier program?

Congressman Thornberry: Of course. I think everybody is concerned about cost and delays in the carrier program as well as the difficulties they've had in making the new catapult work and so forth. We talked about this before. One of the, if you look back and diagnose why some big programs have gotten in trouble in the past, one of the key conclusions is you had to invent as you were building it. I think that applies to the carrier; it applies to the F-35. So one of the things that we have tried to change with acquisition reform in recent years is to encourage more prototypes and other things so that you actually build it, see that it works, before you commit to a program of operational units.

I don't want to get upon this too much yet, but you look at, for example, what the Army is doing for Future Vertical Lift. Building prototypes, making sure they fly, testing what their flight characteristics before they decide whether to buy a thousand of them. That's a more promising way. So we're still working through some of the effects of invent while you build.

DWG: I think there's provisions in the markup that would prevent the Navy from accepting the Kennedy if it's not F-35 qualified or capable. Is that something you would support?

Congressman Thornberry: Sometimes we need to put things in the bill to get their attention. But it is also true that our responsibility is to dig down deeper and look at okay, what exactly are the problems, are they solvable. Because, I'll just say, in recent weeks we have seen clear evidence of what a

Thornberry - 6/11/19

shortage of deployable aircraft carriers means for real world national security problems. And it was, when we had no carrier in the Persian Gulf or thereabouts, that this threat stream from Iran got everybody's attention.

You can look at the programs, I don't want to say in isolation, but as just the program, but then you also have to consider real-world consequences, and obviously we don't have enough aircraft carriers, and obviously they make a big difference when they are in the neighborhood.

DWG: Shawn Naylor.

DWG: Representative Smith yesterday was, I asked him about the elements in the markup that talk about Syria and getting more timely information from DoD on activities in Syria. He certainly left the impression that he felt that the Committee wasn't getting timely reports and maybe not all the information that it ought to be getting from the military on account of terrorism activities in Syria. Do you share his concerns in that regard?

Congressman Thornberry: I'm not sure what he was referring to. One of the things that we put in several years ago was a regular reporting requirement on counterterrorism activities, especially outside of, at that point, Iraq and Afghanistan, because it is true that terrorists have spread out to a variety of places. We have special operators and others trying to make their life difficult, and it is an oversight challenge when you have a number of activities going on in a variety of places, but we have to be as agile as the adversary.

So there is a requirement which the Pentagon, you know, part of it depends a little bit on personality. Sometimes you get more information than others, but generally they have been keeping with the law of quarterly CT briefings at a very classified level so that we can do our job in understanding what the enemy's doing, what we're doing to try to counter this.

I may be missing, there may be something that's not in my mind

Thornberry - 6/11/19

right now that he is specifically referring to, but generally, I think that has worked pretty well.

DWG: Ellen Oheiser.

DWG: It was interesting this morning to receive the email about [inaudible] submit to increase the top line, and that includes \$1.2 billion for personnel accounts, service member pay, retirement, housing allowances and so forth.

What elements of those are not sufficiently funded in the Chairman's mark?

Congressman Thornberry: Well, the Chairman's mark cut the request for the personnel accounts by about \$1.2 billion. So what I'm doing with this amendment is to restore the funds to the level requested. And if I can just emphasize, people talk about random numbers, 700, 733, 750. One of the things I wanted to make really clear was 750, which is right about three percent real growth, enables us to do very specific, concrete things that are important to national security, and that's why I laid out restoring, among them are restoring those personnel funds, putting money for FY20 for disaster funding, for Offutt, Tindall, Cherry Point, Camp Lejeune. Because the underlying mark has none for '20. Restore funding requests on hypersonics. Again, one of the things to be competitive with Russia, China. And y'all should have gotten the list of the specific things that are in, that my amendment allows us to do that the underlying mark does not allow us to do. It's specific, core military capability.

Just a couple more points on this. I really want to emphasize. Number one, virtually everything in here was either in the original administration budget request, or an unfunded requirement from the services.

Secondly, I stayed away from the most controversial stuff. There's no wall money and other lightning rods because I wanted it to be core military capability.

Thornberry - 6/11/19

Thirdly, in the course of the year we have worked across the aisle and we agreed that some of the administration requests either can't be spent well or didn't need to be -- so I didn't go back on any of that. Where we have agreed over the markup process to reduce the administration requests, I didn't put money back there. But this amendment that I have prepared and that y'all have, is directed to core military needs like the personnel accounts, disaster funding, hypersonics, the things I mentioned. And the rest is --

DWG: As a follow-up, yesterday in the meeting with the Chairman, he said that he went to 733 because that's the number that General Dunford and others have been talking for a while. And that he --

Congressman Thornberry: Sorry. I'll try not to react but I can't help it.

DWG: I'm looking for the answer to his argument that 733 has been the number everybody's been talking about and then suddenly he said 750 showed up in February.

Congressman Thornberry: I think that is certainly not my understanding. I know there are press reports about 733 back in November/December. There were press reports about 700. I was in the Oval Office with Senator Inhofe, the Vice President, the Chief of Staff, OMB Director, National Security Advisor, Secretary Mattis last December when the issue of an administration budget request was discussed. I think a number of us made the case that as General Dunford and Secretary Mattis did in the spring of 2017, that you've got to have three to five percent real growth just to not fall further behind with the Russians and the Chinese and to build our readiness.

And at the end of the day the President's decision was okay, we'll do three percent real growth. He likes round numbers, so that's how 750 got there. It's within a fraction of being three percent real growth. And that was the decision, that's what everybody moved out on, that was the administration request, that

Thornberry - 6/11/19

is the amount the Senate is marking to, and to go back -- and one other point on that. Also the National Commission on Defense Strategy, 12 Republicans and Democrats whose names y'all know well, endorsed that three to five percent real growth is what it takes.

But these are not just numbers. That's the reason on this amendment I didn't just increase the top line to 750. It is specific capabilities that that three percent real growth enables you to achieve, whether it's taking care of your people or more research on hypersonics. It's those specific, that's the difference between three percent real growth and less than that.

You go back and look at the testimony before our Committee since at least early 2017, both Secretaries of Defense, General Dunford and lots of other folks have said that's what we need. Three percent real growth. That's the request, and that's what my memo does.

DWG: Tony, Inside the Pentagon.

DWG: Thank you for being with us this morning.

If this amendment does not get through and you can't get the top line up, will you vote against the bill?

Congressman Thornberry: I think all Republican Members of the Committee, as I said earlier, are going to have to evaluate the good, the bad and the ugly in the bill. If you say no, we're not going to fund these things, that's a big deal.

DWG: Big enough to vote against it?

Congressman Thornberry: Well, we'll see. I'm not going to decide now because we've got a markup to go. We've got amendments to come and go. It may get better; it may get worse. We'll see. But I have been, I think, very open about my concerns about what I like in the bill and my concerns about the bill. We went out something to y'all so you could see. I've been very

Thornberry - 6/11/19

clear with Adam all along about where we were. I think without question, all Republican Members on the Committee want to vote yes on this bill. The question of whether we do is going to depend on that basic thing I said while ago, does this continue to move us forward, or does this take us backwards? And having seen the consequences, again, I can't emphasize enough what an impact the increased accident rates and other training problems had on Members. We are just not going to participate in moving us backwards on some of these key points.

DWG: Do you think your argument for an increase in funding has been undercut by the reprogramming controversy the Pentagon was able to find a few billion here or there to go build fences at the border and --

Congressman Thornberry: Not really. Y'all know this better than just about anybody. From the time they write the budget until the time they get the money to spend, a lot of time and events have taken place. So it is inevitable that there are going to be shifting needs of different priorities and that's what reprogramming has been able to allow us to adjust to. That's a terrible sentence.

I've told all of y'all, I think, I am concerned about a loss of flexibility on reprogramming because there is so much time between the time a budget is written and the world happens. But I don't think, you know, because there are changing events, because programs under-perform in certain ways, that does not undercut in any way that essential conclusion of the Secretaries, the Commission, and everybody that you've got to have at least three percent real growth just to keep from losing ground.

DWG: Tony Capaccio, Bloomberg.

DWG: Shift to an item, an issue that could undercut public support for defense spending. The Transdyne overcharge issue came up. It's noteworthy that it was Cummings' committee that had a hearing, the Armed Services Committee, by the way. What amendments would you support in order to give contracting

Thornberry - 6/11/19

officers greater authority to get cost and pricing data? That's one of the issues of the report.

Congressman Thornberry: I think in general the IG did a pretty good job of looking at this and in making recommendations of it. But it's also true that contracting officers have the authority now to get that contract and price data.

Again, I think we'll look back at some of the specific recommendations of the IG.

Can I just go broader for just a second on this issue? Because what has happened in the past is you get a bad actor and then Congress and/or the building comes up with a new law, a new regulation that puts additional requirements on everybody. And that's part of what has gummed up the acquisition process and made it harder to have competition over the years.

So I think we should look at tools to help go after the bad actors. I don't care if you spend one dollar or a trillion dollars in defense, there will be bad actors. But the key is, you need to be able to have the tools to go after those bad actors without punishing everybody and making it harder for people to do business with the Department of Defense.

So I think what the IG talked about was okay, if you've got a company that consistently refuses to provide cost and pricing data and gets into some questionable things, you really need to target them. I think that targeting of folks who are taking advantage of the system is the right approach for this.

I'll quit, because I'll bore you all with all my acquisition reform. Remember a couple of years ago, one of the things I put in acquisition reform was to develop more intellectual property expertise in the department, because a fundamental problem here is that we have not negotiated well for the intellectual property, especially of parts and repair, so that there is not enough competition for spare parts, especially of older stuff, and the repair work that needs to be done.

Thornberry - 6/11/19

I can't tell you how many companies have come to me, smaller, middle-sized companies over the years and said we just can't get in the door because the original manufacturer or somebody else has bought up all the intellectual property and that's what Transdyne did. They went around looking for the patent rights to specific parts that were essential to aircraft that there was no competition for.

DWG: That's their business model.

Congressman Thornberry: And they -- but my point is, you can't just treat the symptom. You need to treat the underlying problem here.

DWG: There's going to be amendments that give contracting officers greater authority to go after cost and pricing data. Would you support those kinds of amendments?

Congressman Thornberry: I'll look at it. They have that authority now.

DWG: The report's pretty clear that they don't.

Congressman Thornberry: Well, I think they do, but anyway, I will look. Again, one of the things, and I don't have the specifics in my head or before me, but I think the IG did a pretty good job of some of his recommendations and the way to go forward. But just emphasize, go after the people who are abusing the system. Be careful about adding new layers that reduce competition, that actually could make this whole thing worse. That's how we got corrosion reports for software. Some program officer did not do a very good job in making sure that there was not corrosion protection on some ships. So what do we do? We have a rule that everybody's got to have a corrosion report including everything that we buy.

So I don't want to slip backwards in that respect either, but I do want to go after the people who are abusing the system while

Thornberry - 6/11/19

dealing with the underlying cause which is really intellectual property and not enough competition.

DWG: Fair enough.

DWG: Laure Williams, Federal Computer Week.

DWG: Speaking of abusing the system, I want to talk about OTAs a little bit and what are some of the behaviors that you've seen that kind of have led to a provision that would put the [name tax] on them in the bill. Do you know what I'm talking about?

Congressman Thornberry: I've forgotten what is in the underlying -- I have in my, a month ago I introduced two bills, or released discretion drafts, and what I did in mine was required DoD to have a department-wide policy for some of these expedited authorities. I think that is important.

This is somewhat a similar thing. It is so long and cumbersome to go through the normal acquisition process that we have developed various work-arounds to try to go faster, you know, where there's an urgent need.

So it is important for us to have transparency and oversight of these other authorities, but I want to be careful about limiting them too much because that will send us back towards the 20 years to get an airplane sort of thing.

So I don't know off the top of my head the specific provision on OTAs that you're talking about, but as I look at some of the increased capability the department has been able to bring on-line in the last couple of years, OTAs and Section 804, other things, have played a key role in doing that.

DWG: Nick Shiffron, CBS.

DWG: Thanks very much for doing this, and I usually ask about China, but I want to go back on Syria actually, and I wanted to zoom out a bit.

Thornberry - 6/11/19

What is your understanding of the U.S. presence in Northern or Northeast Syria right now? And the strategy going forward in that area? And Idlib. This is something that a lot of us have focused on, what is going on there. The Russians and the Syrians resuming this absolute bombardment. The President did raise it recently after not raising it for a while, after raising it before. You know the [inaudible] there. How interested is the administration in trying to stop what is going on, and what do you think should be done to try and stop what's going on, if anything?

Congressman Thornberry: I'm not very well equipped to talk for the administration. I can't do that.

I will say why do we have a presence in Northeastern Syria? It is to have a presence and so that our allies will have a presence because they're not going to be there without us. That became very clear earlier this year. And part of that presence is they're to prevent an armed clash between Turkey and the Kurds. We are there to prevent the relatively large number of detainees from being released, of ISIS fighters from being released out into the wild. To also help the Syrian forces keep some pressure on ISIS. Because while they no longer control the territory that they once did, you know the concern about a continued presence in the region and a resurgence.

I do not have an answer. What can we do to go fix Idlib, the whole Syrian mess at this stage? I don't know what that answer is. A lot of this is trying to prevent things from getting worse, especially things that could affect us with terrorism. It's a little bit like sticking your fingers in the dike. And I think that's why a presence, significantly reduced, but a presence in the Northeastern part of Syria is important.

DWG: So if that presence is say for a few hundred, is that an indefinite presence?

Congressman Thornberry: I don't know. One thing we've learned,

Thornberry - 6/11/19

in my opinion, is you put a time limit on it, it's a mistake because that encourages your adversary. A second thing we learned, again this year, is that if we don't have a presence our allies are not going to be there either. They're only going to be there with us. And I think it's in the interest of the United States, Europe, most of the civilized world, that ISIS not be able to recapture its former territory and be able to launch attacks.

I can't tell you when we don't have to worry about ISIS anymore. I can't tell you when the Kurds and the Turks are going to lie down together, you know, the lion and the lamb. So --

DWG: That's all going to be a long --

Congressman Thornberry: Maybe, as we continue -- don't underestimate how -- there was a time when, before the, I keep getting the names wrong. Is it Syrian Democratic Forces? Before they existed when, it was pretty hard to see an option anywhere in Syria to attack ISIS. So I don't think we should underestimate how the success of developing that force to protect their own country has been. And so I don't know what's going to happen in the future. There may be other successes. There may be other setbacks. But a few Americans can make a big difference whether we're talking Syria, Africa, you know, wherever, in the counterterrorism environment.

DWG: David Welno, NPR.

DWG: Good morning. Thanks for doing this.

Your Chairman sent a letter to David Norquist denying his request for reprogramming money ultimately for building a wall. And the Pentagon, White House ignored that denial. Is it a concern to you? Has a rubicon been crossed that the Chairman would deny a reprogramming request and they go ahead anyway? How concerned are you about that?

Congressman Thornberry: I'm very concerned about it. We were

Thornberry - 6/11/19

just talking a few minutes ago about the importance of reprogramming as a tool to keep up with the events in the world. This reprogramming is a practice that goes back decades. So it is something, I don't know about a rubicon, but it is unprecedented in at least decades that the administration would choose to move ahead regardless.

I worry about that specific thing. I worry about the increased partisan polarization of decisions. If he's for it, I'm against it sort of thing. And where that leads us.

I hope that we can get past this and go back to some sort of reprogramming authority in this particular case, but that's going to require some rebuilding of trust. If we are not able to rebuilt trust in the institutions, regardless of we individuals who pass through them. If we can't have some sort of institutional working relationship, it is really going to hurt the country.

DWG: Jeff Seldon, EOA.

DWG: Thank you very much for doing this.

One of the [inaudible] oversight questions that came up a little bit earlier about Syria extended a little bit to Afghanistan. We asked the Chairman about this yesterday. But he expressed concerns about some of the data that's been available on Afghanistan which is the district control assessments which have been touted as a, as a benchmark for U.S. progress there. Now those have been dropped by Resolute Support. They're still being produced but they're classified. Do you have any concerns that so much data that used to be made public is now perhaps only available to a few, and other lawmakers in some of these highly classified briefings, and no longer available to the public. SIGAR in its report on Afghanistan earlier, a few months ago, raised significant concerns that a lot of this data was being, disappearing. And while it was clear to people on the ground in Afghanistan what was going on, the American people weren't being told the truth.

Thornberry - 6/11/19

Congressman Thornberry: I think it is one of the big challenges we face to have as much openness and transparency as possible without damaging the mission, without helping the adversaries. I mean it's something we struggle with. In cyber, in CT operations, just go down the line.

Yeah, I probably think that the Pentagon has tilted a little too much towards not releasing information. I disagree with what you said. I do not think that the measure of district control is the gold standard for whether we're winning or losing in Afghanistan. And as we have gotten into that or other measures, I think it is important to dig down deeper, where is the population, and try to understand how those measurements are reached. Are they really for the Taliban? Are they really two warlords who are fighting each other? You know, try to understand a little deeper. I do think that is part of our responsibility.

But I take the broader point that in a democracy we're going to have to put up with a little less efficiency to have the kind of openness and transparency that we need.

I understand it from the commander's standpoint, but I also understand it from a public standpoint as well.

DWG: Is there anything that you think should be done, whether it's Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, other U.S. military activities for counterterrorism around the world, that the Pentagon or the administration should start doing or at least start encouraging now to make, to shed some light on some of those deeper intricacies of what's going on? Help the public understand what its men and women, its sons and daughters, are doing and accomplishing overseas at this point? As opposed to the --

Congressman Thornberry: Well --

DWG: -- just becoming --

Congressman Thornberry: I do think you've got to engage with the

Thornberry - 6/11/19

public in these jobs. It's important to go out and continually explain and provide perspective on why are we in Afghanistan? And what is the status of things there? Or whatever country, or whatever engagement that you want.

So that is an important part of leadership. Part of it is our responsibility, given the insight that we have, and we can do that through hearings, we can do it through speeches and so forth, but it's also part of the administration's responsibility. That doesn't mean you have to give the enemy the information that gives them an advantage, but I do think public engagement on national security, even when the public is focused on other things, is important.

DWG: Should the Pentagon be doing more briefings than what they're doing?

Congressman Thornberry: I think they should. I think the whole administration should.

Of course I realize, I think, as I said at the beginning, national security is the most important thing the federal government does. We need to continually engage with the public on our national security needs, interests, threats, activities, without revealing so much information that we give the adversary an advantage. But yeah, that's part of our job?

DWG: Defense Daily.

DWG: Yesterday we heard from the Chairman that with regards to the content of the mark there was mostly agreement on pretty much everything except he said about the two percent specifically saying Guantanamo Bay provisions and the low-yield nuke. So I was wondering one, in terms of that split on [party lines], your thoughts on those two areas. And then does it extend beyond that two percent that he mentioned?

Congressman Thornberry: I don't know about two percent. If you look at subcommittee markups, five of the six went very smoothly,

Thornberry - 6/11/19

very low controversy. The sixth one, strat, strategic forces, had significant controversy.

Part of the reason I laid out here's some of the good in the bill, here's some of my concerns in the bill, is I wanted to put that out. Again, it's no surprise to the Chairman, but I wanted to be very open and clear about here are my concerns with the mark.

I can't tell you that that's two percent. The things I have concerns about including the top line, the strategic deterrent issues, GTMO, you know, going too far on some of the border restrictions, et cetera, I think they're significant. I didn't put in the list of my concerns little, you know, things that don't matter too much. I tried to list the things that matter significantly. And so I can't tell you what the percentage is, but hopefully we can help the bill get better tomorrow.

DWG: Air Force Magazine, Rachel Cohen.

DWG: Hi. So you brought up readiness issues and mishaps and the [inaudible] stuff we've been seeing over the last couple of years. There was another, I think it was an F-16 crash in California recently.

Do you think that the Air Force is doing enough to address the [inaudible] issues and getting after stuff like that? I know committees have put various provisions in the bills over the last few years. [UV] has set it's kind of 80 percent mission capable goal. Do you think that DoD is doing everything that it can to kind of get after that? And is there anything more that Congress can do, either oversight wise or to [inaudible] with that?

Congressman Thornberry: I would say number one, that the damage to our military readiness was far deeper and more extensive than I think anybody realized, including top Pentagon leadership or us. It's not just whether your plane is repaired and can fly, but it goes to training and a whole series of issues that we are still in the process of repairing. So I think that's number one.

Thornberry - 6/11/19

Secondly, I do think we're doing better. Even though somebody did a study and found accident rates were the highest in years and years last year, I do think we have begun to pull out of this downturn. But you look at it from the Air Force standpoint, they still have a significant pilot shortage. They've made significant process in the maintainer shortage that they had. But we're still flying planes that Ronald Reagan bought. You know?

With the best efforts, it still takes time to repair damage that's that deep and widespread.

Again, just back to what we were talking about while ago for just a second. Remember in real terms, starting in 2011, the military budget was cut 20 percent. In the last two years we've gone back up about 10 percent. So if we can have a 3 percent real growth this year we still haven't made up for where we were in 2011.

I think the Air Force, or planes, in some ways are the most visible manifestation of our readiness problem. So we've had a spate of vehicle [accidents] here recently.

Now I can't tell you it was lack of training or what the cause was, but I do think there's more focus somewhat on airplane crashes because when they go bad, it really is, they go bad. Navy, it was clearly training issues that led to the McCain and the, whatever the other ship was, accidents in the Pacific.

So I can't tell you they're doing everything that they should. I think they have taken it seriously, but it just takes time, effort and money to make up for damage that is that deep.

DWG: There was a lot of Space Force chatter yesterday, because of course there was. At this point, going into markup tomorrow, there's going to be an amendment that people have I guess kind of coalesced around you. How would you kind of characterize the enthusiasm in the Republican HASC caucus right now for that amendment? Are you guys on board with it? Is it --

Thornberry - 6/11/19

Congressman Thornberry: I think so. Remember, two years ago it was the House Armed Services Committee that proposed and put in place in our bill that passed the House a Space Corps. And again, this goes back, it doesn't just come out in markup. There were tons of briefings and hearings that laid out the trajectory of where we were with our adversaries in space. And to their credit, Cooper and Rogers together came to the conclusion we've got to do something different.

So I think the amendment that they have worked together on basically is what we did before with a few tweaks, and I think Republicans are supportive of that and, well, I'll quit there.

DWG: It sounds like the Chairman is more or less in favor of it.

Congressman Thornberry: I think he is. And he voted for it two years ago, as did I. We've been for it.

What I was about to say, I'll just go ahead and say it. The real challenge sometimes is okay, then the President came out for it. So can you still be for something if you're a Democrat and on the same side as the President? That's the challenge. Isn't that weird? You'd think something as good for the national security of the country and yet the impulses of partisanship are so strong that it's hard to stay with what you think is -- harder than it should be -- to stay with what's good for the country because of this partisan pull. I think it is to Adam Smith and Jim Cooper and all the other Democrats' credit that they thought it was a good idea then and they think it's a good idea now. We all need to stick with what's good for the country, regardless of who else is for it.

DWG: Congressional Quarterly.

DWG: I originally had a Space Force question, but I'm glad that you followed up.

We talked a lot about the Middle East, not a lot about China.

Thornberry - 6/11/19

Since my question on Space Force, this is kind of off the cuff, to kind of get your thoughts on it. The commentary basically has been that we're so kind of stuck in Middle East mode that it's, again, it's hard to get out into the Russia/China sphere. Do you think that this bill, that we're going the right direction?

Congressman Thornberry: Yeah. It's a good point. Really, this is the first bill that reflects the new National Security Strategy that puts a greater emphasis on peer competitors like Russia and China. And I do think when you look at where the money goes, where the priorities go, it's not perfect but it does reflect that. And part of the reason in my amendment, I put back money that was specifically cut for hypersonics, for unmanned surface vessels, for some of the 5G stuff is this competition with China and the realization that they are the pacing threat, maybe not in nukes but in everything else pretty much.

So yeah, I do think we have shifted and we have moved in that direction. But it's also true, Obama used to talk about a pivot to Asia. Well, it turns out the Middle East does not allow you to pivot away from them. They keep, something happens that keeps drawing you back in, and that's the big national security challenge of our time, that we can't just focus on China. We have to also pay attention to terrorists and Iran and North Korea and Russia, et cetera. That's part of the reason there are demands on us, on our defense budgets and needs that are not on other countries. We have to pay attention to all of those things.

DWG: But it isn't like it's trying to do everything. I mean where do you --

Congressman Thornberry: You can't do everything. You've got to make priorities. So the big, you know, I think most of us would agree the big shift in the National Security Strategy was making a higher priority for Russia and China especially. And it's not just, obviously, a military aspect to that competition, but for an NDAA, putting more emphasis on space, hypersonics, AI, robotics, as well as having more ships for a greater presence in

Thornberry - 6/11/19

that vast area of the Pacific, all of those things are helpful when it comes to this competition with China.

DWG: Mr. Chairman, let me ask you a question, then we'll go to round two people.

This is a question that probably Chairman Smith might ask you if he were here. Nuclear weapons. Why do we have to have so many of them? And how, in what way would the United States use a low-yield weapon on a submarine? For what purpose? Why do we have to have this new weapon? You want it, he doesn't. Lay out the case for it.

Congressman Thornberry: Well let's step back for just a second. Nuclear weapons are, this will sound trite, different from every other kind of weapon. And the way I see it, our nuclear deterrent, in other words, having the capability to deter others from using nuclear weapons, is the foundation upon which all the rest of our defense efforts are built. That is the crucial thing.

So it looks like we've got a lot, but we have many, many fewer than we have had in the past. The number one attribute that I believe we must achieve with a nuclear deterrent is credibility. So it's not about what we think about nuclear weapons, or whether we think that so and so would use them in such a situation. It is what our adversaries think, and whether they see our nuclear deterrent as credible both in terms of technical capability and our willingness to use it.

We would obviously not go into any of that lightly, but they need to understand that we're darn serious about defending ourselves and our allies.

So if all you've got is a giant megaton weapon that could wipe out a vast metropolitan area, it is reasonable for our adversaries to think they're probably not going to do that. So maybe we can get away with something less. It is unquestionable that Russian military doctrine includes the use of lower-yield,

Thornberry - 6/11/19

smaller nuclear weapons, partly to compensate for their conventional shortcomings, but partly because at least in their mind they seem to think that there might be circumstances that they could use it, get away with it, and we would not escalate, to just use the big megaton bombs.

So from my standpoint, if you want to have a credible nuclear deterrent, then you need to have a range of options, and those options include delivery mechanisms. That's why it's important to have three legs of the triad. And there are people who say we can get by with two, or maybe we could just have submarines or so forth. We need three legs of the triad, and we need weapons with different capabilities to provide a range of options, because a range of options increases the credibility of our deterrent. It makes the other country worry more about what we might do and what they might could get away with.

One other point just briefly. Don't forget, this is not just us and them. There are lots of countries that are under our nuclear umbrella who also depend upon the credibility of our nuclear deterrent. And if it looks like we are not able or willing to keep that deterrent credible, both in delivery systems and the weapons themselves, then if you're Japan or whoever, you've got to start thinking about other options, and how are you, Japanese Defence Minister or Prime Minister, I don't mean to pick on Japan. I'm just using them as an example. How are you going to guarantee the security of your country when you know other people in the neighborhood have nuclear weapons and have shown very aggressive tendencies, et cetera?

Again, credibility of our deterrent is important not just to us but for our allies, and if that credibility wanes, not only will adversaries try to take greater advantage of the situation, but we may have other countries decide that they're going to develop their own weapons as well, and that's not a good trend.

DWG: So you believe, then, in the concept of a limited nuclear war.

Thornberry - 6/11/19

Congressman Thornberry: I believe in credibility. I want, I do not want to tell or I do not want Russia or China or anybody else to say they will never do that. I want them to worry. That's what prevents them from using these weapons to begin with.

We get so wrapped up in our own mind and values that it is really hard for us to try to look at things from the other point of view.

During the Cold War, we had an enormous effort put into studying the Soviet mindset, the Soviet military doctrine. How they made decisions and their value system. We let all that atrophy. And I think most everybody agrees, we are not very good at understanding the Chinese mindset. Right now, today. And it's not the same as ours.

I think a much greater effort in understanding adversaries, their values, what they would sacrifice -- you go back through history, culture, all those things with especially Russia, China, you see something very different from ours and we tend to think everybody looks at things the way we do, and that's not true.

DWG: I was going to make a point on David's, before understanding adversaries, I think you've got everyone in the room agreeing with you there. But to David's point, the experts who disagree with you would say by increasing the credibility, as you call it, you are making these weapons easier to use and therefore increasing the likelihood they will be used and --

Congressman Thornberry: Easier for us to use?

DWG: Or them.

Congressman Thornberry: I do not understand an argument that says okay, if we improve the credibility of our nuclear deterrent, that means it's more likely that Russia or China is going to use their nuclear weapons.

Actually, if we improve the credibility of our deterrent, then

Thornberry - 6/11/19

that gives them greater pause in using theirs. And especially when you're looking at Russian military doctrine that includes the actual use of those weapons, it is more effective to say we've got something to match you at whatever level you try, so don't try it, buddy. That's what we have to convey.

DWG: Does it make it easier for the U.S. to use it, do you think?

Congressman Thornberry: Remember Gene Kirkpatrick in 1984 talked about the people who always blame us first? They see us as the bad guy. Do you really think that the United States would be in a situation where we would be the first to employ nuclear weapons? It is so foreign that it's kind of hard to even imagine.

The bigger challenge for us is given our mindset, our values, our internal debates, the bigger challenge for us is to maintain a credible nuclear deterrent so that Russia, China, North Korea, someday Iran, will not try to use them. That's what we have to try to focus on. The whole purpose of these things, of our nuclear deterrent, is to prevent that from being used.

DWG: Tony?

DWG: Given what you just laid out, is your nuclear threshold for supporting the bill, whether the low-yield amendment stays [inaudible], and if you knock that out or keep it in, and everything else you get --

Congressman Thornberry: I'm not --

DWG: -- is that going to be your --

Congressman Thornberry: Famously, I'm not drawing a red line on any one thing. But there are, especially three areas of concern. One is low yield. Second is they cut money for Minuteman 3 replacement. And thirdly is, they cut a ton of money out of the nuclear infrastructure. The nuclear complex.

Thornberry - 6/11/19

Remember, just to take everybody back, the deal for ratifying the New START Treaty was okay, we will go down to this lower level of nuclear weapons, but we're going to maintain the infrastructure so that if we find a problem with one of the weapons -- remember, these were built in the '70s and '80s. They're machines. They wear out. We're going to maintain the nuclear infrastructure to be able to fix problems, to deal with whatever might occur because when you have so many fewer weapons, then one problem has a disproportionate impact on your total arsenal.

Again, it goes back to credibility.

DWG: Is this a sticking point, though? For the bill?

Congressman Thornberry: Back to my point while ago. I believe that our strategic deterrent is the foundation upon which the rest of our defense efforts are built. So I'm, as I've said several times, I'm not going to, I have not reached the decision, nor do I think any Members on my side of the aisle have reached a decision on how to vote on final passage. But we will have an amendment to deal with low yield. We will have an amendment to deal with ground-based strategic deterrent. I put money in my amendment back into the nuclear infrastructure, the people and facilities that help keep our deterrent safe, reliable and credible. And so it's a big deal.

Nukes are a big deal.

DWG: It's a big deal. But if one of those fails, though, if you don't get the restoration. I mean is that --

Congressman Thornberry: I'm not saying yes or no. Because we have to, this is why I said at the beginning, you've got to look. Does this bill as a whole continue to move us forward? Or does it take us backwards? And there will be good, bad and ugly in that. But that judgment call, balancing the provisions of the bill, is what I and my Members will have to do in deciding how to vote.

Thornberry - 6/11/19

DWG: Thank you so much.

#