

## Interview - Kathleen Hicks

Written by E-International Relations

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Kathleen Hicks is senior vice president, Henry A. Kissinger Chair, and director of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC. From 2009 to July 2013, Dr. Hicks served as a senior official in the Department of Defense. Confirmed in May 2012 as principal deputy under secretary of defense for policy, she was responsible for advising the secretary of defense on global and regional defense policy and strategy pertaining to such areas as the Asia-Pacific and Persian Gulf regions, Syria, and Europe.

She also served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for strategy, plans, and forces, leading the development of the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance and the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review and crafting guidance for future force capabilities, overseas military posture, and contingency and theater campaign plans. She was a career civil servant in the Office of the Secretary of Defense from 1993 to 2006, serving in a variety of capacities and rising from Presidential Management Intern to the Senior Executive Service. She holds a Ph.D. in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, an M.A. from the University of Maryland's School of Public Affairs, and an A.B. magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Mount Holyoke College.

### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in US defense and foreign policy?**

There are so many! The role of US power, and the type and magnitude of US power, is a really interesting set of issues. The viability of deterrence concepts is a very interesting issue set, particularly in the gray areas, meaning provocations less than war. What exactly deters? Relatedly, having nuclear capability as a way to constrain conventional engagements—whether that is really holding true. And then by virtue of that, also nuclear proliferation itself: are we likely to see more nuclear proliferation? That's just a few, but that's my job, so I think about lots and lots of different interesting research areas.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

One of the things I really like is living between the academic and policy worlds. I'm really a policy-world person, but I have the academic training. I really like pulling those pieces together, and that has been the most significant change over time for me, the ability to weave those two together and see the theoretical underpinnings, but then to take it into a policy-relevant context.

I don't think I have a good answer for individuals who shaped my thinking over time, but I will say I think when you've served at higher levels of government, watching various principal level officials—cabinet level and others—operate, is very instructive in terms of thinking through how decision-makers approach issues, what factors are foremost on their minds, and how that ought to influence analysts in terms of how they present issues and what they need to be thinking about that is relevant to decision-makers.

### **What are the most interesting/important areas of foreign policy or defense research or practice that are underdeveloped today or understudied? Where is there most need and scope for new thinking?**

Some of the areas I've already mentioned fall in that category. I'll name some others: one issue is the changing

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demographics of the world, in particular urbanization. I think that's an area where we are really just beginning to think about the implications from a societal governance perspective, and certainly from a security perspective. So urbanization is a huge area, particularly on the waterways—the littorals—combined with climate change effects.

There are parts of the world that I don't think we cover very well. One issue set has been what we call the Eastern Mediterranean: instead of looking at Europe and the Middle East, starting to think about the dynamic that's occurring in the Mediterranean between Europe, North Africa, and the Levant, and the various kinds of challenges that are occurring in and around the Mediterranean, how does that issue set look in the future? It's kind of limitless, but let me stop at two examples.

**As Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Forces, you led the development of the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review and 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance. How does the Department of Defense balance planning for the future force and making sure that today's military is equipped to deal with present challenges? And how do you assess the likelihood of future scenarios and challenges?**

The 2010 QDR was the first in my opinion to look very consciously at both how do you fight in the future, and how do you succeed today. That approach was driven very centrally by Secretary Gates, who famously has talked about his dislike of the “future-itis,” the Defense Department's focus on the future and its unwillingness to focus on the war that it's in. So he really drove the emphasis in 2010 on being able to ‘both walk and chew gum,’ both look at the forces of today and the forces of the future. So it is the only QDR that we've had that has a force planning approach that is in two time frames. It was a very conscious effort.

Overall, the Department grapples with that same challenge every day in a million different ways, not just through its strategic reviews. So when it thinks about, do we deploy, for instance right now during the crisis in Europe, additional US aircraft to support Baltic air policing, it has to think about that in the context of the ability to prepare those same aircraft for longer-term missions, to get them through their maintenance schedules, to rest and further train the pilots. That's just one example, but there are a million examples like that every day where the Department is weighing the long-term health of the force, due to the aging of different equipment, but also the use of its personnel, versus the need to be present and actioned today for different missions. So that's a challenge.

We know we're very bad predictors of the future, we humans, so what we have to do as people who think about strategy and long-term, future force planning, and capability planning is look at all the long-term trends that are out there, look at the ways in which they intersect, and actually use a range of scenarios that help us to understand the different ways that the international system can evolve—knowing that we're maybe going to get all of those scenarios wrong, but the exercise is helpful in figuring out where you're going.

Given that, some of the things that worry me are a highly proliferated world, a world in which many states decide that pursuing nuclear weapons is to their advantage. That's something we haven't really challenged ourselves to think about because it's such a taboo, how we would operate in that world and what the implications would be. The collapse of a major state—North Korea is a major one, Pakistan is another, even a place like Saudi Arabia at some point. You can think of countries where we really can't predict today where they'll be, but their complete collapse would be at such a magnitude in terms of the implications for their region and beyond that it couldn't be managed, certainly not by the United States. So how do you deal with that? Technological breakthroughs are something that we always think about and worry about. For instance, the Chinese having the capability to prevent the United States from protecting its allies around China, certainly Japan and South Korea. Those are things that concern me a great deal if there's some kind of breakthrough technology, if it's not breakthrough for us, that we can't adapt quickly enough to resolve.

And then there are positive opportunistic scenarios that we haven't really grappled with, in the areas—also technology-related—of biomedical engineering, even robotics and other areas where there could be really dramatic changes in the ways that society conducts itself, and the health and welfare of humanity that can affect how we proceed in the future.

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**At the Pentagon, you also advised the Secretary of Defense on regional policy and strategy in areas including the Asia-Pacific, Persian Gulf, Syria, and Europe. How does defense policy balance ongoing threats in the Middle East and Central Asia while working with allies in Asia and Europe? And what has the 'pivot to Asia' meant in practice for defense policy and planning?**

It is extremely challenging for policymakers today to spend a lot of time thinking about the long term—the rebalance to Asia, the pivot to Asia—while they're neck deep in the challenges that we have today in the Middle East, Europe, and elsewhere. So I think it's enormously challenging. There's an apocryphal Henry Kissinger saying that when you go into government, all you're doing is really unpacking your suitcase of intellectual knowledge, and you have to leave government to repack that suitcase, to rebuild that human capital. I think that's something that all administrations and even Congress suffer from, that people are very much inside their immediate requirements, they're using up all of the various energy resources they've stored, and it's hard at that point to do much more than react. I think it's enormously challenging.

On the rebalance, in practice it's meant quite a few things. The first is shifts in the actual location of forces, the emphasis on where the United States will spend its time and energy, so that can be everything from Presidential visits, to secretarial level visits—certainly in Defense, Secretary Hagel focuses quite a bit on Asia in terms of his own personal schedule. It means a shift in emphasis for force posturing, so new agreements—you saw the US and Australia coming to an agreement on the rotational stationing of Marines, you have new openings with the Philippines for some advances in our deployment of forces there. And you see an increased emphasis between the US and various of its allies, particularly Japan, South Korea, and Australia, to think about how you develop capabilities together, to focus on training and exercising together. And it means a shift in the overall resources within the Department of Defense: the vast majority of Defense Department resources are spent on conventional, multi-mission platforms and capabilities that have strong, long-standing Congressional issues and ties, and that are relatively relevant for a range of threats. But there are some high-end threats that they don't speak to directly, those capabilities, so the Department of Defense in its rebalance has really focused on creating lines of capability that will be most relevant for the future challenges posed by a very highly capable China.

**How deeply should the US get involved in the fight against ISIL in Iraq and in Syria?**

The United States needs to take a leadership role in defeating ISIL. The components of that leadership role are building an international coalition, developing an approach to support moderate, particularly Sunni, elements on the ground throughout the region, to include the governments of Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and others who are affected or who will soon be affected if ISIL is left unattended. And there is a military component to that, that should include training and equipping various forces. It has included tactical airstrikes, but it doesn't mean that the United States needs to be the source of a significant number of boots on the ground. There needs to be some amount of US involvement, but also the Europeans, the Gulf states, even the Chinese and others are greatly impacted if ISIL is able to continue to threaten the stability of the Middle East, so there are a lot of international actors that need to be brought together. The US is probably the only one that can lead it, but we won't be able to do it alone, we'll need to have some help from the international community.

**What does the rise of China mean for US defense policy and planning?**

For the United States, the outcome that we really want to see with China is that China becomes a responsible international actor, that it is a contributor to things like peacekeeping operations, that it is an effective advocate for things like rule of law in its own region and the international community, that it's a strong, stable, international partner—these are all outcomes that we look for. In the Defense community, we have this extra factor to deal with, which is the growth of Chinese military capability. The Chinese have assured the US and others that they don't have an intent to use that capability in a way that's threatening, but we have to deal with the facts as we have them, the facts of the additional capabilities there that are growing, and now you have the additional facts of various tussles in the maritime and in the air where China appears to be asserting a kind of right to access, and exclusive access, that we do not agree exists in international law.

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So that means we have to take their military capability growth very seriously, and it is concerning. They could pose a significant challenge in the long term outside of their immediate region. Today, inside their immediate region they do pose a significant challenge. They're not well trained and tested, they're not battle tested, there are shortcuts they take in their acquisition processes that can give us some comfort that they don't have the best equipment in the world, but they are also incredibly good at dealing with challenges like that, and I think they recognize those same challenges and will continue to work on them and grow from them. So we have to take their capabilities very seriously. The United States, as I said before, has allies who live in that neighborhood, and we have treaty commitments to those allies. This is not about an ability for the United States to go into Beijing and attack Beijing—we have probably more than one hundred thousand Americans who live in China, that's not our intent—but we do have to think about our vital interest as it relates to our allies and partners who live in that region, and our ability to protect them. And Chinese abilities are growing in such a way that that can really be questioned in the future.

### **What role will the recent NATO summit play in shaping the West's response to the crisis in Ukraine? What would your policy recommendations to the President be?**

This NATO summit was going to be about Afghanistan—it still had an Afghanistan component, but clearly the crisis in Ukraine and the overall sense of a changing dynamic with Russia was the centerpiece of this summit. The US and particularly Europe need to seize this moment to remind themselves of the importance of the defense capabilities that are part of NATO, that NATO is not just a series of high-level meetings, it's not just about having a shared general principle in support of a trans-Atlantic whole and free, it's about having actual capabilities to deter, and if necessary defeat, aggression, both inside of Europe and, if the alliance so chooses, beyond its borders. That's an incredible challenge to NATO right now. There is not the investment necessary in defense capabilities in the vast majority of NATO countries. There are economic challenges to all members, including the United States right now that they are grappling with and the priority put towards defense is much lower than what NATO puts forth as its standard, which is this oft-heard-of 2% of GDP standard that only four countries meet currently. So the legacy of this summit will be whether it put some fire and energy beneath the alliance. My view at this point is that the members of the alliance are still quite divided about how much they're worried about this: if you are living in the Baltics, or anywhere in Eastern Europe, if you're the Poles, for instance, or the US, you're quite concerned. Some other countries are not quite as concerned, or even if they are concerned, they're hoping they can get away without investing a lot more. So my advice to the President would be, make sure that NATO leverages this opportunity to increase its deployments, particularly along the eastern front of NATO, if you will, particularly along the Baltics and elsewhere, create some opportunities to display the defensive nature of NATO and the intent to execute Article 5 to protect allies should any aggressor attempt to challenge that. That includes exercises, deployments of different types of defensive capabilities into that region. And I think, again, you can't forget Afghanistan. The post-summit signing of the bilateral security agreement helps to ensure that there will be a continuing presence there. This is not the right time to force a withdrawal of all NATO forces from Afghanistan: we do have reason to be invested in the future of Afghanistan, and I do think an enduring presence can do good there.

### **You are one of few (but a growing number) of women who have served in the top positions in the Defense Department. How has gender affected your career, if at all? Have social norms around gender changed at all during your tenure?**

I definitely think social norms around gender have changed for the better, and I think I've been extremely fortunate—I have not personally had many occasions in which being a woman was very clearly and obviously a challenge. The biggest challenge that I found in the Defense Department in my early years was youth—it's a hierarchical structure, government itself is a hierarchical structure for obvious reasons, so that itself tends to be a greater impediment than gender. But it is absolutely fair to say that there are points at which gender, in my mind, becomes a factor that's below the surface in peoples' expectations about what you're going to know, and what your background is. That's true in the military, of course, as well, and I think one of the biggest things that can happen for civilian women who work in national security is for military women in national security to advance. When you see more female generals and admirals at the table, when you start to see a female Chief of Staff of a military service, or even someday a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that makes a tremendous difference in how the military views women in its

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ranks, and then by virtue of that, how they view women in the national security sector.

**What is the most important advice you could give to aspiring foreign policymakers? What about for women who want to work in male-dominated areas of foreign policymaking, like in defense?**

Let me separate those two. I think the most important thing for anybody is to follow your passions, do what you love to do. There's no set pathway, so I say follow your passion because I think that sometimes people feel like they need to do specific kinds of jobs, or work for specific people to advance, and I don't think that's true. If you look at people who've succeeded in the national security sector, there's no singular path at all, people have taken all different types of paths. And I think that really speaks to the importance of doing what works for you, what leverages your own best capabilities and grows you in areas that you need to grow. So be passionate about what you do, and then do well at it. That's the number one thing.

For women in the sector, I think it's important particularly to have confidence, to understand that the opportunities are out there, that you can leverage those opportunities, and be confident that there's a community of women and men who are very interested in having quality people in the community, and they'll support you. There's a strong, supportive community. But you have to take those first steps and be confident that if this is your passion, there's going to be a place for you, and then carry that confidence forward in all of your interactions.

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*This interview was conducted by Alex Stark. Alex is an Editor-at-large of E-IR and a member of the website's Editorial Board.*