

Kelly Brownell:

Hello, and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Today, I'm pleased to welcome Colin Kahl to the program. Colin served as National Security Advisor to Vice President Joe Biden and Deputy Assistant to President Obama from October 2014 to January 2017. As such, he was as a senior advisor to President Obama and Vice President Biden influential on all matters related to U.S. foreign policy and national security affairs. Welcome to Policy 360.

Colin Kahl:

Great to be here.

Kelly Brownell:

You're here at Duke to give a talk that's entitled Grand Strategy Surprises That Await President Trump. What sort of surprises are you talking about?

Colin Kahl:

Well, I mean, I think they're things you can think about in terms of the events in the world that they'll have to contend with. Some of them we can't anticipate, much like we never anticipated the Ebola epidemic, for example. I think there are some events this coming year that are highly likely that they're going to have to contend with. I mean, the North Koreans, for example, could field tests their first intercontinental ballistic missile, which would kind of really ratchet up the threat that North Korea poses to the U.S. Homeland, and I think would probably put the North Korea issue front and center.

I think there are some countries that people don't normally think about that could actually collapse in 2017. Venezuela comes to mind, and that could have profound consequences in our hemisphere. And then there are the issues... The steady-state challenges that they're going to have to face, the campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, what they're going to do vis-a-vis the Russians, what they're going to do vis-a-vis the Chinese.

I think the dilemmas that the Trump administration will face in part stemmed from the fact that President Trump has an extraordinarily unconventional view of the world. That itself is riddled with a series of tensions and contradictions. Just to give you one example, I think they are very, very aware of the challenge that North Korea poses to us, the security challenge. But on the other hand, the Trump administration wants to get really tough with China, especially in the trade and economic domain.

And yet, anybody who knows much about Northeast Asia knows you can't solve the North Korea problem without having a good relationship with China. How are they going to manage having a lot of sharp elbows with Beijing and manage to still somehow put the North Korean missile and nuclear program back in the box? That's one example. Another example is you know that Trump is interested in working more closely with Vladimir Putin to go against Islamic extremists of all sorts, but in particular, the Islamic State in Syria.

Well, that sounds good, except that doing that, going all in with Russia and Syria means going all in with Bashar al-Assad and going all in with the Iranians. But the Trump administration also says they don't want to go all in with the Iranians. In fact, they want to have a more hostile relationship with Iran. How do you manage in a sense taking a pro-Iranian position by supporting Russia and Assad while trying to push back against Iran? Those are just two big examples of some of the tensions they're going to have to work through.

And the last point I would make is that it's not at all clear to me based on the confirmation hearings that the president and his cabinet are on the same side on all these issues. How the process at the White House works to kind of adjudicate competing beliefs and can anybody actually tell Trump no?

Kelly Brownell:

Can you give us an example of a place where you think his cabinet appointees and he himself are differing?

Colin Kahl:

Well, I think the two examples are Russia and the Iran nuclear deal, where in the case of Russia, obviously President Trump on the campaign trail and during the transition and now as president has said extraordinarily flattering things about Putin being a strong leader and effective leader and has gone out of his way to argue that we can make common cause with the Russians on a whole host of issues, most particularly against the Islamic State. Whereas if you listen to General Mattis when he was being confirmed...

Had his hearings for Secretary of Defense or Rex Tillerson for Secretary of State or Pompeo, you had a much more skeptical view I think of the Russians. And clearly when you look at the Republican caucus on the Hill, there are a lot of Russia Hawks there, McCain, Graham, Rubio, and others. How to manage whether you maintain kind of some distance from Moscow or really hug the bear as has Trump seems to inclined to do. That'll be a real fight, I think, in the inner agency.

And then on the Iran issue as well, where on the campaign trail at least, Trump talked about tearing up the Iran nuclear deal. It's the worst deal in history, et cetera, et cetera. Whereas people like General Mattis, now Secretary of Defense Mattis, are on record saying, "Look, it may or may not be the greatest deal of all time, but it would create quite a crisis in the region if we tore it up. We shouldn't tear it up. Instead, we should find other ways to push back against Iran's nefarious activities in the region."

I believe, frankly, that view will be the consensus view within his security cabinet and among his top officials, and then the question is whether Trump listens to that view.

Kelly Brownell:

Is there any way of knowing how that dynamic will work out?

Colin Kahl:

None. You have a president who doesn't have any prior experience in foreign policy. You have a national security advisor in Mike Flynn, who has a lot of experience as an analyst in the intelligence community, has a mixed record as a manager. It's not clear what type of process he's going to be able to run and kind of corralling the views of the Secretary of Defense, the Director of the CIA, the Director of National Intelligence, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Treasury, and kind of bringing them into a focused recommendation for the president, and then actually getting the president to be sufficiently open-minded.

And then I think you have wild cards, like the fact that the chief strategist at the White House Bannon and the president's son-in-law Kushner are also likely to play an out-sized role in foreign policy. And yet, they're not formally part of the process. Figuring that all out is going to be very tricky and there's nothing about how they handled the presidential transition that makes me believe they've figured it out yet.

Kelly Brownell:

You mentioned that there might be important places where countries would collapse, and you mentioned Venezuela in particular. What do you mean by collapse and what would happen?

Colin Kahl:

Well, I think in Venezuela, the economy is in free fall. There's a lot of dissatisfaction with Maduro's regime. It's basically a kleptocracy. He's got close relationships with rich elites and with the military, but I think we may be at a tipping point this year where the economy gets so bad that you see a mass uprising, protests that turn violent, potentially a coup. And if Venezuela falls apart... I mean, it's already kind of a slow motion failed state, but if it completely careens into the ditch, you're going to see a massive humanitarian challenge.

Tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans streaming across the border. It could destabilize countries like Colombia, which is just trying to implement a new peace deal. It could have all sorts of reverberations for crime and drugs and security challenges throughout the hemisphere. And like I said, this is just one of those issues people aren't even thinking about.

Interestingly, if you're going to manage events in Venezuela and the hemisphere, you need to have partners like the Cubans, who actually have an in with the Venezuelan government. Well, is the Trump administration going to continue on the normalization path that the Obama administration charted on Cuba. They seem to be suggesting they're not. Well, if they're not and they have a poor relationship with the Cuban government, are they going to be able to have an in with Venezuela?

All signs point to them having an extraordinarily antagonistic relationship with Mexico. And you can't solve any problem in Latin America, especially one that relates to crime, drugs, migration, if you don't have the Mexicans playing along.

Kelly Brownell:

You focused on the Middle East during your time as an advisor. What was the most challenging situation you had to deal with?

Colin Kahl:

Well, I think the entire Middle East has been challenging for all of history. It's a problematic place. You have struggling economies. You have a lot of economies that focused on a single extractive resource. There's extraordinary inequality. You have political systems that don't allow people to have voice. You have states that tend to abuse their people. This was a problem for a long, long time, even when we thought of certain states as stable.

And then, of course, the events that started in the winter of 2010 and accelerated in the spring of 2011, known as the Arab Spring or the Arab Uprisings really kind of shattered states and the state system across the Middle East. I think that the region has been in turmoil ever since. I think that one of the hardest things... Look, Americans are an optimistic people. We like to think that we can solve problems, and we're also very forward-looking. We don't obsess about the past.

And we also know that we're an extraordinarily powerful country, large population, most potent military in the world, extraordinarily rich. We'd like to believe that we can solve problems. And one of the most frustrating things is to turn on your television, see six countries simultaneously in flames and not have the impulse to fix it. And yet at the same time, you have, frankly, an American public that's sick and tired of the Middle East.

After the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan doesn't want the United States to go all in to try to remake these societies. We don't have a lot of luck demonstrating that that's possible. This puts, I think, presidents in extraordinarily difficult situations. Because on the one hand, people see the region in flames and they want it fixed. Do something. On the other hand, almost anything you suggest to do, which would involve significant amounts of blood and treasure, they don't want you to do.

I think that's the bind that presidents find themselves in, and that'll be true President Trump.

Kelly Brownell:

Given that you said Americans are optimistic, is there cause to be optimistic about what's happening in that part of the world?

Colin Kahl:

In the Middle East?

Kelly Brownell:

Yeah.

Colin Kahl:

No.

Kelly Brownell:

No signs with all that you see?

Colin Kahl:

No. I think we're going through a generational upheaval that will have to work itself out. I think that the United States has limited capacity to manage the problems, but probably not solve their root causes. That's going to be something that the countries themselves will have to sort through over an extended period of time.

And that we have to remain laser focused on those problems that most directly impact U.S. national security and the security of our people and do our best to work with the partners we have to address those problems, while being extraordinarily humble about our ability to transform a part of the globe that has been resistant to transformation forever.

Kelly Brownell:

What would you suggest are the issues that most affect us and need to have that laser focus?

Colin Kahl:

I think there's actually a pretty bipartisan agreement on what they are. First and foremost are the international terrorist organizations that reside in the broader Middle East that have designs to commit attacks in the United States, in the West, against American citizens or American interests. We have to continue to be extraordinarily aggressive against those actors, while not... I mean, striking the balance of not getting dragged into the various quagmires.

I think President Obama, at least, had an approach that was kind of a light footprint approach that relied heavily on unmanned aircraft special operations forces, but not putting hundreds of

thousands of boots on the ground and focused very much on going after high value targets and trying to dismantle terrorist networks that threatened us without kind of over-investing blood and treasure.

I think the other issue, which there's widespread agreement on, is that the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East is a challenge, especially because it could potentially intersect with the terrorist challenge, which is why the Obama administration spent so much time trying to lock down Iran's nuclear program through diplomacy, as opposed to military action.

I think as the Trump administration takes the reins, they're really going to have to figure out how they calibrate the counter-terrorism campaign so that you're doing enough to prevent threats to the Homeland without going all in, because that's not what the American people want, and Trump says he doesn't want regime change and nation building, those types of things either.

And also, how you're going to manage the weapons of mass destruction issue, especially nuclear proliferation, in a world where you're holding the Iran nuclear deal at risk and having a more conflictual, antagonistic relationship with Iran. I think those are the things they're going to have to work through.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, in the campaign, there was a lot of tough talk from Trump and his allies about dealing with the terrorist organizations. Are there any signs yet about how they're likely to go about that?

Colin Kahl:

Well, first of all, I think they actually inherited a pretty good situation as it relates to the campaign against the Islamic State. I mean, the campaign that the Pentagon put forward to President Obama that he approved... And by the way, there was not a single option for Iraq and Syria that the Pentagon put forward that the president didn't approve. All right? We've seen the Islamic State lose 50% of the territory they once controlled in Iraq, about a third of the territory they once controlled in Syria. Tens of thousands of their fighters have been killed.

Dozens of their leaders have been taken off the board. Their revenue has been cut probably by a third to half. The foreign fighter flow is down probably 50 to 90%. Our military is extraordinarily good at a lot of things. They are particularly good at dismantling states, and they have systematically dismantled Islamic State. And that all happened before Trump came in.

There's not some secret plan that Joe Dunford, our Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has in his back pocket that he didn't want to show to President Obama, that suddenly he walks into the Oval Office and shows to President Trump. I think there will be things that the Pentagon will suggest to accelerate the campaign, and I suggest Trump will do those things. But that will largely I think be... There'll be a lot of continuity, especially in Iraq. I think the master or the \$64,000 question is, what play does Trump run with the Russians and Syria?

Because we were willing to work with the Russians and Syria too, but with all sorts of strings attached. We had to be able to approve Russian targets. They had to be compliant with the laws of war, so they weren't bombing civilians. They had to ground the Syrian Air Force. They had to make sure that they enforce the ceasefire. They had to provide humanitarian access. The Russians signed up to all those conditions, and then couldn't follow through with them, which is why we didn't go all in, in cooperating with them.

If the Trump administration decides to go all in with no strings attached, that's a big piece of business. That means we're suddenly complicit with all of the Russian bobbing against civilians. It means that we'll have to figure out some way to reconcile this Russia-Iran issue as it relates to Syria, how do we manage our Sunni Arab partners in the region if we are viewed as propping up Bashar al-Assad. There is

a whole host of tensions and dilemmas if you go all in with the Russians that I don't think the Trump folks have fully thought through.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, do you think they might believe that dealing with the Islamic state is such an overriding issue that those might be... They might consider those necessary prices to pay?

Colin Kahl:

I think they may, but the issue though is that... Let's imagine you go... I mean, the only way to make Trump's argument consistent on Syria would be to go all in with the Russians. Put the question of Bashar al-Assad aside, right? The wolf closest to the shed is the Islamic State. Go all in with the Russians, and by extension Assad, but then, as the price for doing that, try to extract some concessions to minimize Iranian influence in Syria in exchange for doing that. The challenges though are numerous.

First, the Russians themselves, if they don't change the way they're conducting the war, don't just... First of all, they don't predominantly bomb Islamic State targets. They predominantly bomb moderate opposition targets and a bunch of civilians. And as long as you're doing that, that's a recipe for pushing the opposition into the hands of extremists, not reducing the sway of extremism in Syria. And it's certainly no way to end the civil war that provides safe haven for groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

The other point is if you are trying to box the Iranians and their Lebanese proxy Hezbollah, who has thousands of fighters inside Syria, trying to box them off the battlefield, those guys have way deeper tentacles into Syria than the Russians do. And they've already demonstrated in recent weeks when the Russians and the Turks have tried to cut deals behind Iran's back, that they're perfectly capable of playing a spoiler role.

If you are complicit with Russian activities that actually make the war worse and you are so hostile towards Iran that you actually incentivize the Iranians to try to play a spoiler role in Syria, that's no recipe for defeating the Islamic State in Syria.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, you get a sense from the way you're describing this, and this is obviously the case, that these are extremely delicate, sensitive issues. Do you think the right team is in place to help start to address these things?

Colin Kahl:

I think we don't know. I would actually describe... A lot of social scientists think of these problems as wicked problems. It's not just one complex problem. It's a series of overlapping, interdependent, complex problems. Where when you pull on one and try to solve for one, you inevitably make another one worse. The Middle East is one big wicked problem, and Syria is a microcosm of that. It takes a lot of thought, a lot of deliberation and a team that's all working together.

That doesn't mean they agree, but that they're able to work together if you want to have any hope in even managing the situation, let alone solving it. I do think there are some very talented people in the new administration. I think Jim Mattis, the now retired general, new Secretary of Defense, super smart guy, reasonable guy, I think will be a moderating... Despite his mad dog nickname will be a moderating influence on president Trump and a good voice in the cabinet. I think there's a lot of potential in Rex Tillerson.

We'll see. But I have no idea how this team is going to interact and how the process is going to be run. Because again, a lot of that ultimately hinges on how does Mike Flynn, the new National Security Advisor, run that process and who isn't in the room who is also influential with the President of the United States, Steve Bannon, Jared Kushner. Who else is? And if you have not just one process, but two or three different processes, and you have a bunch of people who don't agree and you have a wicked problem, that's not a recipe for early success.

Kelly Brownell:

For sure. Much has been said about President Trump's reported lack of interest in intelligence briefings. How important you think such briefings are?

Colin Kahl:

I think that the intelligence community... Look, the intelligence committee doesn't have a monopoly on good analysis and good sense. All right? Our embassies do amazing reporting. There's terrific evidence and information that's available in the so-called open source domain, newspapers, think tank reports, those types of things.

I don't think that the intelligence community has a monopoly on the right answers, but they do have a lot of information that provides commanders-in-chief with early warning and with a kind of factual predicate as a baseline from which to build policy. It's incredibly important for the president, whoever he or she is, to have a good working relationship with the intelligence community. In this context, President Trump has a lot of fence-mending to do.

First of all, he doesn't appear to, in general, like to listen to people who don't already agree with him or to listen to things he doesn't believe or run contrary to his beliefs. He has it in his head that the intelligence community was somehow out to get him as a consequence of the investigation into the role that the Russians played in meddling in our electoral process trying to influence the election. He said some things largely through his Twitter account talking about the intelligence community I put in quotes around intelligence, comparing them to the Nazis.

When he went to CIA headquarters over the weekend extensively to kind of make amends and show deference, and he stood in front of that wall with all of the CIA officers over the years who have given their lives in the service of their nation, and then he turned it basically into a political campaign type event where it's like he talked about crowd size and Martin Luther King bust. I mean, it was nuts. He's got to fix that. Somebody around him has to fix that.

The last point I would make is the actual PDB, the Presidential Daily Brief, that is not just the physical product that gets given to them every morning with the latest intelligence, but the actual convening once a day of the president with his senior intelligence officers and his national security advisor and senior staff and the vice president to talk about foreign policy is the 30 to 60 minutes a day that you can guarantee that the President of the United States is focused on foreign affairs, because much of the rest of the day is going to be focused on domestic affairs.

That's the way that it should be. It's really, really important that he not only reads the PDB, but that they figure out a process that's regularized, habitualized, institutionalized, and structured so that the president is forced to have a reasonable, rational conversation every day about the world.

Kelly Brownell:

Given the intelligence information on the Russians' involvement in our election process, what do you think is the optimal way for the country to respond?



Colin Kahl:

Well, first of all, I think we have to know all the facts. I will say that the intelligence community, especially since the 2003 Iraq War and the WMD controversies, the intelligence community rarely says anything with "high confidence." The fact that the intelligence community was unanimous in having high confidence that the Russians meddled in our election by hacking the DNC, Podesta, and others, and then colluding with groups like WikiLeaks to release that information to at the very least disrupt our elections and hurt Hillary Clinton to the benefit of Donald Trump.

Now, we don't know whether it actually had any impact, right? All we can judge is what they did and what their motivation was. We know what they did. The evidence on that is ironclad. And we know why they did it. We also know that this was approved at the highest levels of the Russian government, but we don't know the full story about a lot of the other things that are being alleged. I think that there has to be a comprehensive investigation along the lines of the various investigations that you saw after 9/11.

We have to have that as a country and the administration, frankly, would gain a lot of credibility by leaning in to those investigations as much as possible. In terms of what the response is, I think a lot of that depends on at the end of the day how much risk the new administration is willing to run to develop friction with the Russians. Because the response options are sanctions or PNG-ing Russian diplomats, kicking them out of the country, or activities in cyberspace that aren't probably consistent with having touchy-feely kumbaya relations with Putin.

They're going to have to choose between their clear desire to reset relations with Russia and partner with them on a whole host of things, and whether they're willing to actually get tough on the Russians for what they did in our election.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, the signs so far in the early days of the administration is that closing up to the Russians is the more important priority.

Colin Kahl:

Yes.

Kelly Brownell:

Would you think that's right?

Colin Kahl:

It's unassailable true. Even in a world of alternative facts, there are not alternative facts to the contrary. Yes, they are cozying up to the Russians. Whether that is sustained over the coming months, we'll have to see. My guess is that at some point, Putin will say one thing to Trump on the phone and then do something else. The first time Trump gets really angry at what the Russians did, because he believes that they lied to him, which they will do, it'll be really interesting to see how he reacts to that.

Kelly Brownell:

That will. Well, thank you so much for joining us today. Boy, you imparted an awful lot of information in a short time, so I appreciate that. My guest has been calling Colin Kahl. For the past two years, Colin served as National Security Advisor to Vice President Joe Biden and Deputy Assistant to President



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Obama. Special thanks to Professor Peter Feaver and his Duke American Grand Strategy Program, the Duke Department of Political Science, and the Triangle Institute for Security Studies for sponsoring Colin's visit. Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.