

Two weeks ago, two top Republican advisers on the military to the Trump campaign talked to reporters from Defense News to provide some insight into what a Trump election might mean for defense and Trump's plans for the Pentagon. Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, has been widely mentioned as the leading candidate to become secretary of defense. Rep. Randy Forbes of Virginia, chairman of the House Seapower Subcommittee, will be out of a job in January, having been defeated in his primary election. But Forbes is widely respected for his knowledge of naval affairs and could be a contender to become secretary of the Navy. Highlights from the interviews are on the next page

What are the key points of the plan you would be implementing on inauguration day next year?

Sessions: Trump's views are that the United States should advance peace through strength. He believes that the military has been degraded. It needs to be rebuilt. That the sequester has done the damage. That means that you have to place American national interests first.

We should focus on core national interests that includes rebuilding our alliances, and new friends and a more realistic foreign policy that does not seek to achieve things that won't work, and end up making things worse, and costing lives, and treasure. That is kind of a philosophy that I appreciate. I think we have attempted a lot of things at great cost that haven't benefited us or the people we tried to help.

Trump's first commitment militarily is the destruction of ISIS. He said he would have his military produce a plan within 30 days. It would involve military action, cyber, financial, ideological and diplomatic efforts to focus on the destruction of ISIS. Because ISIS represents a direct threat to the United States. They have announced that unequivocally, and have said they intend to attack us. They celebrate people who do attack us. They are an enemy that just has got to be confronted and defeated.

He indicates and has said repeatedly he is proud of the American way. He will not apologize for that around the world, but will celebrate our achievements. He said that immigration is a part of national security, and that we will not bring in persons into the country who might present threats to the United States.

He said that we should expand our production of American energy, which not only creates jobs and keeps wealth at home, it also reduces our dependence on dangerous areas of the globe.

Now, he is specifically committed to fixing our cyber capabilities or improving them. We have got to both have a defensive plan and an offensive plan. You simply can't allow yourself to be vulnerable all of the time to cyber-attacks and not have a response.

Specifically with the Defense Department, he has dealt with the major categories of expenditures in discussion. He proposes an increase in the Army. We now have about 480,000 troops. He proposes that the Army should be sustained at 540,000 troops.

Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions pledges his commitment to Republican candidate for President Donald J Trump before he speaks to supporters at a rally at Ambridge Area Senior High School on October 10, 2016 in Ambridge, Pennsylvania.

Why is that?

Sessions: Well, I was not ready to talk about that. But the Navy, I think, had the most significant shot in the arm in improvements from where we are probably on a percentage basis. He just believes that we should have a Navy that is capable of providing American presence in different areas of the globe. Randy, did you want to comment on that?

Forbes: There was a little bit of a flaw in your question. But you said 'what is the plan he would implement on day one when he was elected?'

That is just the whole thing. The president of the United States can't just implement a plan. The president of the United States has to be able to work with Congress and policy makers to put forth a plan. Why that is so important is this: if you listen to Ms. Clinton, she is saying basically she likes the direction that Obama has gone, and she'll continue that with just some minor tweaks.

But I think that with a President Trump, you'll see him coming out literally within the first few days saying that we are going to have an international defense strategy that is driven by the Pentagon and not by the political National Security Council. That's a clear game changer. Because if you look around the globe, over the last eight years, the National Security Council has been writing that. And find one country anywhere that we are better off than we were eight years [ago], you cannot find it.

The second thing is that whoever the president is, they will not create the military strategy. Short of President Eisenhower, we have not had a president in office that could do that. But you are going to find that whoever the next president is, they're going to be confronted with a crisis and threats probably that we cannot even perceive or predict today. The key for that president is having a strategy presented to them by the Pentagon to give them options.

The big difference between a President Trump and a President Clinton is that President Trump is going to return the direction on our capacity and capability so that president has more options. If you take Ms. Clinton at her word where she said she is going to basically continue what President Obama has done, then I ask you this -- do we really want to continue in a situation where we have gone from, in 2007, meeting ninety percent of the needs our combatant commanders had for ships of the Navy, until this year where we will meet 42 percent of our needs? Do we really want the oldest and smallest Air Force in our country's history, which is what we have had? Do we really want the Army carried down to the direction it is headed to 450,000 troops? And do we want the Marine Corps headed to where they're going?

What we do know is a President Trump has committed as the senator pointed out, to rebuilding that capacity and capability.

We need to move to about 346 to 350 ships. That will be a huge direction. Because by increasing that capacity and capability the next president is going to have more options on the table for threats, which means we have a better chance of not just being successful but of protecting American lives.

Sessions: We're already down to 180,000 of Marines, and Trump proposes to go to 200,000. I think at this point in history with the credibility of president of the United States eroded, were they to suspect that the United States is abandoning its defense spending. It takes more than a

speech to turn this around.

Trump's plans are actually to build more ships and maintain a higher number of troops and aircraft. It will go a lot further than words to convince the world that we remain strong. It will help us to maintain the peace.

When Mr. Romney was running in 2012 there was a detailed plan to build up the Navy. You're talking about 350 ships, but what kinds of ships would be build? Today we have 272 ships with a goal of 308. What would those extra 42 ships be? Do you need more aircraft carriers?

Forbes: Remember the first thing I stated – we will have a new national defense strategy that would be made by the Pentagon. It's going to answer all the questions about specificity. Something that this administration has never put out. All they have put out is a 12-page national strategic guidance. That is nuts.

Number two, though, I think you will clearly see a different direction. Mr. Trump has talked about the importance of our cruisers. This administration has tried to take out 11 of our cruisers. You have to have those multiple cruisers or destroyers to do that 360-degree flight. It makes good sense to us to continue to modernize our cruisers. I think you are going to see a President Trump saying the opposite of what this president had said, saying, we need these cruisers.

I do not think anybody can answer whether we need more carriers or not, but what we clearly are going to need is more submarines. If in 10 years we're down to 41 submarines and the Chinese have twice that amount, we know that is not acceptable. We can start in 2021 adding an additional attack submarine, and I think you will see President Trump doing that.

Sessions: As Mr. Forbes said, we ought to modernize the cruisers and absolutely our missile defense capability. I would just note that Trump has expressly stated that the sequester for the Defense Department has got to go. We might as well acknowledge that the world has gotten in a much more dangerous place than a few years ago. We're just going to have to step up.

He also was very explicit and strong about missile defense with Iran and North Korea. And North Korea with nuclear bombs and Iran able to get them in a short period of time. Both of them are developing missile systems. We need to make sure our missile defense system and is up and running.

U.S. Rep. Randy Forbes, R-Va., speaks to a reporter after a news conference March 1, 2013 on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. Photo Credit: Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images

You referenced the sequester. Given the Budget Control Act and the dynamics in Congress that have really pushed back against federal spending. What do you think would be a path to pay for all of this? I mean, you have 350 ships and 450,000 soldiers, more Marines, more fighter aircraft, a missile defense system. It sounds like there is a big spending increase that would be needed to accomplish this.

Sessions: Well it would be a need for a spending increase, there is just no doubt about it. And it is painful for me as a budget person to acknowledge that we can't stay at a sequester-like level. We are just not going to be able to do that. But President Trump will not do the one thing that President Obama and Hillary Clinton favor. That if you increase defense spending, you have to increase the non-defense spending at the same amount. That is just absurd.

I mean, we are in a crisis worldwide today. Things are going wrong in all corners of the globe. We are going to have to be stronger and spend more. We certainly don't need them to spend more on items that are less critical to the national security such as our general overall spending. He'll have a clear position on that quite different than the current administration's policies.

There appears to be a contradiction in there. You call for a more robust military. But also there is a less aggressive posture towards, say, Russia, and an emphasis on allies doing more. Would President Trump support the Pacific pivot?

Sessions: The situation with Russia has deteriorated dramatically under this administration and during the time Hillary Clinton was secretary of state. This is a colossal disaster. Can it be turned around? I don't know. But we need to attempt to, because Russia – if you look at it in a realist approach. Look at it according to what our national interests are. The United States and Russia should be able to be far more harmonious than we are today. But things have really deteriorated. China is also asserting itself dramatically. The Japanese have been having to launch aircraft to intercept Chinese aircraft. They are very close to Japan on a regular basis at record levels. The major world powers also are causing great concern.

I think the defense increase in preparing for whatever threat might be out there – as I've gotten older, it does appear that whenever we anticipate one threat, it's another one that arises. It is not the one that we so much anticipated. And I feel very strongly that our allies around the world do need to pay more of their share. It is not easy to say exactly what they should spend their money on, but it's hugely important. We've only got five of the NATO nations at two percent on gross domestic product on defense, while we are 3.6 percent – and this might take it higher than that.

We have every right to end this pleading with them and begging them. We really need to have a serious discussion. Donald Trump knows how to do that. We sit down and say we need it, you need to contribute more. That could help us get the job done and not all of it come out of our budgets.

Forbes: We need to realize there is absolutely no conflict between those two points. Because one of the things Mr. Trump realizes is you don't build your national defense on what you think the other players' intent might be. Intent can change in 48 hours. You build it on capacity and capability.

This is not just Mr. Trump saying it. We have the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the previous chairman of the Joint Chiefs and previous chairmen of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees. They specifically referenced a tipping point – when the United States continued to reduce its capacity and capabilities it actually encouraged countries like Russia and China to spend more on national defense because they felt they could then catch us. I think Mr. Trump's positions are exactly harmonious with each other – a strong defense and more capacity and capability actually makes for not only a more harmonious world but it actually keeps our competitors from spending more on national defense.

Sessions: Another issue is the nuclear arsenal. By reducing it too dramatically, you can always encourage other nations to believe they could be a feared competitor of the United States. I was worried about that and I think some of that has been proven to being true. The world needs to know that we are not going to be a second-rate military power. You are not going to surpass us. I think that kind of strength allows us to do a better job of maintaining peace in the world.

I have got to tell you, Donald Trump does not believe in war. He sees war as bad, destructive,

death and a wealth destruction. You see what has happened to the people in Syria, the people in Libya. Egypt has not yet recovered from the Muslim Brotherhood and all of that instability. Iraq was just beginning to come back. And Hillary Clinton, they pulled out all of the troops against the military's advice. And now they're struggling to try to take back their own territory when they were a peaceful nation with an elected government in 2011, when we pulled all of the troops out.

You've not answered the question about the Pacific pivot. Would you stop the rebalance of forces from the Atlantic to the Pacific theater?

Sessions: I think we are going to have a Pacific pivot. That may not be the best word anymore, but in general that concept of a strengthened position in the Pacific, I would support. Randy, I know you've studied that more than I.

Forbes: Even the administration started changing their nomenclature on that. This wasn't really a new policy. This was something that was developing. You simply cannot look at a section of the world where we have probably two-thirds of all of the trade in the world going through there for the next 10 years. Where we have major navies and major armies in the world focused on that.

But what this administration missed was, they felt they would be able to simply refocus to the Asia-Pacific area. And they were not going to have to be players in the mideast anymore or other places around the globe. What Mr. Trump realizes is the fact that the United States can't just put all of its eggs in one basket. You have got to have the capability and capacity to be able to defend around the world.

We're still going to have to huge strength in the Asia-Pacific area, but, you can't do that and draw down all of your capacity and capability from the rest of the world. We just do not get that option.

One of the pieces of this is nuclear modernization. Would a President Trump want to recapitalize the nuclear triad – the ballistic missile submarine, the intercontinental ballistic missile, the bomber? What about the nuclear cruise missile? How does that square with the less aggressive posture towards Russia? Some of these programs are aimed at keeping Russia in

check. You are talking about having better relations.

Sessions: Well I will just say that with regard to Russia. I mean, they are doing civil defense exercises on how to survive a nuclear attack. They are building more modern nuclear weapons and have it in their actual war plan. They use them. This is a very dangerous and troubling relationship. They need to know that we are going to absolutely modernize our nuclear weapons.

The Obama administration recognized that, and they have testified on this issue. But we just have not done it. We have not put in enough money to get it done. We are going to have to modernize our nuclear weapons. We have still got nuclear weapons with vacuum tubes in them. This is a critical action.

Mr. Trump says he wants a state-of-the-art missile defense system. What does that mean? What would he replace?

Sessions: Well, we are going to need to continue our ballistic missile defense system. We already have the technology to put in a much better guidance system for those missiles. We will have to continue to complete the development of that and put that on the existing missiles.

We'll have to decide if we need an East Coast site. I am inclined to think we do. We certainly need an East Coast radar site. I would say we will need to continue that. But with the technology developing the way it is I think we will be in a position to keep ahead of our adversaries. The cost is not that dramatic. But you have got to make sure you maintain steady appropriations so you do not lose momentum in any of these new systems.

What would you do with North Korea? They continue to develop weapons. They continue to develop a capability to strike, certainly South Korea, and certainly Japan, and eventually the United States. Would you put more missile defenses in South Korea and in Japan?

Sessions: We need to work with our allies in the Pacific to make sure that we partner, and I think they need to contribute substantially to our missile defense umbrella for Japan and South

Korea. I think Trump has repeatedly said China has to do more to help us confront the dangerous situation in North Korea.

I am going to say one more thing at a philosophical level, that you may think is politics, but I think is the truth. The situation with Korea is much worse than it was when Obama took office. The situation with China is worse. The situation with Russia is exceedingly worse. Pakistan, worse. Iran is worse. Libya is worse. The military says [we] do not involve ourselves in Libya. Hillary Clinton prevailed in that internal debate. We have toppled that government. We have chaos in Libya. Refugees in Libya trying to get to Europe. Syria is just a colossal situation. Iraq is now finding they are regaining territory. We are lucky that the military was able to intervene and get a new election in Egypt. But it is fragile. It is much worse than it was. The Obama administration and Hillary Clinton as secretary of state did little to help that situation. ISIS is on the loose. In virtually every area of the globe we are challenged.

I think it would be a mistake for Donald Trump to start laying out details about how he intends to respond to any of these right now. A lot of milk is spilt and we are going to have to figure out a way to restore our credibility and world stability.

What is the takeaway is for the defense industry in all of this? Donald Trump has hinted in speeches that the big companies might have to watch out. Does that mean he might try to cut down on profits for big firms in order to reap the savings as all of this gets accomplished?

Sessions: Absolutely, the United States government seeks to get what we purchased at the lowest possible cost and with the least number of problems and flaws in it. I think you have got to remain very vigilant that the defense contractors produce on time and on budget.

Forbes: One of the things you need to remember is the most important thing for defense contractors is predictability. If you give them a strategy you are going to stick to that. It gives them predictability so they can do what they need to do.

The other thing we are learning is it is not just state actors we need to be concerned with. It is these non-state actors – we are very concerned about what weapons systems they can get. The threats they can pose on the United States.

It does not seem like there are any areas where you guys are talking about scaling back. It just seems like there is a heavy foot on the gas pedal. Have there been some tough choices between some of these options that you have put forth?

Sessions: There will always be tough choices. I suspect that everything that we would like to have won't be achievable. But what you have got now is a president who prioritizes national defense and national security, and will identify what he needs and requests it. This administration has spent more time saying in effect – it's almost like, you guys want national defense. We'll give you some defense and take your defense money but only if you just need non-national defense money for general government expenditures. I think you have got to set priorities. We can't rebuild a military and spend the same amount of extra money on other projects that are not essential.

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