

Democratic think tank plots war against Russia and China: What is the Center for a New American Security?

Alex Findijs

16 November 2022

Last month, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" television program revealed that the US Air Force is planning to station nuclear-capable B-52 bombers in Australia. Among the pro-war think tank representatives interviewed on the program was Becca Wasser, the lead war-gamer at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS).

Wasser said: "Having bombers that could range and potentially attack mainland China could be very important in sending a signal to China that any of its actions over Taiwan could also expand further."

Wasser's stunningly reckless saber-rattling against China reflects the aggressive orientation of CNAS since its founding in 2007 by Democratic Party operatives with close connections to the defense industry. The relatively small Washington D.C. think tank has played a major role in both the Obama and Biden administrations and the shift in US foreign and military policy towards confrontation with Russia and China, increasing the risk of nuclear war.

CNAS currently has only 30 employees and a budget of just \$6 million. But its small size belies its highly influential role. In many respects, CNAS embodies the emergence of the Democratic Party as the preeminent political instrument of US imperialist militarism.

The think tank was founded in 2007 by Michele Flournoy and Kurt Campbell at a point of mounting crisis for American capitalism both internationally and at home. The so-called "Global War on Terrorism," which had provided the framework for US aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq, had failed to secure American control over the oil-rich Central Asian and Persian Gulf regions, and the George W. Bush administration was rapidly losing popular support within the US.

From its origins, CNAS was oriented to dramatically accelerating Washington's efforts to contain and weaken Russia and China and remove them as obstacles to US hegemony over the Eurasian continent. China's economy was continuing to expand and become more technologically sophisticated, and its international economic influence was extending all the way to US imperialism's "back yard" in Latin America. Russia, in no small measure due to its nuclear arsenal, second only to that of the US, was increasingly becoming an obstacle to Washington's attempts to install puppet regimes in the Middle East.

CNAS issued a call in its founding statement to rebuild within the US support and capacity for waging war, arguing that "the next president should foster a broad dialogue with the American people and with America's allies on when it is appropriate—and not—to use force in the new security environment."

Central to CNAS' program was the idea that the US was declining in relative power, and had to prepare militarily and economically to defeat adversaries such as China and Russia. In 2011, the Obama administration and its secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, adopted CNAS' policy of confronting China, developed by Kurt Campbell and dubbed the "Pivot to

Asia," as the US shifted its military focus to the Asia-Pacific region.

The US was thwarted by Russia's military, economic and diplomatic support for Syria during the US-instigated civil war aimed at toppling the pro-Russian regime of Bashar al-Assad. In September of 2013, Obama pulled back from his threat to militarily escalate the US intervention in Syria, largely due to the threat of Russian military intervention.

But just months later, in February of 2014, Washington backed the fascist-led regime-change operation in Ukraine that overthrew the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich and installed a rabidly nationalistic, anti-Russian regime. The new government was allied with neo-Nazi forces that celebrated Ukrainian nationalist leader Stepan Bandera and his fascist movement, which collaborated with the Nazis during World War II in the slaughter of Jews and Poles.

That was the starting point for the massive arming of Ukraine and its transformation into a proxy for US and NATO military conflict with Russia, which began last February when the Biden administration succeeded in goading Moscow into invading Ukraine. CNAS personnel, including former CNAS CEO Victoria Nuland, have played a leading role in orchestrating the US-Russian conflict in Ukraine.

Who runs CNAS?

Since its founding, CNAS has provided leading State Department and Pentagon officials in first the Obama and then the Biden administrations.

Michele Flournoy

Flournoy served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy in the Clinton administration before founding CNAS. She was the under secretary of defense for policy in the Obama administration.

While in the Clinton administration, she drafted the "1997 Quadrennial Defense Review," which argued that the US needed to be "capable of fighting and winning two major theater wars nearly simultaneously." During her tenure in the Obama administration, she crafted the US counter-insurgency policy in Afghanistan and helped convince Obama to intervene militarily in Libya. She was so influential that she was known as "the other Michele," to avoid confusion with First Lady Michelle Obama.

She is also the co-founder and managing director of WestExec Advisors, a consulting firm that "offers unique geopolitical and policy expertise to help business leaders make the best decisions in a complex and volatile international landscape."

Flournoy is a board member of Booz Allen Hamilton, a multi-billion-dollar defense contractor which Bloomberg has called "the world's most profitable spy organization." According to a 2002 *Information*

Week article, the firm at that time had “more than 1,000 former intelligence officers on its staff.”

Kurt Campbell

Campbell was assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs in the Obama administration. Prior to that he served as a naval officer in the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Chief of Naval Operations Special Intelligence Unit.

During his time in the Obama administration, he was instrumental in developing the “Pivot to Asia” to confront China. He outlined the shift in US foreign policy toward Taiwan in 2011 during a House Foreign Affairs Committee meeting, saying it was “critical” to build a “comprehensive, durable, and unofficial” relationship with Taiwan. In 2021, Biden appointed him to the post of coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs.

Campbell has directly received retainers from defense contractors Lockheed Martin, Northrup Gruman and Raytheon. He is also involved with a consulting firm called The Asia Group, which has close ties to defense contractors. According to an investigation by the Project on Government Oversight, Campbell received a \$25,000 a month retainer from several defense firms in exchange for traveling to Australia once a year to speak to government officials about buying US weapons.

Victoria Nuland

Nuland is another major Obama-era foreign policy official who played a leading role in the overthrow of the elected Ukrainian government and selection of its pro-Western replacement in 2014. A leaked phone call during the Maidan protests that culminated in the forced removal of Ukrainian President Yanukovich exposed her role in orchestrating the operation in behalf of US imperialism. “I don’t think Klitsch [Vitaly Klitschko, mayor of Kiev and former boxer] should go into the government,” she is heard saying. “I don’t think it’s necessary, I don’t think it’s a good idea... I think Yats [Arseniy Yatseniuk] is the guy who’s got the economic experience, the governing experience. He’s the... what he needs is Klitsch and Tyahnybok on the outside.”

Oleh Tyahnybok is a neo-Nazi. As leader of the far-right Svoboda Party, he played a leading role in the US-backed Maidan protests in Kiev that culminated in the overthrow of Yanukovich. In a 2004 speech that was aired on Ukrainian television, he denounced the “Moscow-Jewish mafia ruling Ukraine” and hailed Stepan Bandera’s World War II Ukrainian National Army, saying, “They were not afraid and we should not be afraid. They took their automatic guns on their necks and went into the woods, and fought against the Muscovites, Germans, Jews and other scum who wanted to take away our Ukrainian state.”

In 2013, Tyahnybok and another Svoboda Party leader were barred from entering the United States for their open anti-Semitism.

Arseniy Yatseniuk is a right-wing, pro-Western politician who was installed as the first prime minister of Ukraine following the February 2014 Maidan putsch.

Following her stint in the Obama administration, Nuland served as CEO of CNAS from 2018 to 2019. She is now the under secretary of state for political affairs in the Biden administration. She has links to Pine Island Capital Partners, which has ties with other Biden administration officials, including Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin.

David Cohen

Cohen is a former adjunct senior fellow at CNAS. In 2009 he was chosen by Obama to be assistant secretary for terrorist financing in the US Treasury Department, before becoming undersecretary of the Treasury for terrorism and financial intelligence two years later. In this role he led the development of the Democratic Party’s sanctions program against Russia and Iran. From 2015 to 2017, he served as deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, where he played a leading role in promoting allegations that Russia had intervened in the 2016 US elections. He was appointed again to this position by Biden in February, 2021.

Ely Ratner

Ratner is a former CNAS fellow who currently serves as the special assistant to the secretary of defense. He has close ties to Biden personally, serving in 2002-2003 as a staffer to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (then chaired by Biden), and from 2015 to 2017 as Biden’s deputy national security advisor during the Obama administration. From 2011 to 2012 he also served in the Office of Chinese and Mongolian affairs at the State Department. After the inauguration of Trump, Ratner became the China studies fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and executive vice president and director of studies at CNAS.

Elizabeth Rosenberg

Rosenberg is a former senior fellow and director of the Energy, Economics and Security Program at CNAS. She currently serves as counselor to the deputy secretary of the Treasury in the Biden administration. Prior to her current role, she worked in the Obama White House from 2009 to 2013 as senior advisor at the Treasury Department for David Cohen. She is considered an expert in “coercive economic statecraft,” developing sanctions against Iran, Libya and Syria. Such sanctions packages have been used to target Russia for nearly a decade.

Funding and support

Defense contractors

Leading contributors to CNAS from the defense industry include Northrup Gruman, Lockheed Martin, Boeing and Raytheon. Between October 1, 2020 and September 30, 2021, Northrup Gruman alone donated more than \$500,000 to CNAS. Raytheon has donated between \$100,000 and \$250,000, and Lockheed Martin and Boeing have each donated between \$50,000 and \$100,000.

High tech

Tech giants Microsoft, Amazon, Facebook and Google all donated at least \$100,000 to CNAS last year. A notable contributor is the computer chip manufacturer Qualcomm. The conflict between the US and China over advanced chip production is central to the confrontation over Taiwan, the leader in global chip manufacturing.

In the words of the liberal online magazine *Responsible Statecraft*, published by the Washington D.C.-based Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, “[T]heir [CNAS’] interventionist views often fit quite comfortably with that of the profit-oriented aims of big industry players... contributions to CNAS from Amazon, Google and Microsoft suggest that Silicon Valley recognizes the benefit of ‘Extending American Power.’”

National governments

National governments have also contributed significant amounts to CNAS. The United States Department of Defense has donated at least \$500,000. The European Union, through the German Marshall Fund of the United States, has donated between \$100,000 and \$250,000. The governments of Latvia and Lithuania, two militarily important NATO countries that border Russia, have also donated to CNAS.

Most significantly, CNAS has received hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office, which acts as the de facto embassy of the Taiwanese government for countries that established formal ties with the People’s Republic of China.

CNAS’ role in guiding US foreign policy

While CNAS has been careful in its documents to shy away from direct

calls for war, it has consistently argued that the US must prepare to defeat Russia and China militarily before it is too late.

In a 2021 report titled “Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership,” it argued that “Sino-Russian cooperation would put at risk America’s ability to deter Chinese aggression in the region and uphold its commitment to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific.” It went on to assert that “their cooperation would amplify the challenge that each country poses to the United States... Simply put, Russia is amplifying America’s China challenge.”

This perspective was most clearly outlined in CNAS’ 2019 report titled “Why America Needs a New Way of War.” This “new way of war” involved a shift from the assumption that the US would always be the premier military power. It entailed “long-term competition with great powers with capable militaries and substantial non-military power.”

A concern voiced repeatedly in the report was that the United States could be defeated in a military conflict with China. To prevent this, the US would have to further develop its military capabilities and prepare “to fight and win limited regional conflicts against China or Russia.” The report continued: “This necessitates the ability to defend vulnerable allies and key partners, and to directly defeat the Chinese or Russian forces engaged in aggression without immediate resort to escalation or strategies of attrition and exhaustion.”

In line with the basic orientation of CNAS, US foreign policy since the Obama administration has been grounded on preparing for “great power conflict” with Russia and China. While CNAS has focused primarily on China, its designation of Russia as a target to weaken China is being played out in the current US-led proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

This war, which has already killed or wounded hundreds of thousands on both sides, threatens at any point to erupt into a nuclear conflict, with all of the catastrophic implications for the very existence of the planet. In mapping out the aggressive strategic orientation of American imperialism, the academic spooks at CNAS, closely aligned with the Democratic Party, are formulating and seeking to implement the barbaric response of the American ruling class to its long-time economic decline.

The 2022 US National Security Strategy released last month by the Biden White House warned that “The People’s Republic of China harbors the intention and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order in favor of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit.” To prevent this, the document insisted, the US must prepare to “compete with major autocratic powers to shape the international order.”

As Leon Trotsky wrote in 1934:

US capitalism is up against the same problems that pushed Germany in 1914 on the path of war. The world is divided? It must be redivided. For Germany it was a question of ‘organizing Europe.’ The United States must ‘organize’ the world. History is bringing mankind face to face with the volcanic eruption of American imperialism.

An agenda of world war is not compatible with democracy or social reform. The efforts of pseudo-left organizations of the privileged middle class such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) to promote the lie that the Democratic Party can be pressured from below to move to the left are belied in theory by the words of the academic war criminals at CNAS and in practice by the war-mongering policies of the Biden administration and its Democratic (and Republican) predecessors, and their corollary—the ever more brutal assault on the living standards and democratic rights of the working class.

Indeed, organizations such as the DSA have fully revealed the class logic of their anti-Marxism, nationalism and obsession with the politics of

race and gender by becoming full-throated, open defenders of US imperialism and its wars of aggression—from the Middle East and Central Asia to Russia and China.

This is bound up with their insistence on the subordination of the working class to the corporatist trade unions and their bureaucratic apparatuses—pro-war and savagely hostile to the interests and aspirations of the workers who are forced to pay tribute in the form of dues and are increasingly rising up in rebellion against them.

Earlier this month, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) published a call to build an international movement of youth, based on the working class and the fight for socialism, to stop the war in Ukraine, beginning with an international online meeting on December 10.

The statement explained:

The economic, political and social foundations of capitalism are crumbling. The class struggle—the great motor force of historical progress—is breaking through all the institutional mechanisms of social control.

While the development of the war raises great dangers for young people and for all of mankind, the IYSSE bases its program not on despair, but on confidence that we can fight and win the future.

The fatalism of the pessimists expresses an outlook that remains trapped within the confines of what is possible within the capitalist world order. Optimism arises out of an understanding that the same capitalist crisis that produces war, dictatorship, climate change and social reaction also produces the growth of international working class struggle.

This struggle requires conscious and determined socialist leadership. Youth, students and workers must decide to join this fight and build this leadership.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality is hosting an international online meeting on Saturday, December 10, for the building of a movement against the drive to war. Register today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact