The Rocky Relationship Between Washington and Silicon Valley

Clearing the Path to Improved Collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

The Trump administration inherited a decent foundation on which to build collaborative ties between Washington and hubs of American innovation like Silicon Valley. Both President Barack Obama and former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter invested heavily in improving government outreach to the tech industry, bringing Washington and Silicon Valley closer than they have been in decades on both policy substance and technology solutions in the national security space. But the relationship was far from perfect, and it is as yet unclear whether lessons, good and bad, from Obama's efforts have been taken seriously by their successors.

Serious work remains to be done in substantive collaborations on countering violent extremism, the future of encryption, cybersecurity threats, and surveillance. Furthermore, several minefields lay ahead – such as addressing the technical and foreign policy challenges of "fake news," the ongoing immigration debate, and the impact of automation on both domestic and international security matters.[1] At this stage, it is unclear whether there will be similar levels of engagement with the tech industry to collaborate on solutions to these challenges or if the relationship will be sustained.

President Donald Trump certainly appears to be interested in what technology leaders on the West Coast have to offer, recruiting contributors like Apple CEO Tim Cook, Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff, and Bill Gates to support the new White House Office of American Innovation, which is designed to bring "fresh business ideas to government."[2] This may prove to be a worthwhile initiative, but the outlook for serious engagement on hard problems of mutual interest is already marred by the administration's exclusionary immigration policies, which quickly provoked a backlash among technology companies.[3] Furthermore, in the run-up to the election, much of the tech industry publicly supported Hillary Clinton, making the dissipation of bicoastal tensions all the more difficult in the short term.

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1 Jessica Guynn, "Tech Workers Vow Not to Build Trump Muslim Registry," USA Today, December 13, 2016, https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2016/12/13/tech-workers-vow-not-build-trump-muslim-registry/95407242/

2 Emily Dreyfuss, "Innovation Can Fix Government, Sure. Either That or Break It," Wired, March 27, 2017, https://www.wired.com/2017/03/innovation-can-fix-government-sure-either-break/

3 Davey Alba, "The Silicon Valley Engineers Driving the Anti-Trump Train," Wired, February 3, 2017, https://www.wired.com/2017/02/silicon-valley-vs-trump-tech-workers-wield-real-power/

But this relationship has never been easy, and political change may have less impact than the long-standing cultural divides and differences in norms separating both communities. Serious policy and legal arguments have also divided them – such as the iPhone encryption debate and subsequent courtroom disputes. Despite that, Obama recognized "technology as an engine to improve lives and accelerate society more quickly than any government body," while Carter also saw vast potential for a synergistic relationship between the Department of Defense and startups, going so far as to set up the Defense Innovation Unit Experimental (DIUx) as a permanent West Coast outpost.[4] Though perhaps more warily, CEOs and founders have opened their doors to government delegations and invested serious time and resources in global challenges. And as American technology companies expand globally, they will almost certainly continue to touch on matters of international affairs – finding themselves caught between geopolitical actors and their bottom line, faced with unpredictable or hazardous uses of their product, or needing a government voice to protect their markets. Changes to leadership do not change this reality. Neither the technology community nor the international security policy community should give up on cross-sector collaboration in the many arenas that could yield mutual benefits.

A close look at why Silicon Valley–D.C. engagement on sensitive security policy issues has struggled, when it has worked, and the key ingredients to make it more productive is overdue. Like any couple with high demand, high stress day jobs and who have difficulty communicating, this relationship may benefit from a clear-eyed assessment and relationship counseling.

METHODOLOGY

The Center for a New American Security (CNAS) and the Copia Institute launched a qualitative, exploratory study to investigate the demand signal for better dialogue on issues intersecting the technology and international security policy communities.[5] The team used personal interviews and, later, a more detailed online survey with subject matter experts, policy leaders, academics, technology executives, and consultants. Next, they began to build an understanding of the communities' perceptions of each other and incentives for smaller startups, larger technology companies, and international policy experts to work together (or not).

Though a relatively small and nonscientific sample, the survey and interview participants were deliberately chosen for both their extensive experiences and their ability to discuss dynamics in their communities in an informed way. Both the survey and interviews were conducted on a not-for-named-attribution basis. The questions focused on drawing out the details of respondents' perceptions of cross-sector collaboration, experiences engaging with the "other" community, and anticipation of opportunities for productive dialogue.

Of note: All input was collected before the 2016 election. While the change in political context may have an impact

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4 Jenna Wortham, "Obama Brought Silicon Valley to Washington," The New York Times, October 25, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/30/magazine/barack-obama-brought-silicon-valley-to-washington-is-that-a-good-thing.html

5 CNAS and the Copia Institute defined the international security policy community to include nongovernmental and governmental organizations focused on influencing, developing, or implementing international security policy. They also defined the technology community to include organizations that are premised on creating value through disruption and are growing quickly, expanding, or exerting influence globally.

on how these communities engage, their core cultural differences and the nature of the challenges to be addressed remain constant.

Among the questions explored:

- What is your understanding of the policy-technology community relationship?
- What are substantive policy topics on which these communities might productively engage?
- Which collaborative methods are the most and least effective in bringing these communities together on policy matters?
- What sorts of participants are useful – or not – to these cross-sector engagements?
- What factors contribute to successful policy collaboration? What barriers prevent it?
- What specific experiences do you believe the communities could learn from?

CNAS and the Copia Institute also leveraged their prior research and experience analyzing and working in the spaces between the Washington, D.C., international security policy community and the Silicon Valley technology community.

FINDINGS

The findings from CNAS and the Copia Institute's exploratory study will not seem groundbreaking to those who work at the nexus of the technology and international security policy communities. The survey and interview responses confirm the conventional wisdom that the policy-technology relationship is strained and, at times, adversarial. Many predictable barriers stand between these communities and effective collaboration – barriers that will sound familiar to anyone who has sought professional relationship advice. So, if the problems are so obvious, why is it that neither community feels comfortable in the relationship?

Engagement between the technology and international security policy communities is occurring, but its effectiveness is not a given. For that reason, we sought views on key ingredients that make engagements succeed or fail. Some of the most critical determinants for improving collaboration included such factors as endorsement and involvement of leaders in any such project; the kinds of participants in any engagement; how the initiating question or task is framed; personal relationships between participants; and follow-up by participants.

This last issue – follow-up by participants – received the most attention throughout the study. Over and over, survey and interview participants described productive sessions – meetings, conferences, brainstorming – that ultimately went nowhere. In an earlier CNAS study of attempts by the Department of Defense (DoD) to partner with Silicon Valley, tech industry and government representatives alike lamented an increasingly frustrating phenomenon they called "tech tourism": government personnel seeking out generic meetings with technology companies without defined objectives and no plan for concrete results or further engagement.[6] Respondents in this project similarly characterized

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6 Ben FitzGerald and Loren DeJonge Schulman, "12 Months In – 8 Months Left: An Update on Secretary Carter's Innovation Agenda" (Center for a New American Security, April 2016), https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/12-months-in-8-months-left-an-update-on-secretary-carters-innovation-agenda.

much of this failure in cross-sector engagement as largely, though not uniquely, a government problem – although, in general, the government being the "suitor," rather than the target, in the courtship could be an important factor.

To expand on this study, CNAS and the Copia Institute set out to identify specific steps that could improve collaboration between the technology and international security policy communities. Barriers to positive engagement may vary from one issue to the next but they share a pernicious point of commonality: poor communication and lack of shared understanding. The policy-technology relationship is not strained because of a lack of awareness of shared problems, but because productive dialogue is frequently derailed by divergent perspectives and mutual misjudgment.

The following themes, repeated by both survey and interview respondents, illustrate why common ground between these communities is in such short supply and suggests initial steps to diminish the barriers to policy-technology collaboration.

Preexisting tension between the technology and international security policy communities undermines the success of professional relationships and engagements between the groups. Unsurprisingly, very few respondents expressed positive views of the state of relations between Silicon Valley and Washington. Nearly 80 percent of survey respondents rated the current state of collaboration between the communities as "poor" or "very poor," with communication and coordination drawing similarly negative rebukes. Some respondents felt this bad blood was an elephant in the room and noted that open acknowledgment of tensions is a prerequisite for a positive working relationship. Politely whitewashing cultural differences is not viable, nor is ignoring past serious disputes. One of those surveyed highlighted the highly fraught Apple-FBI encryption debate and called for "apologies…for attacking patriotism or motives" as a first step for related discussions. Getting past these tensions requires establishing a baseline understanding of each other's goals and interests – and how they clash or overlap – to help "stakeholders focus on finding a common solution rather than defending existing positions," as one technology community respondent reported. Another warned that failing to take such steps to ameliorate "the current adversarial nature of the relationship can only lead to distrust and heightened aggression from each side."

The incentives for collaboration are understood differently across the technology and international security policy communities. Despite the frustration expressed over the current state of relations, all but two survey respondents reported that technology companies have something to gain from increased collaboration with the international security policy community, and every single survey respondent said the policy community would gain from increased cooperation. Whether due to potential gains or simply resignation, there is a sense of necessity for improving this partnership, particularly given the number of critical intersecting issues on the horizon. One survey respondent stated, "We can't not bridge these communities, [it's] too critical to the nation and the world." Nonetheless, members of both communities disagree about the specific benefits of collaboration.

Still, respondents from the technology community perceive uneven returns from engagement with their policy counterparts. Some further argued that the international security policy community has more to gain in terms of both actual capability and knowledge of trends. The utility of the tech sector working with the policy community in mat-

ters where they might act as advocates, political interpreters, or partners (e.g., trade negotiation or limiting harmful foreign regulation) was not raised, whether due to the makeup of the respondents, an unwillingness to acknowledge comparative advantages, or limited returns. To our surprise, some warned against the international security policy community trying to make the case that joint engagement on policy issues is primarily a business interest to those in the tech industry. As one respondent explained, "Businesses are focused on profits and growth and everything else is either an enabler or a distraction," so engaging on policy-related challenges may be worthwhile but not relevant to near-term business motives. In contrast, in interviews, the international security policy community was convinced that demonstrating that its work has business impact is key to getting in the door with Silicon Valley. Unsurprisingly, "we're from the government and we're here to help you" is not a welcome opener in technology centers. Explicitly and humbly disavowing this stereotype – being painstakingly clear on what policymakers are actually working toward – would be a welcome first step.

Fundamental differences between governmental and commercial approaches to problem solving undermine the success of cross-sector engagements. Collaboration between the technology and international security policy communities on hard problems is difficult because the purpose and pace of operations do not align was a common theme in both surveys and interviews. Though far from the only difference, an example that came up repeatedly suggested the two sides hold different understandings of the value of time and its link to change within formal processes. Meetings and reform processes, for example, tend to be lengthy, repetitive, and exploratory in the policy world, versus short, purposeful, and experimental in the technology world, generating frustration when the groups are mixed. "Destructive innovation can work well for a company...accountable only to its customers," whereas a democratic government by its nature must be held accountable to all of its citizens.[7] Frustration over these differences is particularly high within the technology community, because the opportunity cost of taking government meetings, especially those with no clear or immediate returns, is revenue.[8]

Such differences become all the more stressful if the knowledge base between the communities is drastically different when launching an engagement. Lack of technical know-how among policymakers was criticized regularly by tech participants. Interestingly, neither sector raised significant concerns in the survey about the technology community's relative inexperience or indifference to policy substance or process being much of a limitation, which perhaps reflects the (unrealistic and unhelpful) engineers-vs.-liberal-arts-majors meme haunting social media, with engineers generally attributed omni-competence compared with liberal arts majors' supposed inability to function in STEM fields. Regardless, such perceptions seem more a matter of stereotype than reality and are easily mitigable. Mutual goal setting, preparatory homework, flexibility, and candor regarding mutual problems and opportunities are potential fixes to these tensions.

The nature of the issues being addressed – and the framework for engagement – are critical determinants of whether cross-sector collaboration will succeed or fail. To scope their next phase of work, CNAS and the Copia

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7 Dreyfuss, "Innovation Can Fix Government, Sure. Either That or Break It."

8 Billy Mitchell, "DoD Innovation Unit Hosting Pitch Events in Silicon Valley," FedScoop, November 4, 2015, https://www.fedscoop.com/dod-innovation-unit-hosting-pitch-events-in-silicon-valley/

Institute are particularly interested in what issue areas are most productive for bringing together the international security policy and technology communities – what's the "next big thing," or the issue currently lacking appropriate attention. In interviews, several respondents warned against trying to launch any additional policy discussions on highly contentious topics, particularly cybersecurity, encryption, and counterterrorism. At best, they judged this space to be too saturated and, at worst, too contaminated by bad blood to make new collaborative efforts worthwhile (such views may have been influenced by significant media attention to a series of tense engagements between Washington and large tech companies). In contrast, the survey data revealed the opposite. Even though these topics have created serious tensions, for obvious reasons they top the list of issues that would yield the most significant benefits from continued engagement: The greatest opportunity lies wherever there are the greatest points of friction. Former Secretary of Defense Carter, for example, spent the last months of his tenure encouraging cross-sector collaboration on cybersecurity and encryption, despite seemingly incompatible tech industry and government points of view. He emphasized the importance of striking a "balance between what the government says it needs (no encryption!) and what the tech community says it needs (encryption!)."[9] Though these and other issues generated interest, – like data localization, cryptocurrencies, technology and civil society, and the 'Internet of Things' – the specific topic seemed less important than the approach. Above all, study participants emphasized the importance of pursuing topics where both sides share not just mutual interest or frustration, but also a degree of certainty that collaboration will have a direct and positive impact on the issue at hand. Mutual admiration of a problem goes only so far. Survey respondents endorsed data localization, cryptocurrencies, technology and civil society, and "the Internet of Things" as promising topics, for example. But more than the issue, the kind of engagement – and who does it – matters.

Who participates in collaborative efforts between these communities can make or break the opportunity for positive engagement. In a prior study, CNAS encountered a view that when working together, neither the policy community nor the technology community involved the right kinds of people. One thing they have in common? Shared frustration over lawyers. The extent to which legal departments inhibit collaboration between the policy and technology communities was a common theme among study participants. Government respondents noted how difficult it was to acquire legal clearance to meet with individual companies without navigating a host of contractual requirements. And technology community respondents expressed similar frustration over the difficulty of "bypassing legal roadblocks" to engage with D.C. representatives or to avoid an "automatic no" when seeking follow-up engagements. For this and other comparable reasons, many highlighted the need for third-party stakeholders or organizations to host or separately engage communities on particularly sensitive issues. This is similar to Track 1.5 or Track 2 dialogues held within the foreign policy community, in which third parties use informal forums to bring together disparate groups for relationship building, learning about another perspective, and considering options for problem solving.[10] There seems to be an opportunity for third-party organizations to play a similar role.

In addition to lawyers, the press received similarly negative feedback for its involvement in policy discussions, particularly given the number of recent public disputes between the communities. Investors, international organizations,

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9 Jessi Hempell, "DoD Head Ashton Carter Enlists Silicon Valley to Transform the Military," Wired, November 19, 2015, https://www.wired.com/2015/11/secretary-of-defense-ashton-carter/

10 J. W. McDonald and D. B. Bendahmane, eds., Conflict Resolution: Track Two Diplomacy (Washington: Foreign Service Institute, U.S. Department of State, 1987)

and industry associations were also unpopular participants. On a more positive note, there was enthusiasm around including engineers, technology policy leads, technology company leaders, government agencies, and think tanks in any international security policy engagements.

The format of the engagements themselves can impact the results. Of particular interest to CNAS and the Copia Institute was whether certain types of collaborations could bring together policy and technology professionals in a more productive manner. Nothing from the survey results stood out as a magic format, but there was a notable emphasis on the utility of executive-level meetings (to ensure leadership buy-in), informal interactions and informal requests for comment (to build relationships and keep pressure low), and simulations and exercises (to provide context and opportunity to see alternative perspectives on policy issues). The "Hacking for Defense" platform, launched at Stanford University and now available at six additional universities, is a particularly successful example of an educational exchange that draws policy and technical experts together to "develop technology solutions to help solve important national security problems."[11] On the other hand, conferences, formal requests for comment, and, surprisingly, hackathons proved the least popular forums among respondents.

THE KEY INGREDIENTS

Some immovable barriers present complex challenges to technology and policy professionals seeking to bridge the bicoastal divide. Even if the topic, the forum, the objective, and the participants are right, fundamental philosophical differences, a history of distrust, and the absence of leadership support can still stand in the way of productive collaboration. So, how can the technology and international security policy community move past these barriers?

With this question in mind, CNAS and the Copia Institute specifically asked survey and interview participants for examples of key takeaways from their experiences with collaboration. Respondents offered some practical lessons for those seeking to pursue such efforts in the future, including:

- Readiness to travel to Silicon Valley by the policy community
- Realism on timeline and objectives to avoid inertia and decision paralysis
- Deliberately including an appropriate range of perspectives
- Willingness to do advance homework and study the other's issues and perspectives
- Transparency on all sides
- Consistent follow-through, identification of action items, and allocation of responsibility

Overall, clearer communication, more purposeful engagement, and mutual understanding between these sectors will be critical to improving the policy-technology relationship on key policy issues. Respondents also focused on the need for informality, personal relationships, and honest, regular dialogue over the long term as core elements for successful and continuous future engagement. Specific, practical steps toward these ends should center on increasing

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11 "Hacking 4 Defense (H4D)," Stanford H4D, accessed April 24, 2017, http://hacking4defense.stanford.edu/

the flow of ideas and people between the technology and the policy worlds.

As in Track 1.5 and Track 2 diplomacy, experts who have worked in or with these communities can serve as highly effective "translators" to facilitate this relationship-building process. Silicon Valley outreach efforts by former Defense Secretary Carter were moderately well received in no small part due to his scientific background and ability to "speak the language" with engineers and policymakers alike.[12] Future successful engagements will also depend on including those who can participate or facilitate discussion outside the bounds of formal structures and others who can act as neutral arbiters when tensions are high. Think tanks or academia may be well placed to facilitate bridge building and serve as "mediators" in some circumstances – particularly for longer-term issues.

Likewise, encouraging more mobility between these sectors will be a critical step toward increasing opportunities to cooperate on tough policy challenges over the long term. Whereas "tech tourism…often leads to a less optimal result," as one government official reported, extended cross-sector engagements to acquire skills and connections are more promising. Rethinking government incentives and processes will be essential to recruiting experts from the tech industry and encouraging policymakers to take private-sector positions. For example, under Carter, the Pentagon was exploring programs that would place career officers in technology companies for several months while, at the same time, inviting individuals from technology companies to spend time at the Department of Defense.[13]

In short, creating opportunities to understand the other's issues and positions and being honest about unknowns and misunderstandings will form the foundations for cross-sector dialogue with a purpose and with results. See the next page for a breakdown of our **six lessons for success.**

NEXT STEPS

CNAS and the Copia Institute are going to test these lessons through a few "experiments" with partners in government, the policy community, academia, the technology community, and others. From these efforts we may create some useful case studies for others to mirror, or we may run into the exact same barriers as past efforts – either way, we'll publish and share our findings. Critical elements to our experiments will be relationship building and information sharing ahead of any event, hosts and participants who are able to "translate" effectively for all stakeholders, identification of desired outcomes and a way ahead going into any collaborations, and immersive discussions forcing participants to take different sides.

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12 Tony Capaccio, Brian Womack, and Terry Atlas, "Silicon Valley Wary as Pentagon Chief to Court Innovators," Bloomberg News, August 27, 2015, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-08-27/silicon-valley-wary-as-pentagon-chief-comes-to-court-innovators. This article can also be found at: https://www.stripes.com/news/us/silicon-valley-wary-as-pentagon-chief-to-court-innovators-1.364983#.WTcKHdy1tiI?

13 Hempell, "DoD Head Ashton Carter Enlists Silicon Valley."

SIX LESSONS FOR SUCCESS

Be transparent – and acknowledge the elephants in the room. At minimum, this means stakeholders from both sectors should be straightforward about their own motives and make an effort to understand the other side's goals and interests before meeting on a potentially sensitive policy topic. Several respondents affirmed that clearing the air was a worthwhile first step. Experts can achieve this by acknowledging the problems and misunderstandings they have experienced in the past or read about in the press.

Own what you don't know and be willing to learn in advance. Homework – and humility about any gaps – will go a long way to making any engagements between these communities worthwhile. This work might be episodic (such as intensive mutual preparation for events and projects) or structural (such as policymaker or legal specialization in technology matters) or a willingness to acknowledge comparative advantages (such as diplomatic familiarity with foreign counterparts or deference to engineering expertise).

Go in with a plan – and a plan for follow-up. Over and over, respondents described potentially positive and fruitful meetings, conferences, phone calls, or other engagements that ultimately resulted in nothing because of a lack of clear objectives, lack of respect for time, and lack of follow-through. Open-ended engagements are clearly not useful, and defining timelines, objectives, and desired outcomes (at least in broad terms) would serve both sectors well.

Use third parties (or: lawyers, keep away!) Third-party participants, translators, and moderators will be useful assets to the technology and international security policy sectors, particularly as hosts and intermediaries for particularly sensitive issues. Third parties make for useful neutral ground, but also as arbiters able to ensure inclusion of the full range of perspectives. This recommendation, affirming an initial hypothesis of our study, also may allow both sectors to avoid some of the internal structural barriers they face, like the legal department's reluctance to bless open dialogue and collaboration.

It's all about relationships. Despite our expectation that demonstrating clear business interest would be the best driver of collaboration, survey respondents strongly encouraged informal encounters in future efforts, as a way to invest in relationships between the sectors, and deemphasized the transactional "what can you do for me" nature of many D.C.–Silicon Valley ventures.

It's not the topic, it's the process. Topics of interest to these sectors will frequently and necessarily be sensitive. Searching for win-win goodwill opportunities for collaboration is a nice idea but likely unrealistic. Survey respondents in particular highlighted that arguing conveners should not discard sensitive topics (like encryption or counterterrorism) on the basis of the topic being difficult or well-trodden. If anything, this is an indication that experts should try new methods of addressing them. More important was a degree of certainty that collaboration will have a direct and positive impact on the issue at hand. Mutual admiration of a problem goes only so far.