

POLITICO Pro Q&A: AI advisory panel leaders Eric Schmidt and Robert Work

By Sarah Cammarata

10/07/2020 02:01 PM EDT

China's military build-up and "[digital authoritarianism](#)" is raising red flags to U.S. leadership, yet the heads of a government artificial intelligence advisory board argue America is well-positioned to be dominant when it comes to AI.

Former Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work and former Google CEO Eric Schmidt said they hope the Pentagon and other agencies adopt new technologies more quickly, but they remain optimistic the U.S. will keep its prowess in the increasingly competitive field.

The positive outlook marks a change in tone from their [previous warnings](#) about [China and AI](#). While they agree that the U.S. must prioritize advancements in artificial intelligence, quantum computing and other new technology or risk losing the U.S. innovation edge, in line with recent government reports, Work and Schmidt emphasized how much progress Congress and the administration has made so far.

The two lead the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, which was created under the fiscal 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, [H.R. 5515 \(115\)](#), and advises the government on how AI affects national security.

The U.S. has been "slow to respond to the opportunities and promise of AI," in terms of how automation could benefit economic development and preserve national security, said Work, who pushed for AI reforms in the Obama administration. However, he said "it seems to me that the nation is really starting to marshal its efforts."

The commission delivered [its first interim report to Congress](#) in November 2019 that addressed their concern that "America's role as the world's leading innovator is threatened," primarily by China. Recent recommendations — the focus of a [House Armed Services subcommittee hearing last month](#) — prioritize [bolstering the workforce](#) and making structural changes to the Defense Department. That includes moving the Pentagon's Joint Artificial Intelligence Center out from under the chief information officer and placing it under the defense secretary or a deputy.

Both Work and Schmidt have warned of China's AI development, and [a new HASC report](#) said the Pentagon is clinging to old weapons systems, but an interview with the commissioners presented a positive picture of congressional action on the technology.

The National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence chair and vice chair discussed recent moves from the White House on AI, support from Congress for their recommendations and private sector-government collaboration on this technology, especially in the aftermath of the Project Maven debacle. Google [pulled out of the Pentagon project in 2018](#) over concerns from employees about the company's involvement. The program used AI to help intelligence analysts pick out military targets from video footage and could have improved the targeting of drone strikes.

This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

How did Congress react to your recommendations?

Eric Schmidt: Everything we've proposed has had support from both parties. What I am worried about is the number of little things that have to get done are really, really large. ... We're trying to make sure that the path from our recommendations into the NDAA is smooth, routine, well-accepted.

Robert Work: [Elise Stefanik](#), a Republican from New York, is probably one of our leading proponents. And she works very closely with Rep. [Jim Langevin](#). He's a Democrat. And together, that's a heck of a one-two bipartisan punch.

There is bipartisan recognition that we're in an innovation competition with China. It's absolutely central that we win this innovation competition. [The White House] just allocated \$1 billion, and of that \$1 billion, there will be [seven AI Institutes](#) that are being established at different universities, and another three quantum institutes.

The reason why it's so important we win [the competition] is there's a values competition embedded in it because of the way governments will use these technologies for either good or not so good, and we want the world to be able to have standards that reflect our values — personal privacy, and not using these type of technologies to surveil the population, or to monitor and keep down minorities. I'm quite bullish on the way this is headed in terms of congressional support.

What changes can we expect to the AI national strategy under a Biden administration?

Schmidt: I was talking to one Republican friend yesterday when I was in D.C. and he explained that the civilians under Trump turn over anyway. So it's a new team in either scenario, so I think it's too early to say.

The commission's first interim report released in November 2019 did not come to a judgment about the use of lethal autonomous weapons. What have you concluded and why do groups object to these weapons?

Work: As a commission, we have yet to come to any consensus judgment on lethal autonomous weapon systems. The Department of Defense has been injecting autonomous functionalities into its weapons for 80 years. And we have used them in a responsible way, and they have proven to be utterly safe and reliable. Certainly there have been battlefield mistakes, but generally those mistakes have resulted because of target misidentification.

It is the Department of Defense's firm conviction that combining AI with autonomy will improve target identification, which has then lowered the number of casualties. The department is the only military that I know of that has published ethics, which was at the direct urging of Eric. The department's moving ahead and these debates will continue for quite some time.

How has the commission worked to boost transparency following recent [charges the group was operating in secret](#) and how are you working to increase private sector engagement with the government amid ethical AI concerns?

Schmidt: We've always tried to be quite transparent. We are now a [Federal Advisory Committee Act] committee, which is perfectly fine [Note: Under FACA, the commission must hold open meetings and provide certain records to the public]. With respect to the industry, I think that the [Google Maven](#) thing sort of set a view of what was going on but it's not quite accurate. There are hundreds of small companies and a number of large companies that are trying to work really hard with the DoD and the national security industry overall.

I'm personally aware of quite a few startups and venture capitalists that are trying to fund [DoD and other government projects] to try to get much more modern technologies in for national defense. A lot of [the focus is on] imaging because there's a lot of gains in imaging, so better visual analysis and that sort of thing. There are a lot of people working on autonomy, which is something that the military cares a lot about.

Most people somehow think that [the Google Maven debacle] was the end of the debate. But in fact it was not. It was specific to a company and not specific to the industry.

How will you address social, bureaucratic and political challenges that make adopting AI at the pace you map out more difficult?

Work: The United States in my view has been slow to respond to the opportunities and promise of AI in all things, in our economic development, in our national security, etc. But it seems to me that the nation is really starting to marshal its efforts.

You have widespread recognition in Congress, as we said over 80 bills or 70 bills, in which AI is a prominent part. So it seems to me that the nation really is starting to get its act together.

I'm a glass half-full type of guy, so I'm quite happy with the way things seem to be shaping up, but I'm the glass half-empty in terms of speed.

What has work with allies looked like in the last year and have you discussed AI with China?

Schmidt: I'm not aware of any contact with China. There had been a discussion about maybe doing it, but of course, with the pandemic and everything else going on, there's been no activity there. We have talked to a number of European groups informally.

Work: The staff has met with numbers of our allies and we're in very close discussions with the Department of State on how we marshal our allies in a broader sense, develop AI in a moral, ethical and legal manner. We want to be as close to our allies as we possibly can.