

2017 National Security Strategy Perspective

The new *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (*NSS*) released in December 2017 delineates the Trump administration's approach to United States security. Much of the document consists of the typical boilerplate language of previous strategies since it includes the usual nation-state suspects, North Korea, Iran, Russia, and China, in addition to the familiar theme of terrorism. However, the new *NSS* is unapologetically based on realism, focusing on interests, power, competition, and conflict—and some might say to the detriment of American ideals.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with a security strategy based on realism, this particular *NSS* may well be the most realist-based edition ever produced. It calls out the evil empires, seeks peace through strength (i.e., greater military spending), and wishes to restore confidence in America's purpose (i.e., make America great again). Indeed, it declares a "strategy of principled realism that is guided by outcomes, not ideology." It attempts to pragmatically balance national security tradeoffs and uses the America first mantra as a pseudonym for realism. Several areas in the strategy are most indicative of realism, including economic competition, military strength, a caveated requirement for allies, and a narrow definition of American values.

While the United States relies on a thriving, competitive, international free market system, this strategy calls for reciprocity coupled with fair trade rather than selective enforcement of trade practices. It sees the United States as more a victim rather than arbiter and benefactor in an increasingly complex world economy. This realism-based approach to international economic competition will likely mean cancelled or renegotiated trade agreements, economic protectionism, and foreign reprisal that may well upend the very system it seeks to exploit. How well the administration balances the strategy's realist desires for a competitive US advantage will have implications for the world economy. Extreme realism may swing the balance against a prosperous future.

This *NSS* also rests on the realist assumption that diplomacy and leadership depend on military power. It proposes military modernization to increase and sustain that power by making up for the effects of sequestration and what could be considered a modernization holiday. Not only does this *NSS* insist on modernizing a plethora of systems, but also it focuses on acquisition policy, technology exploitation, and the defense

industrial base—all aimed at increasing military prowess. The new *NSS* also takes a realist approach to cyber intrusions by proposing offensive action against cyber adversaries whether nation-states, criminals, or others. It intends to make America more resilient, more prepared, and more powerful against threats.

For sure the *NSS* extols the virtues of having allies and partners by mentioning these terms 54 times in as many pages. It correctly recognizes there are enough challenges in the world to go around and lists the typical regional opportunities for greater cooperation. However, the one overriding caveat is reciprocity, which means sharing responsibilities equitably and paying a fair share of the defense burden. The irony of the extensive ally/partner discussion is how it is divorced from current reality. At the same time the strategy calls for increased cooperation on terrorism, cyber, weapons of mass destruction, crime, commerce, and energy, it appears the United States may not be postured to capitalize on these opportunities. In the past year the US has abrogated its leadership role in several international organizations and trade associations. Our normal cooperative relations with long-time allies have become much more confrontational and coercive while our diplomatic prowess, historically the envy of the free world, has been weakened. So will US diplomacy be able to garner allies, shape the international environment, and protect our interests? Interactions seem to lack the delicate balance required for productive burden sharing and greater cooperation. A more balanced strain of realism could help persuade other nations to become model allies: those who do things for the United States, those who do things with the United States, and those who never deliberately work against the United States.

Most importantly, how the *NSS* redefines our values is striking in this document. The narrow definition can be summed up thusly: what is good for America is always good for the greater world. Any sense of altruism and sacrifice for the common good of all the world's people is limited. The undertone of the document indicates that a nation cannot advance its influence without being taken advantage of. This *NSS* intends to advance American influence, but only to the extent the rest of the world supports US interests. In other words, “the strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must.” It is in a sense a strategy of national interests disguised as moral concerns, out of balance with the angels of our better nature and the idea of America as “a city on a hill.”

The key to advancing our influence hinges on moral suasion—the ability to balance realist desires with a moral imperative. While the strategy mentions liberty, democracy, and the rule of law as inspirational concepts, these values become meaningless if not pursued with the same vigor as other elements of hard power. In fact, the document explicitly states the US will not impose its values on others but offers encouragement to those struggling for human dignity. In this brand of realism, one wonders if it would include support for self-determination, sovereignty, and statehood. It diminishes the impact of a values-based strategy and the very influence it seeks to attain. What this strategy seems to lack is a sense of idealism that reminds us the power of our example could be the greatest example of our power. In the current *NSS*, protecting our interests clearly overrides projecting our values.

It is also difficult to envision how an America absent leadership roles in many international organizations will be able to advance its influence. From this perspective, as quoted in the document, the world may not “have its eye upon America” as Alexander Hamilton intended but rather be looking askance at American motives and actions. America should be guided by its interests, but it must be disciplined by its values. To expand American influence we must have confidence in our values, embrace those values, and live those values. A balanced realism strategy would insist on this.

No doubt this *NSS* will be evaluated thoroughly over the coming months for clues to the future of US foreign and domestic policy. It is a realist document that relies heavily on allies and partners to confront today’s problems while narrowly defining US values. This *NSS* does not provide answers to all our challenges nor does it expose all our opportunities. National security scholars may well provide the best policy recommendations to help this realism strategy live up to its expectations. **SSQ**

W. Michael Guillot

Editor, Strategic Studies Quarterly

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