

The 2018 National Defense Strategy: Continuity and Competition

After nearly two decades of fighting Islamic terrorists and insurgents, including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States Department of Defense is refocusing on great power competition. The unclassified summary of the new *National Defense Strategy (NDS)*¹ is unequivocal: “Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.” By focusing on near-peer threats and declaring a new era of great power competition, the *NDS* sounds a sober warning: “Today, every domain is contested—air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace.” It lists China and Russia as the central challenges to US prosperity and security and mentions rogue regimes such as North Korea and Iran as destabilizing states, though it is for China alone that the *NDS* reserves its strongest language. Given growing Chinese capabilities and political ambitions, Beijing seeks “Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.”

To meet such a challenging strategic environment, the *NDS* calls for a “more lethal, resilient, and rapidly innovating Joint Force, combined with a robust constellation of allies and partners” to “sustain American influence and ensure favorable balances of power.” The three pillars of the strategy are to restore readiness and build a more lethal force, strengthen traditional alliances and build new partnerships, and reform the business practices and efficiency of the Pentagon. This *NDS* proposes to drastically reorient US defense priorities to prepare for great power competition and conflict. But to the extent the *NDS* offers a strategy at all, it fits squarely within the post–Cold War strategic tradition of military preeminence and forward-based presence.

Each of the lines of effort—improvements to military readiness and modernization, strengthening alliances and partnerships, and reforms to the department—represents more continuity than change in the Trump administration’s defense policies. First, this *NDS* doubles down on US military investments, striking familiar themes about technological innovation, force modernization, and defense capacity. With calls to “restore readiness and modernize our military,” the strategy seeks to develop and leverage new technologies, such as “advanced computing, ‘big data’

analytics, artificial intelligence, autonomy, robotics, directed energy, hypersonics, and biotechnology” to gain a decisive competitive advantage over potential adversaries. The idea of leveraging technological innovations is nothing new; it dates back to at least the post–Vietnam War period—and beyond. Indeed, the readiness improvements and technologies singled out as necessary to “ensure we will be able to fight and win the wars of the future” are the kinds of capabilities previously proposed as part the Third Offset Strategy, put forward by former Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work.

Second, when it comes to alliances and partnerships, this *NDS* remains firmly committed to a forward military posture and to the alliances and partnerships the current administration inherited. As a candidate, Donald Trump regularly criticized US allies for not contributing a fair share to the burden of collective defense and questioned the relevance of NATO, describing it as obsolete. These complaints were not unfair, as our European allies have cut their defense budgets to the bone since the end of the Cold War. In this new defense strategy, however, the Trump administration toes the line on alliances in Europe and Asia that have been cornerstones of US defense strategy for the past 75 years. This *NDS* echoes former administrations, declaring, “Mutually beneficial alliances and partnerships are critical to our strategy, providing a durable, asymmetric strategic advantage that no competitor or rival can match.” It further affirms the critical role of alliances and partners in “maintaining favorable balances of power that deter aggression and support the stability that generates economic growth.” Even the strategy’s prioritization of the Indo-Pacific, NATO, and the Middle East is nothing new, at least for anyone who has read the 2012 *Defense Strategic Guidance* or the 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review*.

Along with the European Reassurance Initiative and the renewal of US security guarantees to Japan (both initiatives of the Trump administration over the past year), this *NDS* signals the US will not turn inward as so many commentators feared. If anything, this administration is even more ambitious than the last one as it seeks to attract new partners, thus incurring additional security obligations. Even as this *NDS* proposes “transitioning from large, centralized, unhardened infrastructure to smaller, dispersed, resilient, adaptive basing,” it still envisions a forward force posture, albeit one better able to maneuver and survive under attack. The emphasis of the 2018 *NDS* on US allies and partners thus

indicates that the US global role will not shift dramatically under the “America First” presidency, and the US military presence and operations overseas will continue unabated. In other words, it’s business as usual.

Finally, the promise to reform the business practices and effectiveness of the Pentagon is also nothing new. Almost every secretary of defense promises to reform the defense department. The George W. Bush–era defense reforms of secretary of defense Robert Gates are still ongoing. Gates made a serious effort to overhaul the military’s procurement, acquisition, and contracting process, but more than eight years and two secretaries of defense later, fundamental acquisitions change remains elusive. In recent years, Congress has used the National Defense Authorization Act to mandate organizational reforms within the Pentagon. Current defense secretary James N. Mattis will now have his chance to take on the department’s infamous bureaucracy. Of course the Pentagon is poised to receive a major cash infusion, with defense spending projected to rise to \$629 and \$647 billion for fiscal years 2018 and 2019, a \$165 billion hike over budget caps for the next two years. This budget windfall, even if short-lived, removes financial incentives for the department to become more efficient. Giving the Pentagon all it wants is not the way to inspire innovation and improve efficiency; shrewdly crafted budget constraints may focus it on better spending choices and urgently needed innovation.

But how will building a more agile and lethal, forward-deployed force—even if more innovative and less wasteful—make the US more secure? The United States is inherently secure, with the largest economy in the world and an enviable geographical position, endowed with ample natural resources, wide oceans, and relatively weak neighbors to the north and south. All of this suggests that the American security position is far from precarious. And yet the United States spends more on national defense than all of its competitors’ militaries combined. How will seeking more military power by spending more on national defense better protect the American people and their interests?

Unfortunately, the unclassified summary of the *NDS* leaves this critical question not only unanswered but also unasked. The closest it comes is with the pronouncement, “The surest way to prevent war is to be prepared to win one.” It is difficult to argue against such logic. But none of the strategic difficulties of the past two decades have arisen because the military was not strong enough to prevail in battle, a point apparently lost on this administration. As Gates observed astutely, “One of

the most important lessons of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is that military success is not sufficient to win.”² In short, more military means alone are not sufficient to achieve US national security objectives.

As a statement on strategy, this *NDS* is wanting, as it offers no discernible theory of victory. A good defense strategy aligns policy, that is, the political *ends*, with strategic *ways* and military *means* as well as offers a theory of how and why the specific force structure, force posture, and mix of capabilities should be expected to achieve the desired outcomes. In this defense strategy (at least, the unclassified summary), the pursuit of military power is the end in itself. It is unclear what building an even stronger military accomplishes in terms of US interests in the South China Sea or confronting Russian aggression.


Instead of reflecting on the strategic blunders of the past 16 years, the administration embraces the mistaken notion that a more muscular approach to American foreign policy improves our relative power position. The *NDS* depicts the emerging security environment as “more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory” and warns the “long-standing rules-based international order” is under severe threat. Both China and Russia are building militaries to compete with the United States, North Korea has acquired nuclear weapons, Iran has grown more aggressive across the Middle East, and operations continue unabated against jihadist terrorists. Given the United States has been the single most powerful state in that global order, could it be that the militarized and forward-leading foreign policy of the last two decades contributed to these worrisome trends?

Regardless, this *NDS* advances the same self-defeating, unnecessary, and costly strategic prescriptions as the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations. It characterizes the past 16-plus years as “a period of strategic atrophy” when it has been anything but. The US has not suffered from an absence of strategy but has instead pursued a consistent strategy of primacy since the end of the Cold War. From the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to military interventions in Bosnia, Kosovo, Libya, and Syria as well as counterterrorism worldwide and freedom-of-navigation operations in the Persian Gulf and the Pacific, the US has consistently sought to remain the strongest military power in the world and shown a willingness to use military force to shape the global order.

Unfortunately, this muscular strategic approach has been largely unsuccessful. Strategic activism has generated predictable pushback from

other states and nonstate actors. Together with the *National Security Strategy*, this *NDS* adheres to the same grand strategy of primacy as practiced for nearly 30 years, supported by a massive increase in defense spending. But more of the same is likely only to reproduce the same pattern of strategic frustration that the US has experienced since the end of the Cold War: irremediable disorder and self-generated threats.

What is the United States to do? For most academic realists, the answer is clear: focus a more restrained grand strategy on preventing Chinese dominance of the Indo-Pacific region. Since the US is relatively secure and therefore faces few threats to its safety, it need not engage in unnecessary, risky, and costly military activities in a fruitless attempt to preserve American global primacy. History attests repeatedly to the self-defeating nature of great power ambitions and warns against the risks of actively pursuing power-maximizing strategies. For the past 30 years, the American hegemonic project has proved both unsustainably expensive and strategically illusory.

Instead, the US should pursue a more cautious, balance-of-power strategy in Asia while engaging with regional actors to limit the capacity of jihadist terrorists to strike the homeland. Consistent with the emphasis of this *NDS*, a strategy of restraint prioritizes great power competition over terrorism. Given concerns about the rise of China, it would focus on the deterrence and containment of Chinese military power. At the same time, it would shift most of the burden of building military power to deter Russia in Europe to the Europeans, so that the United States can better concentrate its resources in the Indo-Pacific theatre. It would also mean avoiding unnecessary wars, including a preventative attack on nuclear North Korea. The US military would be less active. Used sparingly, American economic and military power should not be squandered in futile attempts at remaking the internal affairs of other countries by the point of the spear—a conclusion shared by this *NDS*. Such a strategy calls for the United States to exercise more discipline in its policy goals and military means, avoid unnecessary military engagements, and genuinely reconstitute the nation's strength for this era of renewed great power competition. 

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Notes

1. The excerpts in this policy forum piece can be found in Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018), <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

2. Robert M. Gates, Landon Lecture (speech, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, 26 November 2007), <http://archive.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1199>.

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