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U.S. National Security Strategy

by Bartosz Wiśniewski

Unites States' National Security Strategy of May 27, 2010 is the most comprehensive outline of the country's international priorities since President Obama assumed office in January 2009. It marks a departure from the criticized policies of the Bush administration, and while it identifies threats in a similar way, it lists other security policy priorities. As a result of the economic crisis and a steady rise in the importance of transnational challenges, it stresses the need for a greater role of other countries and multilateral institutions in the shaping of the international order.

As a declaration of the U.S. administration's foreign and security policy intentions, its National Security Strategy is intended first of all for the foreign audience, including the authorities of other countries and the public. The document presented by President Obama does not indicate a decrease in the aspirations of the United States towards playing a leading role in the international system, but the announced rebuilding the competitiveness of the U.S. economy as a top priority could signal readiness to focus on domestic issues. The document avoids a confrontational tone and value judgments; for example, Iran and North Korea, which were referred to in the past as "rogue states," have now been depicted as "adversarial governments".

Security Policy Priorities. The strategy supersedes documents drawn up during the George W. Bush presidency. It identifies a similar group of threats, but adopts a different hierarchy of threats and means for overcoming them. Inclusion in the strategy of the issue of homeland security is a major conceptual shift, but it will be of secondary importance to the external dimension of the U.S. security policy.

The most serious threat is seen in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, mainly nuclear weapons, and the possible obtaining of these weapons by terrorist organizations. According to the new strategy, the threat of proliferation will be mitigated by reductions in nuclear arsenals, strengthening of the Non-Proliferation Treaty regime and initiatives aimed at stopping illicit trade in nuclear technologies. Political and economic sanctions are indicated as a means of exerting pressure on Iran and North Korea in connection with their nuclear programs.

With respect to the terrorist threat, emphasis is placed on the nature of the adversary—al-Qaeda and its affiliates—and on the actions taken against it rather than on an analysis of the roots of terrorism as such. There is no reference to the concept of the war on terror—key for the preceding administration, yet widely perceived as offering an oversimplified picture of the challenges to U.S. security. At the same time, the assumption remains that threats should be eliminated at the earliest possible stage, but enhancing the potential of foreign partners in the area of security has been placed above direct engagement. In line with this policy, guidelines for Afghanistan and Pakistan have been drawn up, as these remain priority theaters of operation, along with Yemen and Somalia, where terrorist bases might be set up.

The strategy also mentions challenges to which more countries should react, although it also stresses that the same can be said of the proliferation of WMDs and terrorism. These challenges include climate change (however, actions taken independently by individual states have been given a priority) and pandemics as well as armed conflicts and post-conflict stabilization. In the context of multilateral cooperation, the strategy also refers to U.S. interests in the Arctic.

Promotion of democracy—seen by the Bush administration as the principal goal and means of security policy—will continue to be a U.S. priority, although the strategy announces that it will be pursued with different methods. Rejected is the option of imposing regime change upon other countries and selective support for democratically elected governments, depending on their relations with

the U.S. Thus emphasis is placed first of all on the need to rebuild U.S. credibility as a promoter of democratic values, with the United States now expected to support these values in a less expansive way.

Use of Force. The strategy does not refer to the doctrine of pre-emptive strike. If the use of force is deemed to be necessary, the U.S. is to seek international support (in this context, the U.N. Security Council and NATO have been given equal roles). In contrast to its predecessors, the Obama administration does not mention the possibility of the use of force against states suspected of trying to develop WMDs, although the declared greater moderation in resorting to force is offset by the observation that the United States reserves the right to unilateral use of force “to defend our nation and our interests”. Use of force would also be justified in the event of a threat of a humanitarian disaster. This approach resembles the guidelines of security policy under Clinton, so it is not a simple continuation of the criticized methods of the Bush administration.

Role of Alliances. Alliances are considered to be the instruments of boosting the legitimacy of America’s actions in the international arena and helping mobilize additional resources. Emphasis is placed on the need to strengthen the sense of security among the allies by enhancing U.S. forward-deployed defense capabilities on the one hand and, on the other, through maintaining conventional military superiority and global power projection capabilities in order to deter and overcome various threats, including those from potential regional rivals. The American nuclear arsenal is also intended to raise the credibility of alliance commitments.

Transatlantic relations are described as the cornerstone for U.S. engagement in the world, and NATO as America’s most important military alliance. The strategy suggests that the U.S. will put bilateral cooperation before relations with the European Union (the U.K., France and Germany are referred to as “close allies”). One of the areas of common interest for the EU and USA is support for political and economic transformations in Eastern Europe.

Significance of Centers of Influence and Multilateral Institutions. Emphasis on the permanence of transatlantic ties and Asian alliances (with Japan or South Korea, among others) is accompanied by plans to intensify cooperation with key centers of influence, such as China, India or Russia. India is the only country here depicted as a strategic partner, bound by common interests and values. Apart from interest in the development of China’s military potential or references to thorny issues, such as human rights protection, stress is placed on the fundamental role of that country in shaping the international economic order and combating climate change or the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The announced shift in the U.S. economic relations with the outside world (higher exports, less dependence on external sources of financing for the budget deficit, emphasis on higher consumption on the emerging markets)—a change seen as key to enhancing global economy equilibrium—is directly linked to relations with China, showing their importance for the U.S. Relations with Russia are to be based on cooperation in areas of interest to the U.S.—non-proliferation of nuclear weapons or stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan—although support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries neighboring on the Russian Federation is emphasized.¹ The strategy also highlights the importance of cooperation with such emerging centers of influence as Indonesia, Brazil or South Africa.

The strategy announces greater involvement in the work of the UN and efforts to improve the organization’s effectiveness, although the G-20 is deemed the most important multilateral institution. The make-up of this group is depicted as a true reflection of the international division of economic and political influence, so the G-20 can become not only the most adequate mechanism for managing the global economy, but also a forum for consultations and coordination in other areas.

¹ R. Śmigielski, B. Wiśniewski, “The Reset of U.S.-Soviet Relations: Progress and Prospects,” PISM Bulletin no. 23 (99), 11 February 2010.