



Talking strategy: Washington's new NSS

by Jan Joel Andersson

On 6 February 2015, the White House released a new national security strategy (NSS). The NSS outlines a vision of how to advance core US interests: the security of the US, its citizens, allies and partners; a strong economy; the respect for universal values such as equality, human rights, and democracy; and a rule-based international order. It emphasises that US action will be guided by a long-term perspective and make use of all instruments available including, but not limited to, diplomacy, development, defence, science and technology, and intelligence. The US will lead by example – upholding its values at home and its obligations abroad – and work alongside capable partners which can be mobilised to take collective action in the face of global challenges.

Threats and means

The three major strategic threats listed in the new NSS are: a catastrophic attack on the US homeland or critical infrastructure; threats or violence against US citizens abroad and US allies; and a global economic crisis or widespread economic slowdown. Other top strategic risks identified include nuclear proliferation; infectious disease outbreaks; climate change; energy market security; and weak or failing states. The White House also pledges to maintain the world's best trained, equipped, and led military force which is to 'remain dominant in every domain'. In order to achieve this, the science and technology base will be safeguarded

from sequestration, and new investments made in the fields of space, cyber, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR).

The dangers posed by al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) are to be tackled through a combination of 'decisive US capabilities and local partners'. Biological threats such as Ebola will be met by developing a global capacity to respond through the Global Health Agenda, while addressing climate change will require both national emissions reductions and effective international diplomacy.

The NSS also states that the economy is the foundation of American strength. It underlines how a strong economy, combined with a prominent presence in the global financial system, makes it possible for the US to shape the emerging international economic order and advance American security. To ensure continued economic competitiveness, the NSS notes the importance of early childhood schooling, affordable higher education and healthcare, and immigration reform.

Strategy and process

Originally expected in early 2014, the new NSS is only the second security strategy of the Obama administration, updating the one released in May 2010. Given how much the world has changed in five years, many welcomed its release.

The legal foundation for the NSS is the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, which requires the president to submit one annually to Congress. Until 2001, a NSS was published almost every year: George W.H. Bush submitted three in his four years as president, and Bill Clinton released seven during his eight years in the White House. President George W. Bush, however, submitted only two – in 2002 and 2006.

As might have been expected, the latest NSS has received mixed reviews. Some analysts believe it is too broad and filled with platitudes, while others criticise it for being too focused on particular areas and policies. It is, however, important to understand that the NSS is not a planning document and that it relies on other texts, such as the national military strategy (NMS), to translate its general content into specified ‘ends’, ‘ways’, and ‘means’. The primary purpose of the NSS is to communicate the president’s national security concerns and strategic vision (and how to manage them) to Congress, as well as explain his stance to a wider domestic and international audience.

The NSS, however, is also an important tool with which the US executive branch seeks to forge an internal consensus on foreign and defence policy. Forcing government bodies which often have different and competing views to reach an agreement is a difficult but invaluable process for any administration. The team drafting the document must summarise all of America’s national security concerns, describe how the US will address them, and then secure support and buy-in from the many government agencies and departments across Washington in an iterative, inter-agency process. Simultaneously, the drafters must also factor in how the document will be received on Capitol Hill – and in capitals across the world.

Competing world views

Early reactions to the new NSS reflect the tension between competing views in Washington of how to understand – and react to – current global events. For those who see the chaos in the Middle East, China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea and Russia’s actions in Ukraine as proof of the return of geopolitics and the breakdown of the post-Cold War liberal international order, the new NSS is a disappointment. From their perspective, the US now faces immediate challenges to its core security interests in Europe, the Middle East and Asia that have not been addressed in the NSS.

The new republican chairman of the US Senate Armed Service Committee, John McCain, has labelled the current administration’s foreign policy a ‘disaster’, and advocates the deployment of US ground troops in Syria and the sending of arms to Ukraine.

Another critic of President Obama’s foreign policy is Senator Lindsey Graham (a potential presidential candidate in 2016), who strongly opposes the new NSS emphasis on diplomacy, economic sanctions and ‘strategic patience’. Arguing that the new NSS is not forceful enough and that strategic patience is a risky strategy that has led to “a world in chaos”, Senator Graham has repeatedly called for a more muscular US foreign policy.

The NSS clearly states that the US faces serious challenges to its national security ranging from the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to violent extremism and terrorism. The document also acknowledges that cyber security issues and Russian aggression are causing anxieties worldwide. The new NSS, however, rejects the analysis that Moscow’s belligerence or ISIL’s bloody territorial advances have fundamentally changed how the world operates.

Tellingly, neither Russia nor ISIL are explicitly mentioned among the top eight strategic risks to US interests (although attacks against US citizens and allies are). While the NSS acknowledges these threats, it also makes clear that climate change, global poverty, and weak and failing states are among the top security risks – ones which require a long-term approach and a rule-based international order to be overcome.

Talking the talk

Finally, the NSS also makes plain that while American power is great and US leadership indispensable, there are limits to what the US can do alone: it needs capable partners. The fact that the European Union is only mentioned once in the 29-page document should not therefore be interpreted as a lack of interest in transatlantic cooperation but rather, perhaps, as an indication of the timeliness of Europe’s own review of its strategic priorities.

Jan Joel Andersson is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.

