

Patient, prudent, strategic?

The 2015 United States National Security Strategy

Giovanni Grevi

>>> The publication of a National Security Strategy (NSS) gives American presidents an opportunity to outline to domestic and foreign audiences the broad strategic posture and priorities of the world's main power. The new United States (US) NSS published in February 2015 puts forward 'strategic patience' as the organising principle for dealing with growing challenges, while building on the achievements of the previous six years of the Obama administration. The vindication of President Obama's foreign policy record and the reassertion of 'an undeniable truth – America must lead' (as Obama puts it in his introduction to the strategy) stand out in the new document.

The NSS features strong elements of continuity with its 2010 predecessor. It affirms the need for American leadership, acknowledges the limits of American power and confirms a preference to wield it in concert with others, where possible. At the same time, it reflects the considerable changes that have occurred in the US and in the global strategic landscape since the 2010 version of the NSS.

PATIENCE

The defining message of the 2010 NSS was that, after two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a deep economic downturn, American leadership needed renewal. That would start from rebuilding the base of US power at home, notably restoring economic growth. The 2015 NSS claims

HIGHLIGHTS

- The 2015 National Security Strategy stresses America's restored strength, affirms the need for US global leadership, and a preference to wield power in concert with partners.
- The strategy confirms the US rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific and calls for a constructive relationship with China, but restates the American commitment to European security in the face of an aggressive Russia.
- The NSS seeks to chart a middle ground between the world as it is and the world the US seeks, offering important pointers but also exposing strategic dilemmas.

2

»»»»» mission accomplished on this crucial score. America has recovered its economic strength, the US has become the largest producer of oil and gas in the world and well over 150,000 troops have left Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2015, the US 'is stronger and better positioned to seize the opportunities' of the 21st century.

The strategy goes to great lengths to stress American resolve to lead 'by example' (promoting core values at home and abroad), 'with capable partners' (expanding both their number and capabilities) and 'with all the instruments of US power'. The US military 'must remain dominant in every domain', but the strategy makes clear that the use of force will not be America's first choice. Instead, it should be 'principled and selective' and should be part of a much broader toolbox. The words 'lead' and 'leadership' are used almost as many times in the 2015 document as in the 2010 one (131 times against 153) but the latter is twice as long.

The new NSS also calls on the US to lead 'with a long-term perspective' to be able to influence the evolution of five key transitions, namely: power shifts; the diffusion of power away from states; increasing interdependence; power struggles in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA); and dramatic changes in the global energy market.

The (rather blurred) list of security priorities of the 2015 strategy somewhat mirrors this long-term approach. Thematic issues – such as conflict prevention and state fragility, climate change, access to 'shared spaces' (cyber, space, air and oceans) and health security – take more prominence than in 2010. Like in 2010, however, the spread and use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), associated with the 'persistent' threat of terrorism, is considered the biggest danger to American security.

Strategic patience frames the US approach to the key relationships with China and Russia. The narrative of proactive engagement with large rising powers that was central to the 2010 NSS has been toned down a notch and made more selective. There is an emphasis on partnerships with other

like-minded countries and allies from Asia to Europe. Like in 2010, China's rise is welcomed by the US, which will pursue a 'constructive relationship' with Beijing. But the 2015 strategy clearly states that the US is and will remain a Pacific power, and acknowledges that tensions in the Asia-Pacific risk escalating. The document seeks to carve a viable path for US-China relations: 'While there will be competition, we reject the inevitability of confrontation'.

Conversely, prospects for strengthening the US-India 'strategic and economic partnership' are highlighted, including a reference to the convergence between India's 'Act East' policy and the US rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific. Russia's 'aggression' in Ukraine has triggered a marked shift from the aim to build a substantive relationship with Moscow in 2010 to the need to 'deter' Russia today by imposing costs for its behaviour and supporting the sovereignty of its neighbouring countries. And yet, the US will keep the 'door open' to collaboration with Russia on areas of common interest.

In short, the 2015 NSS calls for a firm but incremental and inclusive approach to facing tensions and crises in key global regions. It warns against allowing 'fear' to result in over-reach, and allowing the immediate threats posed by 'transgressors' to define the regional strategies of the US. Along with Europe and the Asia-Pacific, this also applies to the MENA region, where the NSS fleshes out a rather patchwork set of objectives, including dismantling terrorist networks, boosting the capacity of partners (Israel, Jordan and the Gulf countries) to defend themselves, supporting domestic reforms and political transitions, and pursuing a comprehensive agreement with Iran to prevent WMD proliferation.

PRUDENCE

The 2015 NSS represents a sensible but arduous, and not always persuasive, attempt to reconcile American strategic ambitions with global geostrategic turmoil. In so doing, it seeks to chart

a prudent middle ground between three strategic dilemmas facing the US.

First, to borrow the language of the 2010 strategy, the dilemma between accepting 'the world as it is' and pursuing 'the world we seek'. Second, the tension between rejecting the 'false choice' between interests and values (as stated in the 2010 NSS) and recognising the need to make 'hard choices' between competing priorities (as stated in the new strategy). Third, the gap between robust, sometimes unilateral responses to immediate threats and the comprehensive, multilateral approaches required to manage long-term trends and challenges.

On most measures, the gulf between the world as it is and the world that the US seeks has grown wider over the last five years. The so-called Arab

spring has resulted in destabilisation, conflict and authoritarian restoration, with the exception of the ongoing democratic transition in Tunisia. Russia has turned from a potential partner to a challenger in Eastern Europe with a large spoiler potential

on a number of key files, chiefly Iran and arms control more generally. China has become more assertive, making it harder, though not prohibitive, to work out a viable relationship between the two Pacific superpowers.

Reality has taken a toll on the aspiration to inspire 'hope' in people around the world, building on common aspirations and the power of example, which featured prominently in the 2010 NSS. The choice between pursuing short-term interests and promoting values over the long-term is indeed a false one in principle, but requires a very difficult balancing act in practice. The best intentions to shape sustainable, rules-based solutions over time do not necessarily rule

out the need to take hard short-term measures to avert or counter dangers to vital interests when they arise. However, ill-advised short-term action can preclude long-term progress instead of paving the way to it.

In short, the middle ground may be prudent, but it is not an easy place from which to devise and implement a strategy. However, the 2015 NSS is correct in charting it as the only available option between sheer *realpolitik* and lofty ideological designs. The question is whether the NSS provides the necessary sense of priority and direction. On that score, the balance is mixed.

STRATEGY?

The strategy includes a rather heterogeneous list of security priorities, ranging from attacks on the US, which comes on top, to countering terrorism and the spread of WMD, and from improving cybersecurity to tackling climate change and fighting pandemics. Geopolitical tensions from Russia and Ukraine to the Middle East are mainly addressed in separate sections, notably under the heading 'International order'. Taking a comprehensive approach to security with a focus on the root causes of instability and threats is fundamental. Placing geopolitical rivalries or regional tensions at the top of the security agenda might raise excessive expectations on American responses and appear inconsistent with the current efforts to defuse them. However, the document could have better connected the main geopolitical threats shaking regional orders today with the broader cross-border risks that affect international security. The structure of the document leaves it rather unclear what really matters for the US beyond protecting the homeland and American citizens.

As to strategic direction, the NSS offers three pathways to overcome the dilemmas fleshed out above. First, it regards the comparative strengths of the US as a solid basis for confident leadership. The document stresses the unparalleled assets of the US, such as economic performance, technological competitiveness, a vibrant society and military might,



The 2015 NSS is a strategy of the possible couched in the language of ambition

»»»»» among other benchmarks. This diagnosis is correct but it remains unclear how it squares with the fact that over the last five years the US has been unable to prevent or resolve various international crises which have surely affected its interests. The insight that power assets (in themselves) buy less influence in an increasingly contested and polycentric international system could have helped address this conundrum. How these assets are used, and the perceptions and responses of others, will define influence in today's world.

Second, the NSS offers strategic patience, a long-term comprehensive approach and working with partners as the recipe to pave the way towards a stronger, rules-based international order. The strategy insists that the use of force 'is not the principal means of US engagement abroad, nor always the most effective'. On the one hand, this is a sound approach, including the important recommendation not to let emergencies or rivals define the US response, but preferably joining forces with others to impose costs on transgressors and deter them. On the other, the strategy dedicates only limited space to assessing the 'undeniable strains' challenging the international order. Besides, it relies on the fact that 'the vast majority of states' buy into the current international system and demand American leadership to uphold it. However, multiple divisions on key global issues suggest a more complex picture.

Third, the strategy posits that the US needs to live its values at home and promote universal ones abroad, with an emphasis on democracy and human rights. Values are presented as a source of strength and advancing them is 'related to every enduring national interest'. In particular, the NSS insists on the need to empower civil society and connect with young leaders. Restating these principles and objectives is important but the commitment to values is very much qualified by the recognition of the many constraints. The NSS acknowledges that the US will need to engage with governments that do not share its values but argues that any American support to them 'will be balanced with an awareness of the costs of repressive policies for our own security interests and the

democratic values by which we live'. The strategy is correct to point out the tensions and tradeoffs between conflicting priorities. However, it is less convincing in drawing out the consequences of these tradeoffs, in particular when it comes to cooperating with authoritarian regimes in the MENA region, where security-driven considerations appear to prevail.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE

The 'profound commitment' of the US to a free, whole and peaceful Europe is restated. If the US is the indispensable leader, Europe is its 'indispensable partner'. NATO is the 'hub' of an expanding global security network and the US commitment to collective defence under Article 5 is 'ironclad'. The European Union (EU) is mentioned (once) in relation to seeking an ambitious Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and deepening NATO-EU ties. In addition, the strategy points to the fact that the US has a 'significant stake' in the energy security of Europe and should work with Europeans to improve it, notably with reference to Europe's dependence on Russia's supplies.

The ongoing crisis with Russia and, more broadly, the important role of Europeans in the American global network of allies and partners are the twin pillars framing the strategy's approach to Europe. America's determination to deter Russia and reassure allies is meant to meet widespread concern in Europe about US commitment there, although implementing these guidelines will continue to require intensive dialogue to preserve a common transatlantic front. The clear commitment to pursue a comprehensive deal to ensure the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme will also be welcomed in Europe, as an important factor in preventing the further destabilisation of the Middle East. At the same time, there is a strong risk that Americans and Europeans converge towards a short-sighted approach to conflicts and broader security challenges in the MENA region, essentially directed to contain threats and counter terrorism.

The NSS confirms the US intention to advance its rebalancing to Asia, which is described in Obama's introduction to the strategy as a historic opportunity. It is interesting to note that while the NSS mentions both the TTIP and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as important planks in shaping a new global economic order, only the latter scores a mention in the president's introduction. The strategy broadly confirms that the US looks at Asia as the biggest source of both future opportunities and challenges.

From an American standpoint, Europe is no longer going to be the theatre where the global balance of power and prospects for prosperity will be defined. However, even beyond the current crisis in Ukraine, the 'enduring alliance' with Europe may become more valuable than often assumed for the US, as it seeks to preserve the liberal international order in the face of many challenges. The question is whether Europeans and Americans will necessarily see eye-to-eye across the board in responding to these challenges and fostering a rules-based international order. For instance, Europeans and Americans do not always agree on how to deal with crises in the Middle East or the implications of China's rise.

CONCLUSION

The 2015 NSS is simultaneously a response to sustained criticism of Obama's foreign policy as too cautious, a consolidation of his strategic direction and practices, and an update of the US global posture to reflect evolving security challenges. It is a strategy of the possible couched in the language of ambition. Overall, compared to the 2010 version, elements of continuity prevail over innovations.

The strategic direction of the new strategy is broadly correct but the document could have benefited from less emphasis on the inevitability of American leadership and a better sense of priorities. The strategy seeks to strike a very difficult balance between overlapping strategic dilemmas. While providing important pointers,

it only partially succeeds. Seeking to reconcile the 'world as it is' and the 'world we seek' is exceedingly difficult for international actors that aim to advance their particular interests and liberal values at once, torn between short-term needs and long-term aspirations. As the EU now embarks on a new exercise to assess changes in the global environment and work out its own strategic priorities, the challenge of balancing hard realities and normative aspirations is worth bearing very much in mind.

Giovanni Grevi is director of FRIDE.

**e-mail: fride@fride.org
www.fride.org**