



# Trump's National Security Strategy: A Critic's Dream

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President Donald Trump released his administration's first *National Security Strategy* on December 18, 2017 with much fanfare.<sup>2</sup> In the run-up to the release, Trump's foreign policy had come in for significant hostility, with critics decrying the administration for betraying U.S. liberal internationalism and pursuing an avowedly "America First" agenda.<sup>3</sup> Initial reactions to the speech from much of the policy and scholarly communities have been at best ambivalent, with analysts lambasting the strategy's "realist framing," its emphasis on great power competition, and seeming over-reliance on the military tools of statecraft.<sup>4</sup>

These assessments are disingenuous. Like it or not, the 2017 *National Security Strategy* is strongly in line with the national security agendas of Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. The new strategy may spend time identifying the problematic and self-harming elements of America's post-Cold War foreign policy consensus, but it is neither realist in its logic nor restrained in its recommendations. Instead, it commits the United States to a more muscular primacist agenda. Trump's one-time critics should now rejoice: at least on core security issues, the document reflects Trump's formal agreement to sustain the U.S. strategic consensus. They have won the initial salvo in the grand strategy debate of this administration.

## The 2017 Strategy: *Sui Generis* or *Déjà vu* All Over Again?

Grand strategy — the linkage of a state's military, diplomatic, and economic tools of statecraft to help a state "produce" security for itself — is notoriously difficult to formulate, describe, and execute.<sup>5</sup> Although often portrayed as a formal plan by which a state assesses its interests and the means it chooses to get there, in reality, strategy evolves as external conditions, domestic and bureaucratic politics, and the ideas motivating individual policymakers wax and wane.<sup>6</sup> The relative importance of these factors can vary as well. States living in highly competitive international environments (think 19th century Europe) are incentivized to focus on external conditions. In contrast, states benefiting from a surfeit of security have the latitude to draw more heavily upon other factors.

The modern United States falls into the latter category: a massively wealthy state surrounded by weak neighbors, wide oceans, and with no peer competitor since the early 1990s, the United States benefits from the most latent security of any actor in modern history. In the post-Cold War world, the net result has been the consolidation of a powerful grand strategic consensus in which the United States claims to act in support of a liberal world order. In theory, this system allows the United States to (1) support benevolent policies such as free-trade and regional stability; (2)

prevent states from engaging in military affairs unless viewed as legitimate; and (3) integrate potential rivals into a mutually agreed-upon “rules based” system of international governance.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, these claims were always embraced more in theory than in the breach. In practice, the United States quickly recognized the desirability of asserting American power in support of its self-defined interests irrespective of other states’ concerns. “America First” is hardly a new concept. Primacy, not benign liberal engagement, typically ruled the day. After all, the United States went to war against both Serbia and Iraq despite international opposition, and has shown a marked disinclination to let other states have a say in constructing the nominal “rules” of international governance.

As a framing device, however, the post-Cold War foreign policy consensus was a mobilization device par excellence, reflecting and able to sustain popular backing through its nod to liberal values, bureaucratic support by providing substantial foreign policy funding, and political support by leaving enough maneuvering room for leaders to pursue any policy they wanted. Indeed, the appeal of this consensus was such that — as Patrick Porter shows — alternate grand strategy approaches have been largely ignored, with their proponents isolated or driven from government decision-making.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the sound of grinding teeth, Trump’s *National Security Strategy* fits squarely in the post-Cold War grand strategic tradition. This is not to deny that the 2017 strategy contains some departures from past practice on domestic policies, with calls for reduced immigration, tightened border security, and economic policies suggesting more closed American homeland. Still, on core security issues related to U.S. engagement in international affairs, relations with other powerful states, and counter-terrorism and state-building efforts, Trump’s agenda is in keeping with the post-Cold War tradition.

Consider 2017. Despite coming to office more overtly critical of U.S. global activism and traditional alliance relations than any American leader since 1945, Trump’s first year in office has seen Washington double-down on its commitments in the Middle East, affirm the American commitment to NATO, and reinforce the U.S.-Japanese and U.S.-South Korean relationship. The new strategy affirms these actions, noting that the United States will “compete and lead in multilateral organizations so that American interests and principles are protected.” It underscores the continued relevance of NATO, existing “partnerships” in the Middle East, and the centrality of allies in East Asia for “responding to mutual threats.”<sup>9</sup> In this, the document parallels past strategic declarations. The George W. Bush administration’s 2006 strategy, for instance, vowed that the United States would prioritize “pursuing American interests within cooperative relationships, particularly with our oldest and closest friends and allies.” Likewise, the Obama administration’s 2015 strategy called for the U.S. to foster a “rules-based international order” under “U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges.”<sup>10</sup> The Trump administration has effectively committed itself to a strikingly similar approach, couched in similar language, to its predecessors.

The same is true of U.S. relations with other powerful states such as India, Russia, and China. At the start of the 1990s, the U.S. government — as the draft 1992 *Defense Planning Guidelines* and its successors underscored — decided that it would oppose the emergence of peer competitors able to challenge American dominance.<sup>11</sup> As the distribution of power shifted away from the United States, this view evolved. The United States would now seek to either coopt potential competitors as allies (e.g., India) or incentivize their continued cooperation through

integration into economic and security institutions. The tradeoff gradually became explicit: as the 2015 *National Security Strategy* explained in the context of China, the United States would otherwise “manage competition from a position of strength.”<sup>12</sup> In short, America would welcome cooperation from other major powers on American terms, or try to overmatch potential competitors.

The 2017 strategy again falls within this post-Cold War tradition. Embracing the potential for U.S.-Indian “strategic partnership”, the report also notes that China and Russia are increasingly pursuing “revisionist” policies that imperil American dominance in Asia and Europe.<sup>13</sup> The two “competitors” to the United States thus need to be overmatched and contained. Even here, however, the change is less dramatic than it may appear. Although describing China and Russia as explicit “competitors” is new, the underlying theme of competition is not. After all, as far back as the 2006 *National Security Strategy*, the George W. Bush administration allowed in the Chinese context that “Our strategy seeks to encourage China to make the right strategic choices for its people, *while we hedge against other possibilities* [emphasis added].” The Obama administration’s 2015 report was even clearer in underscoring “there will be competition” with China such that the United States sought to “manage competition from a position of strength.” Labeling China and Russia “competitors” is thus an evolutionary change in U.S. policy – not a revolutionary break.<sup>14</sup>

What of counter-terrorism and state building? The Trump-endorsed document hardly breaks the mold, committing the United States to both extensive counter-terrorism efforts — particularly against Islamist terrorism — and state-building abroad. Not only will the United States “pursue [terrorist] threats to their source” militarily, but there is a direct relationship between state-building and counter-terrorism. After all, “safe havens” in fragile states allow terrorist groups to flourish, requiring the U.S. to help develop local institutions so that direct American action is superfluous.<sup>15</sup> Again, this logic tracks with prior strategic guidance. Bush’s 2002 strategy, for one, espoused “direct and continuous action” against terrorist groups while calling upon the international community to “focus its efforts and resources on areas most at risk” of “spawning” terrorism.<sup>16</sup> Strikingly, not only did the 2006 *National Security Strategy* return to these themes, but so too did the 2015 version advanced by the Obama administration.<sup>17</sup> At least on paper, Trump is little different than his predecessors.

## **A Critics Dream**

Noting that the Trump administration’s *National Security Strategy* is relatively consistent with that of previous administrations is one thing. As significant for the grand strategy debate, it also bears little resemblance to the images conjured by the primacists who have become some of Trump’s biggest critics. Take Tom Wright’s campaign-era overview of Donald Trump’s foreign policy, in which he argues that Trump’s election would destroy America’s post-Cold War foreign policy:

If he did get elected president, he would do his utmost to liquidate the U.S.-led liberal order by ending America’s alliances, closing the open global economy, and cutting deals with Russia and China.<sup>18</sup>

Or, consider Elliot Cohen, who promises that Trump will usher in a “dangerous and dispiriting chapter” for American foreign policy. Cohen notes

even barring cataclysmic events, we will be living with the consequences of Trump's tenure as chief executive and commander in chief for decades. Damage will continue to appear long after he departs the scene.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, Hal Brands outlines a stark potential shift in American foreign policy, a so-called "Fortress America" approach "that would actively roll back the post-war international order and feature heavy doses of unilateralism and latter-day isolationism."<sup>20</sup>

Yet the Trump administration has not gone down this road, in either practice or the new *National Security Strategy*. Again, the document embraces America's global alliances, noting that "allies and partners are a great strength of the United States," and promising to "encourage aspiring partners."<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the idea of embracing authoritarian states, it pushes back on them strongly through repeated statements such as "China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests." Indeed, the language in the document is so stark on this point that Russia and China have condemned it as "imperial" and a "victory for hardliners."<sup>22</sup>

Even on trade, where the document perhaps makes the biggest divergence from prior policy approaches, it doesn't come close to the dystopian visions critics have predicted. The document strongly supports the existing global trade regime, though it does promise to crack down on "cheating" countries which "adhere selectively to the rules and agreements" of free trade.<sup>23</sup> Though the document suggests the potential to "modernize" existing trade agreements, it offers no specifics, instead emphasizing domestic economic policies such as infrastructure investment. By any reasonable standard, this is a change of degree, not of type.

Yet, just as the *National Security Strategy* does not actually reflect the predictions of Trump's critics, neither does it appear to be realist in any true sense of the word. Certainly, the document claims to advance a strategy of "principled realism," suggesting aspirations for the level-headed strategic calculations of a Henry Kissinger or George H.W. Bush. Yet realism as a concept has always been promiscuously used by experts in order to give their opinion gravitas — or as a slur. As Kissinger himself once noted, "the United States is probably the only country in which "realist" can be used as a pejorative epithet."<sup>24</sup> Look no further than reactions to Donald Trump's foreign policy statements during the campaign. In response to articles attempting to label Trump's nationalist pronouncements as realist, both Stephen Walt and Robert Kaplan — analysts not known for their agreement on any issue — argued the same thing. In essence, each said, "I'm a realist, and Trump doesn't represent my foreign policy views."

Despite its use of the term, however, the new *National Security Strategy* includes few policies that are recognizably realist as understood by scholars or savvy practitioners. Although it promises pragmatism, the strategy commits pledges to advance American values and deny "the benefits of our free and prosperous community to repressive regimes and human rights abusers."<sup>25</sup> It provides prominent placement to relatively minor threats like terrorism and transnational crime, and maintains America's commitments to conflicts in Afghanistan and elsewhere despite criticism of those conflicts as expensive side-shows by most realist analysts. And it again perpetuates the idea of safe havens, arguing that fragile states pose security threats — a claim that most realists see as a myth.

In some ways, the document's evocation of realism is reminiscent of an argument made recently in *Commentary* by some of Trump's most fervent critics, Peter Feaver and Hal Brands. In arguing that realism has lost its way (and that Trump himself advocates a variant of a realist

position), the authors suggest that the solution is to ‘reclaim’ realism. They would do this by taking realism’s core precepts and adding those of liberal internationalism — from the necessity of American global leadership to maintaining U.S. alliances and spreading of American values.<sup>26</sup> In the same way as this approach seeks to appropriate the term realism and reallocate it to the authors’ favored policy packages, the Trump administration’s *National Security Strategy* uses the term “principled realism” to disguise its hodge-podge of contradictory ideas and impulses.

Indeed, perhaps ironically, the document bears the strongest resemblance to the approaches favored by some of Trump’s critics. After criticizing “Fortress America,” for example, Brands goes on to suggest an alternative, which he describes as either “better nationalism” or “internationalism with a nationalist accent.”<sup>27</sup> This alternative includes a tougher approach to China, renegotiation of existing trade agreements like NAFTA, reaffirmed alliance commitments, a strong military buildup and intensified anti-terror campaigns — each of which is in the new *National Security Strategy*.

Likewise, Wright argues that his proposed grand strategy of “responsible competition” is not compatible with the Trump administration’s views.<sup>28</sup> Yet responsible competition is a strategy which “preserves a liberal international order” while acknowledging “the adversarial and zero-sum nature characterizing relations with rival powers,” and avoiding major conflict. This sounds remarkably similar to the *National Security Strategy*’s emphasis on combating powers like China and Russia, adversaries “adept at operating below the threshold of open military conflict.” Elsewhere, Wright emphasizes the nuclear threat posed by North Korea, and the need for increased military involvement in the Middle East — both of which are championed by the Trump administration. Undoubtedly, there are differences between these strategies, but there is more that unites them than divides them.

This common ground between Trump and his critics also suggests a more worrying trend: that members of the foreign policy consensus and backers of the Trump administration may make common cause to sustain the primacist core of U.S. grand strategy at a time Americans are clamoring for a forthright foreign policy debate. As Brands argues, perhaps policymakers should make “an effort to minimize the most costly and frustrating aspects of American internationalism in order to sustain the broader tradition” of intensive American global engagement and efforts to structure international security on American terms. The *National Security Strategy* appears comfortable with a similar course, questioning long-running economic policy while advocating a muscular and unilateral approach to U.S. primacy. In many ways, Trump’s liberal international critics are getting almost everything they could want in this strategy.

### **Is there Hope for a Realist Grand Strategy?**

Of course, it is fair to question whether the *National Security Strategy* reflects Donald Trump’s own views, and whether it will be put into practice. Tellingly, the President’s speech accompanying the release of the *National Security Strategy* was notably different from the text. He spent much of his time criticizing his predecessors and calling for increased spending by NATO allies; he did not echo the document’s criticisms of China or Russia.<sup>29</sup> Yet in its broad strokes, the strategy mirrors the actions that the Trump administration has taken during its first year: complain about allies, suggest cozying up to Russia or China, and criticize America’s wars in the Middle East, while actually pursuing a conventional foreign policy and dialing up America’s foreign commitments. Trump’s rhetoric has never truly matched his

actions.<sup>30</sup> And, *regardless of the rhetoric*, the president has accepted this strategy and put his name on it. If this is a case of advisors like Secretary of Defense James Mattis or National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster “managing up,” then they have been remarkably successful in reshaping the president’s foreign policy instincts, and maintaining the broad strokes of American primacy as a strategy.

Yet, if Trump and his advisers have sought the realist imprimatur without actually embracing realist precepts, the question stands: what would a realist national security strategy entail? It is *not* primacy: as even the most hard-bitten realists focused on power-seeking acknowledge, pursuing primacy in global affairs is a recipe for international opposition and overreach.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, realism as a body of knowledge underscores the often self-defeating nature of power and the risks of actively seeking security in an uncertain world.

Any realist strategy would therefore start from the point noted earlier in this paper, namely, that the United States is extremely secure. From there, the question becomes: how does seeking more power and more security in the world help, and what are we giving up or squandering in the process? For many realists, the answer is simple: a restrained grand strategy focused largely on preventing a peer competitor such as China from establishing dominance overseas, while reinforcing quiet tools of cooperation with local actors to address regional conflicts, terrorism, and other such security problems. Without locally powerful actors poised to dominate their regions, and with actors incentivized to address local problems in way conducive to U.S. interests, the United States can be far more relaxed in world affairs. Restraint — as opposed to the classic formulation of primacy or the Frankenstein version of it found in the new strategy — has much to commend it.

Still, not all analysts accept that the global status quo is truly stable. Some argue that local conflicts might spin out of control; that local competitions may allow a state such as China or Russia to establish regional hegemony; or that local actors may fail to address problems such as terrorism. These are reasonable concerns. Even then, however, a truly realist grand strategy would still ask the extent to which American activism is needed to address these problems. Depending on the circumstance, some form of American action may be needed, whether combat power, diplomacy, or economic engagement. Nevertheless, it would not mandate the extensive efforts to manage all global affairs at significant cost and risk that the post-Cold War consensus calls for and the Trump administration endorses.

Advocates of the foreign policy consensus have been rightly critical of many aspects of the Trump administration, from his odious and xenophobic views of immigrants to his tendency to pick fights on twitter. Trump himself is a poor spokesperson for U.S. foreign policy: his impulsiveness and self-absorption are likely to undermine foreign policy implementation throughout his term in office. Yet their criticisms of Trump’s foreign policy are misleading. The new *National Security Strategy* is far closer to the primacy-based strategy favored by these critics than to any recognizably realist strategy. Both Trump and his critics call for the United States to play an outsize role in global affairs because they see the world as dangerous, and believe American activism increases our power and influence. Ultimately, Trump’s critics should be thrilled. They are getting almost everything they want.

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