

# WAR ON THE ROCKS

## The Case for Getting Rid of the National Security Strategy

Justin Logan and Benjamin H. Friedman

November 4, 2022

The Biden administration recently released its first National Security Strategy. As is the custom in Washington, the document was greeted with fanfare by bureaucrats eager to promote their work, beat reporters with deadlines to meet, and think tank pundits, who skim to find mention of their pet issues. But the National Security Strategy is a predictable sham. There is no real strategy to be found there because strategy documents do not prioritize among goals to guide resource allocation.

While national security strategy is unavoidable, “national security strategy” documents should end. The same goes for Quadrennial Defense Reviews and National Defense Strategies. They are a distraction from debate about real strategy — the unofficial but operative kind manifest in the defense budget. Those concerned about the need for strategy should focus on making the budget process more strategic, not on documents that are at best a vacuous public relations exercise.

U.S. strategy documents are the spawn of the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, which required administrations to draw up a “comprehensive description and discussion” of the “worldwide interests, goals, and objectives of the United States ... [and] the foreign policy, worldwide commitments, and national defense capabilities of the United States.” This was a well-meaning effort to coordinate agencies around a shared agenda, but it failed.

The general rule for these documents is aspirational language that offends no major constituency by suggesting it is less important than any other, with occasional interludes of potentially harmful ideas. Strategy documents are rife with unsubstantiated claims about great historical shifts and talk about the how threats are complex but connected by some common sinew, like disorder or autocracy. The lesson is always that the United States must order the world to be safe, and that the things it values are mutually supportive. The implication is to keep doing what the United States is doing with more or less the same policies. If budgets are mentioned, it is to complain of their insufficiency.

Congress should end the requirement to produce strategy documents, or the White House should just stop complying and see if anyone minds. The point is not to abolish strategy. That is impossible, as strategy is more of a shared idea or operational code among policymakers about

how to achieve security than one set of words about it. Rather, we recommend focusing on the budgetary choices where strategy manifests, in order to have more meaningful debate about American foreign policy and maybe even produce better policy outcomes. The flaws in the National Security Strategy are emblematic of U.S. strategy documents. Debates over defense budgets — precisely because they are so parochial and political — are a better vehicle to debate strategy.

### **The National Security Strategy Isn't Strategy**

We see three reasons to abolish strategy reviews, each evident in this latest National Security Strategy. One, the documents fail to meet the definition of strategy — they are lists of objectives, not a guide for choosing among them. Two, the operative definition of “national security” has been abused to the point that it is now indistinguishable from whatever the authors, or the public they envision, view as good, which exacerbates the inability to focus and prioritize. Three, where coherent, U.S. strategy documents tend to overgeneralize, making specific troubles seem like era-defining clashes, fueling the country’s powerful tendency to overreact to distant trouble.

Strategy is prioritization among competing goods, a guide to choice in resource allocation. By definition, strategy must say that some things are more important than others, and that all nice things do not go together. Like past National Security Strategy documents, the authors of the Biden administration’s version avoid choice and name-check basically all current security policies, alliances, and regions of the world as vital. U.S. security, the document contends, demands improving democracy and fostering innovation at home, confronting Russia, and containing China. The United States must also lead the creation of new global and regional institutions of democracies, win the support of the Global South in the global competition with autocracies, maintain a nuclear triad, prevent nuclear proliferation, stop pandemics, and suppress corruption.

The only possible exception to this litany of support is in the Middle East section, where the Biden administration suggests avoiding “grand designs” and regime-change wars. The problem is that even this section avoids making a hard policy choice. No mention is made of what impact this shift will have on U.S. forces in the region and whether these forces should be allocated elsewhere around the world, given the competing demands that U.S. strategy places on the military.

Instead, the document promises to fix extremism’s “root causes” in the Middle East with better government, and suggests a “framework” for helping regional partners “lay the foundation for greater stability, prosperity, and opportunity.” This approach relies on five principles and will work on fixing problems with Iran, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Israel, and Palestine, as well as dealing with climate change, refugee flows, and a host of other problems in the region. The Biden administration may wind up de-emphasizing the Middle East, but the document’s prescriptions do not contain a roadmap for doing so.

### **Real Strategy Is Politically Costly**

The big reason that strategy documents evade choice is that facing up to it is politically costly. Communicating publicly that an administration favors one program or agency over another creates a losing political constituency, and hence a fight and the expenditure of lots of political capital.

Administrations evidently don't see doing real strategy documents as worth the hassle. Instead, they promote a compromise that serves key agencies and stakeholders and thus suffer from the so-called Christmas tree problem, where each agency finds a place for its ornaments to protect its agendas.

On the rare occasions when strategy documents do suggest a real policy choice, it's generally because the administration has already made a choice that it wants to justify. For example, in 2012, the Obama administration released a defense strategy that said that ground forces would no longer be sized for counterinsurgencies — and hence shrunk — and that U.S. force structure in Europe would be reduced. This was a bit of real strategy, but one that responded to the need to comply with newly imposed budget caps and the struggles of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Notably, that was not a regularly scheduled defense review or national security strategy — it was a one-off response to sell a strategic shift already underway. The lesson is that circumstance requiring choice, not a legislated requirement to write a report every few years, produces strategy.

### **If Security Is Everything, Maybe It's Nothing?**

The second general problem evident in the national security strategy is the tendency to drain the term “national security” of meaning. We believe that national security threats call for expenditures primarily in the Defense Department aimed at killing enemy forces and destroying their materiel. By contrast, the view advanced in this National Security Strategy is that U.S. national security suffers from a “lack of health care” in various developing countries, different corporate taxation rates in developed countries, the absence of a “digital dollar,” and an array of other problems.

Whatever one thinks of these issues, they are indirectly tied to American national security, in the sense of the nation's physical safety from attack. Security strategy is supposed to explain how to cause security for the country. If “national security” is basically everything good, it essentially means nothing, and discussion of its causes is impossible. Non-security goals are best addressed in non-security parts of the government. Calling them security threats detracts from efforts to shift focus, or even funds, to policies that advance them.

### **Strategy Documents Overgeneralize**

Third, where they make coherent theoretical points, U.S. strategy documents suffer from what George Kennan called an “urge to seek universal formulae or doctrines in which to clothe and justify particular actions” that “causes questions to be decided on the basis of criteria only partially relevant.” The documents' theories are mostly caliginous but occasionally they articulate a genuinely harmful idea.

This latest security strategy claims, for example, that “the most pressing strategic challenge facing our vision is from powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy.” Accordingly, the United States must lead a global struggle between autocracies and democracies — plus some “like minded” “countries that do not embrace democratic institutions.” This is a reference to the Gulf-Arab monarchies. Somehow concern about Russia invading Ukraine and China menacing Taiwan gets transformed into a war of all against all. A coup in Mali is somehow supposed to be related to China and hence a threat. The document makes clear that the American

public are to accept that the United Arab Emirates is on America's side in this global fight, despite it being autocratic.

This overgeneralization is confusing because it tries to resist its own logic with these exceptions. It also generates new adversaries — by implying that countries like Vietnam, Egypt, Eritrea, and other autocracies with no special affection for Russia or China are locked into a binary struggle with the United States and its adversaries. If forced, some countries will choose China, if only because this offers tangible economic benefits. Sensible strategy should try to minimize enemies.

### **Security Strategy Cannot Escape Politics**

These strategy documents help to distract experts and Congress from focusing on the closest thing we have to the real deal: the annual budgets for the Department of Defense and the Department of State. Budgets are not strategy, but they reflect it — strategy guides prioritization, and budgets execute that guidance by prioritizing. But they are resource-constrained and cannot evade choice, which is why “strategy wears a dollar sign.” If you want to see what the U.S. government is trying to do in the world, budgets can tell you far more than any National Security Strategy. Budgets show that the vast majority of U.S. security efforts remain devoted to conventional war in Europe and Asia, but also that any purported shift away from the Middle East is just talk, so far. Greater focus on defending Taiwan would be manifest in investment and basing choices that push air and especially naval forces toward East Asia for that fight — budgets show the limits of any such shift. Comparing the U.S. Agency for International Development's budget to the Defense Department's reminds us that talk of ramped-up aid to win hearts and minds in the developing world is exaggerated at best. Indeed, the United States will spend considerably more aiding Ukraine's war with Russia than on foreign aid this year.

Advocates of the current strategy process will complain that the defense budget is political — beholden to parochial interests like agencies, contractors, and the congressional districts where they have production lines. But, as we have shown, that is also true of strategy and inevitable at least as long as big threats don't loom. Strategy documents try by fiat to do what pressing danger does: unify people and agencies against a fixed target. This is futile. We should accept that strategy is political, not made in some laboratory that interest groups and ambition cannot penetrate.

A first step to having a more meaningful strategy debate would be to acknowledge that national security is neither sacred nor science. It is a compromise among competing agendas, and thus appropriately political, and a result not just of executive direction but of choices made in Congress, the most democratic branch of American government, an arena designed to resolve conflicting agendas.

The problem with the defense budgeting process, in terms of producing useful strategy debate, is that it is insufficiently contentious. The same compromises among agencies and interests that hobble strategy documents constrict debate about budgeting and underwrite a liberal hegemony strategy, which aims at policing the world to overawe rivals and keep allies and partners beholden. In some ways, this is a function of U.S. wealth and power — it bankrolls a large array

of interests that would otherwise compete more for resources and tempts Americans with the illusion that they can avoid choice.

### **A More Competitive Strategy Debate**

U.S. security, in other words, militates against strategy debate. But we can attack the problem by encouraging competition within the national security apparatus, and government in general — a topic we have touched on at greater length elsewhere. Here are four suggestions to create more meaningful strategy debate.

First, Congress should remember and exercise its foreign policy powers. For Congress to perform more meaningful oversight of defense spending and debate strategy more effectively, it needs to overcome the atrophy in thinking about strategic alternatives that decades of underuse have induced. That requires more experienced (and hence better paid) staff, beefed up support from the Congressional Budget Office and Government Accountability Office to better frame strategic choices, and, most of all, members who are jealous of institutional prerogatives. Members that take up the constitution's invitation to struggle for the privilege of shaping U.S. foreign policy can help to force the debates among competing goals that American strategy documents suppress.

Second, cap defense spending. Legislated spending caps can impose more choices on the budget and force the debate that more abundance would prevent, breaking up the usually aligned interests that make up the military-industrial-congressional complex. Something along these lines occurred 10 years ago when the Budget Control Act's caps loomed — the services began to see counterinsurgency efforts as more of a threat to their core missions, but Congress kept raising the limits and letting the Overseas Contingency Operations budget bail the base budget out, lessening the effect. A softer version of this occurs when policymakers define national interests more broadly than defense spending can support, a problem that is arguably emerging today. The danger is that defense agencies may deal with cuts by sharing them equally, rather than competing. Caps should thus come with efforts by civilian leaders to manage competition within the Defense Department, which leads to our next suggestion.

Third, encouraging interservice competition for budget shares can juice debate about strategy. Instead of giving each service a roughly steady share of the budget, they should be rewarded for a defined objective. For example, a strategy that prioritized defending Taiwan against China would mean funding the Navy in particular — and submarines within the naval budget — perhaps causing service communities that lost out to argue for an alternative. Something like this occurred around nuclear weapons doctrine under President Dwight D. Eisenhower when his New Look (massive retaliation) strategy rewarded the Air Force at the expense of the other services.

Finally, security fears should compete more against non-security risks in the budget. One way to encourage this is to stop securitizing everything — pretending every problem that humans face is a security threat. Let's admit, for example, that the novel coronavirus, and infectious diseases like it, are a far worse danger for Americans than security threats, not a species of them. Then we can ask whether the United States should reduce defense spending to buy something more relevant to its well-being, rather than casting disease as part of a swirl of trouble that the Defense Department combats.

U.S. security policy is hobbled, in a sense, by safety. Endangered and poor countries have to focus and make good investments to be safe. The United States is so safe and so rich that Americans can drift along pretending to run the world for \$850 billion and congratulate themselves on their good luck with strategy documents that use airy language wearing the disguise of strategy. We're a way away from a meaningful strategy debate, but step one is to stop pretending strategy documents are strategy.

*Benjamin H. Friedman is policy director at Defense Priorities. Justin Logan is director of foreign and defense policy studies at the Cato Institute.*