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Obama's Security Strategy is Clueless

by Ted Galen Carpenter

05.28.2010

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The most striking feature about President Obama's new National Security Strategy (NSS) **document** is that there is very little new in it. True, the tone of the NSS is rather different from the Bush administration's implied preference for unilateralism, but even that change merely takes U.S. strategy back to the days of the Clinton administration and most of its predecessors. In short, the Obama NSS is warmed-over liberal internationalism.

The principal theme in this NSS is burden sharing. The United States, the document stresses, cannot afford to be the world's sole policeman. Washington needs partners who are willing and able to meet security challenges and help preserve global peace and prosperity.

But administrations since the founding of NATO in 1949 have emphasized the need for such burden sharing—with a spectacular lack of success. And successive generations of U.S. officials have vented their impotent frustration. President Dwight Eisenhower's secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, warned the European allies in 1954 that if they didn't do more for the common defense effort against the Soviet Union, the United States would have to conduct an "agonizing reappraisal" of its commitment to Europe. The NATO allies treated his warning as the empty threat that it was. Their security free riding on the United States barely diminished throughout the remainder of the Cold War.

President Obama is likely to find his search for willing and capable allies even more futile. The already inadequate military efforts of America's European and East Asian allies have plummeted over the past two decades. Even Washington's most significant security helpmate, Britain, is witnessing a free fall in defense spending. London's defense budget for 2009 was a modest \$62 billion—2.8 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product. And given Britain's mounting financial woes, that spending level is certain to decline sharply. Indeed, the debate within the new Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government is simply about how much to cut and which weapon systems to terminate.

But Britain is a militarized Sparta compared to Washington's other traditional NATO allies. France's military spending is down to 1.7 percent of GDP, Germany's to 1.4 percent, and Italy's to 1.0 percent. America's newer NATO partners provide little hope either. Most are too small to significantly augment the strength of the United States in dealing with security problems. Even some of the larger new members have few military capabilities. Poland, for example, has a defense budget of a mere \$8.6 billion, which is trivial compared to Washington's \$700 billion.

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Matters are not much better in East Asia. Even Japan, by far Washington's most significant ally, strictly adheres to spending no more than 1 percent of its GDP on the military. South Korea, despite facing an extremely dangerous and volatile neighbor, North Korea, devotes barely 2.8 percent of GDP to defense. Taiwan, facing the ongoing claim from Beijing that the island is rightfully Chinese territory, spends the same anemic percentage on its security.

Such persistent—and worsening—under-investment in defense begs the question of where President Obama is going to find these capable partners he seeks to share the burdens of maintaining global peace and order. At best, “burden sharing” is likely to take the form of the same militarily useless, largely symbolic force deployments that we have seen from many of the NATO allies in Afghanistan. Even worse, faux burden sharing may mean that the U.S. forces do all the security heavy lifting, and face the bulk of the dangers, while allies perform nonmilitary nation-building tasks of dubious utility.

Nor can the United States turn to powers other than its supposed allies to share global security burdens. It seems unlikely that the president contemplates relying on nations such as China, Russia, and India, since those countries frequently do not share Washington's policy objectives. In short, his NSS is little more than a pious wish.

Matters will not improve as long as the United States obligingly takes care of the security needs of all of its allies and clients. They then have every incentive to continue free riding on the enormous U.S. military exertions and devote their resources to shoring-up their financially beleaguered social welfare states. Unless Washington changes that incentive structure by scaling-back commitments to security clients who ought to be doing far more for their own defense, nothing will change for the better. Yet the Obama administration's NSS offers not the slightest hint of a willingness to make that imperative change.

Given the current incentive structure and the clueless U.S. policy that makes it possible, President Obama's search for willing and capable security partners will prove even more futile than the famous search by Diogenes for an honest man in Ancient Greece.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of eight books and more than four hundred articles on international issues. His latest book is *Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America* (2008). He is also a contributing editor to *The National Interest*.

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