

THE EVOLUTION OF US STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

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SUMMARY

- The Biden administration's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance reflects an evolution in US strategic thinking and policy priorities.
- The document shows how the administration intends to shift away from America Alone and towards America and its Allies.
- But the optimism and confidence the US expressed in 2015 has been replaced by deep concern over a range of strategic trends.
- The US will now prioritise strategic competition with China, a new approach to trade, the rise of technology, the defence of democracy, the urgent climate and health crises, and efforts to avoid 'forever wars' in the Middle East.

Introduction

Every new administration in Washington puts its clever thinkers together and drafts a National Security Strategy (NSS) that is then supposed to guide the combined policies of the United States on the international stage.

Normally, this takes some time. But, less than two months after assuming office, the Biden administration has taken the unusual step of publishing the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG), a document setting out some themes that are likely to be reflected in the NSS that eventually will appear.

At 23 pages, it is somewhat less comprehensive than the 55 pages of the December 2017 NSS of the Trump administration. But it is not far short of the 29 pages of the February 2015 NSS of the second Obama administration.

A comparison of the three documents provides an interesting view of the evolution of US strategic thinking and policy priorities. There are major differences, but also continuities, worth noting between the 2015, 2017, and 2021 documents.

The international order

The key difference between the 2015 and 2021 documents on the one side, and the 2017 one on the other, is the roles they ascribe to allies, partners, and international collaboration to meet the different challenges they identify. It is America and its Allies versus America Alone.

The 2015 NSS says that “in an interconnected world there are no global problems that can be solved without the United States, and few that can be solved by the United States alone”. And the 2021 NSS takes this a step further, stating that none of the key challenges it lists “can be effectively addressed by one nation acting alone. And none can be effectively addressed with the United States on the sidelines.”

The 2017 NSS does state – fairly late in the text, and seemingly in passing – that “allies and partners are a great strength of the United States”, but its overall emphasis is a different one. Its central thesis is that of “a world of strong, sovereign and independent nations” that is “an arena of continuous

competition” between them. It states that “a central continuity in history is the contest for power” and that, after a period of “strategic complacency”, it was now time for the US to reassert its power and to exercise its sovereignty.

This world view, of course, had a number of consequences.

While the concept of an international order and the different international institutions that serves it is in the 2015 NSS, it exists primarily as a problem in the 2017 NSS. “We stood by while countries exploited the international institutions we helped to build. They subsidized their industries, forced technology transfers, and distorted markets.” And other international institutions were seen as undermining the sovereignty of the US and other countries.

It was time – so ran the central thesis of the 2017 document – for the US “to rethink the policies of the past two decades. These policies had been based on the assumption that “engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners.” This, it was claimed, had been an illusion.

The INSSG of 2021 does not reflect on whether this is the case, but the concept of international order makes a strong return – although the document sounds a note of caution in saying that we are in a situation where “the alliances, institutions, agreements, and norms underwriting the international order the United States helped to establish are being tested.” The task ahead, then, is to “modernize the architecture of international cooperation for the challenges of this century”, and this has to be done “together with our allies and partners”.

While the 2017 NSS refers almost exclusively to power relationships on the global stage, neither the 2015 NSS nor the 2021 INSSG is particularly specific on the precise nature of the international order it seeks. The 2015 NSS refers to “a rules-based international order” but, while concepts such as international law and multilateralism would figure prominently in any European document, neither idea has much prominence in any of the three US documents.

There has often been some ambivalence in the US attitude towards the United Nations as an essential part of the global architecture.

The policy laid down in the 2015 NSS is to “continue to embrace the post-World War II legal architecture – from the U.N. Charter to the multilateral treaties that govern the conduct of war, respect for human rights, nonproliferation, and many other topics of global concern”, and to “work

vigorously both within the U.N. and other multilateral institutions, and with member states, to strengthen and modernize capacities.”

The 2017 NSS takes a different approach to the subject. It acknowledges that “the United Nations can help contribute to solving many of the complex problems in the world”, but stresses that “it must be reformed and recommit to its founding principles”, without indicating what that means. On one point, the text is very clear: “the United States will not cede sovereignty to those that claim authority over American citizens and are in conflict with our constitutional framework.”

The 2021 INSSG adopts a more positive tone, saying that “because the United Nations and other international organizations, however imperfect, remain essential for advancing our interests, we will re-engage as a full participant and work to meet our financial obligations, in full and on time.” The ambition is that the US will “resume a leadership role in multilateral organizations”. The tricky issue of “authority over American citizens” and related issues is not addressed.

Trade

One can see a clear and continuous evolution of trade policy through the three documents.

Stressing, without reservation, “the positive benefits of trade and commerce”, the 2015 NSS spells out an ambitious agenda for wide-ranging trade agreements. “When complete, the Trans-Pacific Partnership will generate trade and investment opportunities – and create high-quality jobs at home – across a region that represents more than 40 percent of global trade.” The document adds that “through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP), we are setting the world’s highest standards for labor rights and environmental protection, while removing barriers to U.S. exports and putting the United States at the center of a free trade zone covering two-thirds of the global economy.”

All this was left out of the 2017 NSS, which started its section on these issues by stating that, “for decades, the United States has allowed unfair trading practices to grow” and focused its concern primarily on “trade imbalances”. The US was now only ready to “pursue bilateral trade and investment agreements with countries that commit to fair and reciprocal trade”. Note the word “bilateral” – no room for the European Union – and that trade should not be free but instead “fair” and “reciprocal”.

The approach in the 2021 INSSG does not go that far, but it certainly does not return to the ambitions of 2015. The specific concern with trade imbalances has disappeared, but the core principle the US now spells out is that trade “must serve all Americans, not just the privileged few” – thereby implying that this had previously not been the case, and that the Biden administration will take a very cautious approach to the issue. And new trade deals of any sort will only be possible “after we have made investments in American workers and communities”, although exactly what that means is left unsaid.

Thus, trade policy has, step by step, turned domestic and defensive after previously having been global and transformative. The 2015 Obama vision of “a free trade zone covering two-thirds of the global economy”, setting the standards of the world, is dead and buried.

The only more global and transformative aspect of policy remaining is the ambition to reform the World Trade Organization, and to do this together with allies and partners.

Military power

The 2015 NSS is ambitious on arms control, making the radical statement that “we seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons”. It follows this up by seeking the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and the creation of a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty. It sees policy on Iran in this light, stating that the country had to “demonstrate its nuclear program is entirely peaceful”.

Arms control is not a priority in the 2017 NSS, although the document notes that “we will consider new arms control arrangements if they contribute to strategic stability and if they are verifiable”. At the end of the day, the Trump administration signed no such agreement, and left a number of others. The administration saw the modernisation of the strategic nuclear triad as essential to maintaining

deterrence.

In the 2021 INSSG, the approach is clearly different. It has the ambition to “head off costly arms races and re-establish our credibility as a leader in arms control”. And, in an important reversal of the policies of the last few years, the document states that “we will take steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy”.

In a novel approach, the document says that “we will engage in meaningful dialogue with Russia and China on a range of emerging military technological developments that implicate strategic stability”.

Much in line with traditional policy, the 2015 NSS makes clear that “a strong military is the bedrock of our national security”, and argues that, “although our military will be smaller, it must remain dominant in every domain.” It does not go into any geographic specifics, but notes that the combined number of US troops in Afghanistan and Iraq is down to less than 15,000.

The 2017 NSS stresses that American military strength “remains a vital component of the competition for influence” and adds that the US “must retain overmatch” versus any adversary. “Overmatch”, the document says, “strengthens our diplomacy and permits us to shape the international environment to protect our interests”. The stated ambition here is to “grow the size of the force so that it is capable of operating at sufficient scale and for ample duration to win across a range of scenarios.”

Unsurprisingly, the 2021 INSSG reaffirms that “a powerful military matched to the security environment is a decisive American advantage” but, in a twist not seen in the previous documents, says that “the use of military force should be a last resort, not the first; diplomacy, development, and economic statecraft should be the leading instruments of American foreign policy”.

Regional priorities

The 2021 INSSG is slightly more specific concerning priorities when it talks about “strategic challenges from an increasingly assertive China and destabilizing Russia”. Accordingly, the document states that “our presence will be most robust in the Indo-Pacific and Europe” – in that order – while “in the Middle East we will right-size our military presence” to a narrower set of tasks.

In an ambition that, in different words, was also there in 2015 and 2017, the 2021 INSSG states that

“the United States should not, and will not, engage in ‘forever wars’ that have cost thousands of lives and trillions of dollars.” One might point out that it was not meant to be like that in 2001 and 2003, but these ‘forever wars’ all had their roots in the Middle East and – indirectly, in the case of Iraq – in 9/11.

Of course, the three documents take significantly different approaches to the Middle East. The fight against the Islamic State group is certainly prominent in both the 2015 and 2017 documents, but only the former stresses the “root causes” of terrorism and instability, and says that “change is inevitable in the Middle East and North Africa, as it is in all places where the illusion of stability is artificially maintained by silencing dissent.”

In the 2017 NSS, there is no hint of the more fundamental issues the US needs to address in the Middle East, and the need for change there is limited to encouraging “states in the region, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to modernize their economies”. There is no mention of any need for political change in these countries.

The language in the 2021 INSSG swings back to more fundamental issues in the region when it says that “we will not give our partners in the Middle East a blank check to pursue policies at odds with American interests and values” – thereby implying that this had previously been the case, although it avoids the specifics of what the new approach means. But it is a big shift from the Trump administration, which often presented itself as strengthening friends and weakening adversaries. The key now is “to de-escalate regional tensions and create space for people throughout the Middle East to realize their aspirations”.

In the 2017 document, there is a passing reference to support for any deal between Israel and Palestine that they could agree on, while the 2021 INSSG says that the US will resume its “role as promoter of a viable two-state solution”.

Apart from the overall approach – an international order built with alliances and friends versus an unbound competition between sovereign states and actors – and the question of trade, the greatest difference between the documents lies in policies on China. But, here, it is more a question of a continuous sharpening of the focus and a hardening of the language.

The 2015 strategy talks about how to “advance our rebalance to Asia and the Pacific”, but the 2021 INSSG carries this much further. It refers several times to “the Indo-Pacific, Europe and the Western Hemisphere” – always in that order – as the most important areas for the future.

The 2015 document uses harsh words on Russia – coming the year after the country began its war against Ukraine – but its treatment of China is more nuanced. “The United States welcomes the rise of a stable, peaceful and prosperous China” and would “seek to develop a constructive relationship” with it. “While there will be competition, we reject the inevitability of confrontation.” And the US would “manage competition from a position of strength”.

The 2017 NSS takes a more critical approach, saying that “after being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition returned”, as “China and Russia began to assert their influence regionally and globally”. The National Defense Strategy that followed in 2018 stated, famously, that “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.” Although Russia was still there, it was clear that China had now replaced al-Qaeda as the number one security concern.

The 2017 NSS is free of the far more belligerent rhetoric on China that emerged later, notably during 2020, but it notes that “for decades U.S. policy was rooted in the belief that support for China’s rise and for its integration into the post-war international order would liberalize China.” While this had clearly not happened, the internal order of China is not a major concern in the document. It is external Chinese policies that are in focus: “although the United States seeks to continue to cooperate with China, China is using economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda.”

If the 2017 NSS still formally sees Russia and China as equal challenges, the 2021 INSSG clearly differentiates between them. While the latter is “the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system”, Russia merely plays “a disruptive role on the world stage”. The difference between “sustained challenge” and “disruptive role” is substantial.

Now there is no longer any effort to welcome the rise of China as in 2015. Instead, the key phrase is “strategic competition” with China. Nonetheless, the 2021 INSSG recognises that “strategic competition does not, and should not, preclude working with China when it is in our national interest to do so”. This means that the US “will conduct practical, results-oriented diplomacy with Beijing and

work to reduce the risk of misperception and miscalculation”.

The 2021 INSSG sets out three components of the “strategic competition” with China. The first is “to invest in our people, our economy, and our democracy”; the second is “bolstering and defending our unparalleled network of allies and partners”; and the third is “making smart defense investment” to “deter Chinese aggression”.

In terms of deterring “Chinese aggression”, no issue is more critical than that of Taiwan. Here, the 2021 INSSG states that “we will support Taiwan, a leading democracy and a critical economic and security partner, in line with longstanding American commitments”. Although the document underlines that this is nothing new, it is highly likely to seem new in the eyes of both Beijing and Taipei. The 2017 NSS explicitly mentions the One China policy, while the 2021 INSSG does not. Although the earlier document refers to helping with Taiwan’s defence, the phrase “critical ... security partner” certainly goes further than that.

Technology

One can see cyber and technology issues gradually rising in prominence through the three documents. In the 2015 NSS, the outlook is optimistic and confident: “as the birthplace of the Internet, the United States has a special responsibility to lead a networked world”. And, without indicating any major challenges, it states that “prosperity and security increasingly depend on an open, interoperable, secure, and reliable Internet”.

Those optimistic words did not come back. The emphasis of the 2017 NSS is very different, as it devotes considerable space to malign activities in cyber space and the need for the US to be able to strike back. And it does so without any trace of the earlier vision of an open, networked world.

In the 2021 INSSG, the perspectives have widened and the issue of technology is very prominent. “The world’s leading powers are racing to develop and deploy emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing, that could shape everything from the economic and military balance among states to the future of work, wealth and inequality within them”.

This opens up new areas of policy: “America must reinvest in retaining our scientific and technological edge and once again lead, working alongside our partners to establish the new rules and

practices that will allow us to seize the opportunities that advances in technology present.”

Cyber security certainly figures as “a top priority” and “an imperative across the government”. But, critically, the US “will double down on science and technology investments”, not least as a critical part of the “strategic competition” with China. The 2021 INSSG expresses worry that current trends do not entirely favour the US.

The document does not discuss whether an open, interoperable, secure, and reliable internet is still a realistic vision. Yet, clearly, the US will re-energise its cyber policies and “renew our commitment to international engagement on cyber issues, working alongside our allies and partners to uphold existing and shape new global norms in cyberspace”. Nonetheless, the confident tone of 2015 is no longer there.

Deepening concern

Three other issues are worth noting.

Firstly, the 2021 INSSG stresses the defence of democracy even more strongly than the 2015 strategy does, after having been almost totally absent from the 2017 document. Now the ambition is to “revitalize democracy the world over”. The 2021 INSSG mentions the ambition to hold a Summit for Democracy, without including further details.

Secondly, climate change is prominent in the 2015 document but absent in the one from 2017, when it was instead important to counter “an anti-growth energy agenda”. The issue is now back as a top priority. The world faces “a deepening climate emergency”.

Thirdly, the danger of the “spread of infectious diseases” is prominent in the 2015 NSS, which states that “we will accelerate our work with partners through the Global Health Security Agenda in pursuit of a world that is safer and more secure from infectious disease”. The 2017 NSS, despite being twice the length of the 2015 strategy, turns away from the issue. But, naturally enough, it is back with a vengeance in the 2021 INSSG, one of whose key global priorities is countering this threat and preventing the next pandemic.

So, apart from America Alone versus America and its Allies, it is now a question of the strategic

competition with China, the accelerating pivot to the Indo-Pacific, the decline of free trade, the rise of technology, the concern for democracy, the urgency of the climate and health crises, and the repeated attempts to avoid becoming bogged down in ‘forever wars’ in the Middle East.

There are undoubtedly differences in tone between the three national security documents. The US government was relatively optimistic and confident in 2015, became distinctly alarmist in 2017, and now expresses deep concern over a range of strategic trends.

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