

The Trump National Security Strategy: Return to the Nineteenth Century?

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Dec 19, 2017

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Brief Analysis

If taken as a whole, the document supports a largely traditional brand of U.S. foreign policy, but many elements of it could be used to justify a very different approach to the world.

With a geostrategic approach that merges throwback rhetoric with the status quo, President Trump's [just-released National Security Strategy \(https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf\)](https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf) seems to raise as many questions as it answers about how his administration will conduct foreign policy. The new NSS superimposes a worldview that is more nineteenth than twentieth century onto policies that look a lot like what the United States has been doing since 1940, but with a heavier emphasis on American economic health, competition, and military power than previous administrations. The good news is that this view eschews isolationism while seemingly correcting some of the flaws and blind spots in recent U.S. foreign policy, whether by emphasizing the threats from China and Russia, de-emphasizing global "do-goodism," or rejecting the notion that the worldwide triumph of liberal values is inevitable.

Yet the NSS fails to answer two fundamental questions: Is there a common global order that advances more than just American interests, and is this order worth preserving and defending? Absent such an organizing first principle, the document's underlying strategy comes across as something that Vladimir Putin -- a longtime fan of the nineteenth-century system -- would gladly sign up to.

WHAT MAKES THIS NSS DIFFERENT?

Unlike past iterations, the new NSS is pitched as coming from the president himself, making it far more important than these overlong, erratically issued documents usually are. As both candidate and president, Trump has

repeatedly called into question much of the core substance of American global engagement, and this document makes some of his well-known views official and explicit.

Any NSS has to answer three basic questions: What is the central vision of America's engagement in the world? What tools and general policies will be used to promote that vision? And how do the first two elements differ (if at all) from previous NSS documents? Trump's NSS is such a departure that the answers to the first and last questions are inextricably linked.

The president's strongly nationalist vision hits the reader directly in the introduction: "This National Security Strategy puts America first." Yet many past public policy documents have been laced with a more played-down version of this same nationalist tone, and Trump's NSS clearly mentions the traditional U.S. role, arguing that "a strong America is in the vital interests of not only the American people, but also those around the world who want to partner with the United States in pursuit of shared interests, values, and aspirations." So what is the problem with his approach?

In a nutshell, the answer lies in what he left out. The Obama administration issued two quite different NSS documents, in 2010 and 2015, but kept the following language in both to describe America's core national interests: "a rules-based international order advanced by U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges." There is nothing of the sort in Trump's version. Administration officials argue that language such as "cooperation with reciprocity" implies fealty to a global system, but it is not the same thing.

The organizing vision of the new NSS thus resembles neither an isolationist nor an internationalist worldview, but rather one reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Great Powers era. For example, it contends that "a central continuity in history is the contest for power. The present time period is no different." Diplomacy is not to be ignored, but rather restructured "to compete in the current environment and to embrace a competitive mindset" -- a far cry from diplomacy as organizing and managing a cooperative global system.

A more globalist mindset does seem to surface in one of the document's four pillars, "Advancing American Influence," which calls for celebrating "America's influence in the world as a positive force...for peace and prosperity and for developing successful societies." Noting that the world admires "what America stands for," the text promises partnership "to those who share our aspirations for freedom and prosperity" and states that "allies and partners are a great strength of the United States." The document then challenges explicit elements of global strategy advanced by the previous two presidents. Taking aim at the Bush administration, it promises that America "is not going to impose our values on others," emphasizing free will and shared interests instead. It then counters one of President Obama's key themes, the global inevitability of liberal democracy: "There is no arc of history that ensures that America's free political and economic system will automatically prevail." Such statements indicate that even the document's most avowedly globalist passages are centered on the core theme of almost Darwinian global competition.

For example, the NSS makes clear that the United States faces "three main sets of challengers—the revisionist powers of China and Russia, the rogue states of Iran and North Korea, and transnational threat organizations, particularly jihadist terrorist groups," all of which "are actively competing against the United States and our allies and partners." Furthermore, these are "fundamentally political contests between those who favor repressive systems and those who favor free societies," putting the world into a limbo where rivals are neither "at peace" nor "at war" but rather in an "arena of continuous competition." Although Trump's recognition of these threats is a welcome departure from the 2015 NSS (which, to be fair, was issued at a time before North Korea launched ICBMs and Russia intervened in Syria), his emphasis is on how they challenge the United States, not the global system that America runs.

Failure to make this link raises the question of what compels these states to challenge Washington so directly, since none of them likely seeks true world dominance (with the arguable exception of China). The obvious answer is that they are challenging not so much the United States as the constraints of "a rules-based international order advanced by U.S. leadership," to quote Obama's NSS. If the Trump administration deems that order not worth mentioning, let alone upholding, then one might wonder what is to stop America and its foes from defusing potential threats to each other by divvying up the world like the 1815 Congress of Vienna.

HOW MUCH MIGHT U.S. POLICY ACTUALLY CHANGE?

The most important conclusion that can be drawn from this NSS is that the Trump administration is going on record endorsing two seemingly contrary things: a central vision that deviates significantly from the "global order" focus of past administrations, and a set of familiar values and actions that inevitably serve such a global order. If the administration adheres to this strategy as a whole, its approach would align with the traditional policy followed over the past seventy years (and endorsed by surprisingly large margins in a recent Chicago Council on Global Affairs poll of Americans), but with no compelling, overarching argument for doing so beyond "American interests." Even the names of its core pillars echo prior NSS efforts once stripped of nationalist sentiment: "Protect the American People, the Homeland, and the American Way of Life"; "Promote American Prosperity"; "Preserve Peace Through Strength"; and "Advance American Influence." The long laundry list of specific actions that support these pillars are even more familiar, aside from a greater focus on military and economic facets as well as more mentions of emerging threats like cyber.

Tellingly, many areas are covered in a quite cursory manner. The Middle East merits only one short section that lumps together Iranian expansionism, state collapse, jihadist ideology, socioeconomic stagnation, and regional rivalries as generators of instability, without offering a specific antidote. Moreover, the document dismisses the Bush and Obama approaches (democratic transformation and disengagement, respectively) while offering little in the way of a replacement, only promising to be "realistic" about U.S. expectations for the region -- hardly a call to arms.

At the very least, the NSS and the initial domestic reactions to it are promoting a much-needed debate over how much of the traditional global order the United States needs to maintain. For example, David Frum delivered a classic internationalist critique (<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/12/a-national-security-strategy-devoid-of-values/548219/>) in the *Atlantic*, making special note of the document's lack of emphasis on the "soft power" values of democracy, which he sees as central to U.S. influence. Yet the Bush administration's overemphasis on those values in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan cost America dearly -- a problem voiced not just by Trump, but also by many in the generally anti-Trump internationalist wing. Even President Obama avoided nation-building (apart from a half-hearted effort aligned with the Afghan surge) and did little to promulgate American values beyond the rhetorical sphere. Frum also cites Trump's unpopularity as a result of abandoning a values-based system, but such criticism assumes that America's global role is all about popularity -- a notion that many observers beyond the president would challenge.

In the end, the proof of this pudding will be the degree to which the president and his top advisors adhere to the NSS as a whole. If they do so rigorously, the world will experience a Trump variant of traditional American foreign policy. If they want to deviate from that policy, however, the document provides enough justification to launch a very different approach to the world, as the president himself at least suggested in praising Putin (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-administrations-national-security-strategy/>) during his speech announcing the NSS.

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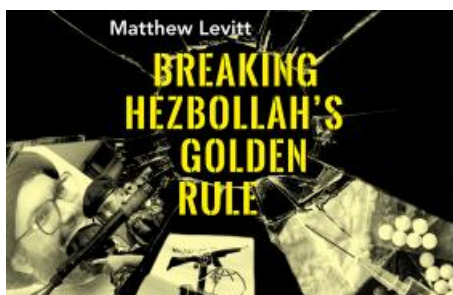
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