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The 2017 National Security Strategy: Issues for Congress

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On December 18, 2017, the Trump Administration released its first National Security Strategy (NSS). The document maintains that, in addition to the threats posed to the United States by rogue regimes and violent extremist organizations that have been a central focus of national security policy since the end of the Cold War, great power rivalry and competition have once again become a central feature of the international security landscape. To advance U.S. interests effectively within this strategic context, the Administration argues, the United States must improve domestic American security and bolster economic competitiveness while rebuilding its military. The NSS is organized into four interconnected "pillars":

- **Protect the American People, the Homeland, and the American Way of Life**, which focuses on border security, immigration, improving resilience to catastrophic events, and combating threats to the American homeland, including those from weapons of mass destruction.
- **Promote American Prosperity**, which concentrates on rejuvenating the domestic economy; promoting free and reciprocal economic relationships; leading on research, innovation, and invention; and protecting the national security innovation base.
- **Preserve Peace Through Strength**, which focuses on defense policy, including improving the lethality of the joint force, and articulates U.S. interests in different regions around the world, as well as ways to advance U.S. interests using diplomatic and economic means.
- **Enhance American Influence**, which aims to improve the U.S. ability to achieve its desired outcomes in multilateral fora, as well as broaden the community of states with which the United States partners.

The 2017 NSS retains many of the same themes as those articulated by previous Administrations, particularly its prioritization of combating threats from weapons of mass destruction, promoting U.S. global leadership, and advancing economic prosperity. It differs in several key respects, including the degree of its emphasis on homeland security and American economic growth, its declaration that the United States will no longer "impose [its] values on others" (p.37), its assertion that the United States will defend its sovereignty "without apology," (p.4) and its argument that the United States must better compete with other actors in a complex international security environment in which many adversaries are blurring the lines between war and peace. Some observers maintain that the 2017 NSS's emphasis on advancing U.S. interests and global competition is a return to principled realism. Others take the view that the document dismisses the importance of "soft power," in particular promulgating U.S. values as a source of American strength.

NSS Statutory Requirement

The NSS is a congressionally mandated document, originating in the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 (P.L. 99-433, §603/50 U.S.C §3043). The NSS has been an unclassified document published by the President since the Reagan Administration in 1987. The FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), P.L. 114-328, Section 944, amended 50 U.S. Code, Section 304, to delete "both a classified and unclassified form" and insert "to Congress in classified form, but may include an unclassified summary."

What the 2017 NSS Says

Many observers and practitioners have long noted that NSSs are not strategies as traditionally understood; that is, successive Administrations' National Security Strategies generally fail to link overall national objectives to the tasks and resources necessary to accomplish stated goals. The Trump Administration's NSS is no different, as it broadly describes key strategic challenges and "priority tasks," without articulating the resources necessary to accomplish stated goals, or asserting which of the 117 identified tasks are most important. What NSSs *do* provide is a broad assessment of the international strategic context in which the United States is operating, as well as an articulation of an Administration's underlying philosophy for advancing U.S. interests.

One could infer from the NSS that the Trump Administration regards homeland security, economic growth, and national security as more fundamentally interrelated than its predecessors have argued, and that at times, the United States must cooperate with those states with which it also competes. Some key specific points in the new NSS include

- **The U.S. must operate in a global strategic context, wherein adversaries often compromise American interests using nonmilitary tools.** "China, Russia and other state and non-state actors recognize that the United States often views the world in binary terms, with states being either 'at peace' or 'at war,' when it is actually an arena of continuous competition. Our adversaries will not fight us on our terms. We need to raise our competitive game to meet that challenge, to protect American interests and to advance our values" (p. 28).
- **Some actors, particularly Russia and China, have exploited international institutions in a manner that has compromised American economic security.** The NSS further distinguishes between those like-minded states that follow "fair and free market principles," with which the United States encourages healthy economic competition, from those that "act with little regard for those principles." With respect to the latter, it maintains that the United States will pursue enforcement actions against those countries that violate the rules to their unfair advantage (p. 19).
- **While the United States has benefited from an interconnected world, significant work is required to mitigate the threats that globalization poses to American homeland security.** In addition to securing the border and preventing the use of weapons of mass destruction on U.S. soil, the NSS maintains that adversaries "steal and exploit our intellectual property and personal data, interfere in our political processes, target our aviation and maritime sectors, and hold our critical infrastructure at risk" (p. 7).
- **The U.S. military needs significant investment to maintain superiority against adversaries such as China and Russia.** Noting that "since the 1990s, the United States displayed a great degree of strategic complacency" (p. 27), the NSS argues that investments in new technologies and additional military manpower are required (p. 29).

- **Advancing U.S. interests requires diplomats that are adept at navigating and negotiating in international competitive spaces.** The NSS makes the case for effective diplomacy: "Across the competitive landscape, America's diplomats are our forward-deployed political capability, advancing and defending America's interests abroad" (p. 33). Yet, many observers have argued that the State Department has been underfunded for decades, a trend that the Trump Administration arguably has not reversed.

As it ponders the 2017 NSS, Congress may wish to consider what, if any, additional resources may be required to implement the strategy effectively, and to what degree it will be supported by the forthcoming National Defense Strategy to be issued by the Pentagon in early 2018.

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