

Revitalizing the U.S. National Security Strategy

Strategy is an act of imagination. That is the fundamental insight from Carl von Clausewitz, the nineteenth-century Prussian theorist who in his classic book, *On War*, wrote: “... if the whole is to be vividly present to the mind, imprinted like a picture, like a map, upon the brain, without fading or blurring in detail, it can only be achieved by the mental gift that we call imagination ... If imagination is entirely lacking it would be difficult to combine details into a clear, coherent image.”¹

Strategic planning is important because it forces a fragmented policy bureaucracy to think imaginatively about how the world works and what their nation can achieve. Strategic planning creates space for leaders to articulate priorities and match diverse capabilities to overarching goals. When done well, it allows powerful governments to become forward-looking international agenda-setters, avoiding the all-too-frequent tendency to react to emerging crises in piecemeal fashion. Strategic planning sees order and opportunity in the chaos and threats of daily politics. Clausewitz famously called this the “inward eye” (*coup d’oeil*) of leadership.

Imagination does not necessarily correlate positively with power; in fact, the two attributes might have an inverse relationship in the modern world. The history of the last quarter-century shows that the United States has had trouble imagining how to use its power to promote order in an increasingly complex

James Goldgeier is Dean of the School of International Service at American University. He has authored or co-authored four books, including *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* (Public Affairs, 2008), co-authored with Derek Chollet. Follow him on Twitter @JimGoldgeier. Jeremi Suri is the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Leadership in Global Affairs and Professor of History and Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author and editor of seven books, most recently *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft*, co-edited with Hal Brands (Brookings Institution, 2015). Follow him on Twitter @jeremisuri.

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international system. U.S. policymakers have displayed a repeated tendency to react (and overreact) to problems, rather than create enduring solutions. That is not because of absent capabilities or insufficient ambition. Quite the contrary, unprecedented military tools (including precision unmanned weapons) and universal claims (“ending tyranny in our world”)² have encouraged frenetic action against emerging threats around the globe. Since the end of the Cold War, the geographic range of U.S. force deployments has increased, as have the demands upon those forces. The United States is fighting terrorism in countless failed states and seeks to rescue individual hostages held beyond the reach of legitimate local authorities. In addition to protecting its own citizens, the United States has sent its military across the globe to save other populations under attack. We are ubiquitous global enforcers and humanitarians, at the same time.

U.S. hyper-reactivity to threats represents the opposite of strategic planning. The actions of adversaries—large and small—dictate the immediate priorities for our national resources and attention. Our leaders operate in perpetual crisis mode, fearful of looking passive in the face of the next international incident. Crisis reaction encourages an emphasis on immediate responses and a narrowing of analysis to address the most pressing problems of the day. A broader perspective on the priorities of the nation is lost as our policymakers rush to take out another group of terrorists or debate how to counter another incursion in Ukraine, Syria, or the South China Sea. The range of our capabilities enables our reactivity, and the pressure of our media helps motivate it further. It is not necessarily the best way to promote our national interests.

This is not a new problem. However in earlier times, U.S. leaders responded with imaginative new organizational solutions—rather than a direct military response—to support broader strategic goals. In the decade after WWII, for example, Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower created a permanent strategic planning and implementation structure, including the National Security Council and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, both formed by the National Security Act of 1947. Secretary of State George Marshall created the Policy Planning Staff within the State Department at about the same time, first chaired by George Kennan. With the end of the Cold War and the recognition that globalization was producing fundamental changes in world affairs, President Bill Clinton formed the National Economic Council, designed to build synergies between national security and economic decision-making. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush and Congress created a new Director of National Intelligence to integrate all of the U.S. intelligence agencies. The President and Congress also empowered a new executive agency, the Department of Homeland Security, to improve coordination among intelligence, military, transportation, immigration, and customs offices protecting U.S. territory.

All of these organizational changes responded to a new international environment by integrating diverse government actors. The reforms sought to bring a fragmented bureaucracy together to collaborate on setting priorities, allocating resources, and imagining the future for U.S. foreign policy. When they worked well, as historian Hal Brands has recently shown, these new agencies added enormous value by giving different parts of government clear definitions of national interests, including overriding policy goals. They also defined (sometimes by default) the areas and issues that were not government priorities, and therefore deserved fewer resources. When these organizations did not work well, as they often have not, they engaged in log-rolling, multiplying parallel commitments for the U.S. government to please every interest and spread U.S. resources thin.³

Since the start of the 21st century, spreading resources thin has become the norm, as Washington has taken on unprecedented peacetime commitments in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, where it has achieved very little. In other regions—particularly in East Asia—the United States has given contradictory signals of “pivoting” with more force and simultaneously showing a nagging reluctance to back its claims with real muscle. Without clear strategic guidance, confusion in Washington has contributed to growing uncertainty about U.S. priorities among its allies and adversaries. A cacophony of domestic political voices only compounds this problem, which the presidential campaign season will likely exacerbate.

Confusion and uncertainty have also surrounded the recent nuclear agreement the United States and its international partners signed with Iran. While postponing Iranian nuclear ambitions for fifteen years is a significant achievement for the Obama administration, ambiguity persists regarding the broader strategic goals the United States is pursuing in the Middle East. Does the administration seek a U.S.–Iranian détente, shifting attention away from its traditional partners, Saudi Arabia and Israel? Or does the administration value short-term nuclear non-proliferation efforts above longer-term regional concerns?

Beyond the inevitable political posturing around Iran and other issues, it is precisely during this campaign season that candidates and their advisers must begin to think about future U.S. strategy, and how a clear statement can guide policymaking in a new administration after January 2017. Without a clear strategy statement, the next president will find it difficult to align U.S. capabilities behind core national interests. Without a clear strategy statement, the next president will fail to set a foreign policy course for his/her new administration that leverages U.S. resources and allies, escaping the damaging tendency to do a little everywhere

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and seek to stamp out fires wherever they burn. The new president should be a strategic leader, not a global first responder.

The 2015 National Security Strategy

The most recent National Security Strategy (or NSS) document, released after a series of delays by the Obama administration in February 2015, highlights the problems and potential for strategic planning that our next president would be wise to understand. The thirty-page document covers a wide range of topics from terrorism and weapons of mass destruction to cyber-security, climate change, economics, and civil society. It is almost encyclopedic in its brief survey of numerous challenges; it avoids identifying the most and least important.⁴

Divided into four sections on “security,” “prosperity,” “values,” and “international order,” the 2015 NSS makes a case for U.S. multilateral leadership in the world, with an overriding emphasis on non-military forms of power. The document calls for “collective action” and a promotion of “international rules and norms” to ensure security and order against current threats. It paints a picture of U.S. power as resurgent and global, but based largely on free markets, democracy, and human rights. The document clearly rejects extensive military occupations of foreign societies and unilateral interventions aimed at regime change, nation-building, or similarly ambitious goals. This NSS is expansive in its calls for economic, cultural, and technological openness. Reacting to the failed attempts to reshape countries such as Russia, Iraq, and Afghanistan over the past 25 years, it is restrained in its expectations for how the United States can influence military and political outcomes on the ground.

Unlike many previous national security statements, this NSS does not focus on particular regions or geopolitical threats. It is, in fact, quite vague in its definition of U.S. interests and its assessment of significant challenges. Instead, the NSS offers a “diversified and balanced set of priorities appropriate for the world’s leading global power with interests in every part of an increasingly interconnected world.”⁵ This kind of globalizing language echoes the thinking of the 1990s, and it gives the impression that the Obama administration has not determined priorities other than to avoid long and costly military conflicts—the key foreign policy theme that underpinned the president’s 2008 election campaign. The NSS has little to offer in terms of goals, purposes, and outcomes for U.S. commitments abroad since it is precisely those commitments that the president pledged to limit if elected. Consistent with a central theme since January 2009, the NSS is still a document reacting more to the mistakes of the previous administration,

rather than emphasizing the foreign policy challenges facing the United States going forward.

The closest the document comes to a statement of goals is its observation: “The modern-day international system currently relies heavily on an international legal architecture, economic and political institutions, as well as alliances and partnerships the United States and other like-minded nations established after World War II.” The NSS claims, “[T]he vast majority of states do not want to replace the system we have. Rather, they look to America for leadership needed to both fortify it and help it evolve to meet the wide range of challenges described throughout this strategy.”⁶ This formulation is profoundly conservative and process-driven; it is remarkably unambitious.

The vagueness of the Obama administration’s NSS reflects the absence of rigorous strategic thinking in the president’s national security agencies. As in the document, different parts of the U.S. government are running to catch up with emerging threats. There is little systematic integration of policies, there are few consistent priorities, and capabilities are rarely aligned closely with goals and aspirations. In fact, the recent NSS is largely driven by a desire to avoid using certain capabilities, rather than a focused discussion of what U.S. capabilities are supposed to achieve.

The most recent NSS was, therefore, a missed opportunity. For an administration lacking clear foreign policy direction, the document offered a chance to articulate priorities and bring key actors together. That did not happen. For a government accused of weakness and inconsistency, the NSS could have shown strength of purpose and provided a framework for integrating a diverse set of important recent initiatives including the opening to Cuba, the Iran nuclear deal, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). It offered no such framework. Most important, for a world careening from one crisis to another, the NSS could have sketched a new strategic map that made sense of this world, explained how it worked, and described how U.S. actions could best serve citizens at home and abroad. The Obama’s administration’s NSS, like its policies, never lifted itself above the challenges it surveyed to offer this needed global narrative. It failed to imagine how U.S. policy could build a better, or at least less threatening, world.

For these reasons, almost everyone (including U.S. government officials, foreign leaders, policy experts, and the media) ignored the Obama administration’s February 2015 NSS. It is hard to find a strategy document that received less attention in U.S. history. Most predecessors at least merited major newspaper headlines; not this one. It is so innocuous that Republican presidential hopefuls have not even bothered to attack it.

The 2015 NSS is still reacting to the previous administration, rather than looking forward.

The irony is that in this moment of rapidly shifting international conditions and growing policy uncertainty, a cohesive strategy document is more necessary than ever before.

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We are at a moment of great uncertainty for U.S. global leadership. The early post-Cold War assumption that the collapse of communism validated U.S. notions of democracy and markets for the rest of the globe fostered the belief that the future of the U.S.-led liberal international order was secure. While political and economic freedoms have emerged in places as diverse as Central and Eastern Europe,

Southern Africa, and Southeast Asia, the United States faces challenges from illiberal countries with significant regional ambitions, namely China, Russia, and Iran. Non-state actors such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Hezbollah, and al-Qaeda continue to threaten the interests of the United States and its allies. The United States' traditional democratic allies, Europe and Japan, are struggling with economic and demographic challenges, leaving them less able to combat rising threats. Issues only recently discussed as part of the national security agenda, such as climate change and infectious disease, demand increasing attention from policymakers.

Given the range of short-term and long-term challenges the country faces, one single strategy document cannot do everything, and we are long past the days when we could boil down our main focus with a single word such as "containment." National security statements are not panaceas or silver bullets. They have, however, played an essential role in previous periods of international transition. Rigorous strategic planning and a high-quality strategic statement have provided a necessary foundation for setting priorities, organizing resources, and

building consensus. They have brought key actors together and inspired confidence by narrating a coherent path forward. As Clausewitz predicted, if you cannot imagine the future and describe it, you cannot organize your power to get you there.

The new U.S. president in 2017 will need an effective national strategy statement early in his or her administration, as it is the first term when such documents have traditionally

been most significant. A survey of some of the most important strategic statements highlights that having a principal drafter with strong backing from the president, national security adviser, or secretary of state ensures the writing of a coherent

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document that avoids the lowest common denominator feature of most products emanating from the foreign policy bureaucracy. Serious presidential candidates should begin thinking about their national security strategy—and a designated drafter—right now, just as many of their predecessors did.

Acheson, Nitze, and NSC-68

National Security Council Report 68 (NSC-68) was the most important early Cold War national security statement.⁷ It followed a series of documents outlining the U.S. response to the threat posed by the Soviet Union at the onset of the Cold War. George Kennan articulated the nature of the threat and the need for the United States to contain it in what became known as the “Long Telegram” and the “X article,” in 1946 and 1947. These widely read documents preceded a more detailed set of NSC papers in 1948–49.⁸

At the time, U.S. policy reflected Kennan’s view that the country could afford to focus on the Soviet threat in high priority areas, such as Western Europe, Japan, and the Persian Gulf, and did not need to counter Soviet moves in every part of the globe. Prior to the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, there was little concern about falling dominoes or the emergence of a unified Sino–Soviet threat.

In late 1949, President Harry Truman requested the formulation of a top-secret comprehensive strategy in response to the first Soviet atomic bomb test. Meanwhile, Paul Nitze replaced George Kennan as director of the State Department Policy Planning Staff. Nitze believed the threat of war with the Soviet Union was rising and the United States had to prioritize global preparations to contain communist expansion.

Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Nitze knew exactly what they wanted in responding to the president’s request: a strategy that would galvanize the different parts of the U.S. government, and also the American people, to build the military capabilities necessary to counteract growing Soviet power. Nitze was able to keep the group involved in the process small, since participation required a “Q clearance” which was necessary to see nuclear weapons data. This sidelined Budget Bureau and Treasury Department officials, who would have insisted on cost estimates. Nitze also built support within the bureaucracy (especially inside the Pentagon) to counteract Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, a budget hawk who shared Truman’s opposition to increased military spending. In addition, Nitze sidelined the State Department’s Russia experts—George Kennan, Charles “Chip” Bohlen, and Llewellyn “Tommy” Thompson—who believed Nitze was overstating the Soviet threat and unnecessarily militarizing the Cold War.⁹

Although 70 pages long, NSC-68 had one core assumption and one core policy prescription, surrounded by apocalyptic language about the possible “destruction not only of this Republic but of civilization itself.” The assumption was that the Kremlin had a master plan for “world domination.” This assumption led to the document’s prescription that the United States must embark on a global military buildup to ensure the Soviets did not succeed.¹⁰ Many government documents lay out alternative courses of action, concluding that only one is acceptable; NSC-68 was no exception to this template. It laid out four courses of action (three of which were clearly intolerable based on the arguments in the document): staying the course; isolation; war; or building up the political, economic, and military strength of the United States and its allies to reach “a tolerable state of order among nations without war.”

Nitze and his colleagues argued: “[W]ithout superior aggregate military strength a policy of ‘containment’—which is in effect a policy of calculated and gradual coercion—is no more than a policy of bluff.” Acheson and Nitze deliberately avoided a discussion of cost in order to ensure that the document received the strategic consensus necessary to provide the president a recommendation, and thus NSC-68 merely referred to the need for a “rapid and sustained build-up of the political, economic, and military strength of the free world.”¹¹ President John F. Kennedy’s Deputy National Security Adviser, Carl Kaysen, later wrote: “The apocalyptic tone of the first dozen pages of NSC-68 sounds more like the prose of John Bunyan than that of a committee of Washington bureaucrats drafting a top secret document.”¹² But Acheson had a clear goal “to so bludgeon the mass mind of ‘top government’ that not only could the President make a decision but that the decision could be carried out.”¹³

While NSC-68 had a strong principal in Acheson, and a strong lead writer in Nitze, President Truman remained unprepared to implement the massive military increase it demanded upon its submission in April 1950. The outbreak of the Korean War two months later, however, validated the document’s predictions and made its prescriptions seem both prescient and necessary. The strategy document gave focus to the Truman administration during a period of heightened conflict, uncertainty, and fear.

The United States had defined the Korean peninsula as outside its area of vital interest, and an invasion by North Korea of the South supported by the Soviet Union and China followed. Not only did the United States feel compelled to respond on the peninsula, the administration feared the conflict would demoralize its European allies. As a consequence, the United States soon turned the North Atlantic Treaty into a serious organization with a Supreme Allied Commander and significant troop commitments. After Truman finally approved NSC-68 in September 1950, a tripling of the defense budget and a globalization of containment followed.¹⁴

Although NSC-68 remained classified until the mid-1970s, its contents became well known within the Truman and subsequent administrations. It superseded Kennan's less militarized approach with a more expansive strategy of containment that guided U.S. policy for the next several decades. NSC-68 put the United States on a permanent Cold War footing in all corners of the globe. Washington would resist communist advances in all regions, by any means necessary.

NSC-68 was classified until the 1970s, but gave focus to the Truman administration.

Nixon and Kissinger

The implementation of NSC-68 in the aftermath of the Korean War globalized U.S. containment strategy, contributing to the country's longest and most painful Cold War military intervention in Vietnam. President Richard Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, entered the White House in 1969 determined to shift U.S. priorities away from global containment and counterinsurgency in Southeast Asia. During the first year in office, they focused the interagency process on assessing the U.S. nuclear deterrent in an era of Soviet nuclear parity. They explored realistic options for arms control and alternatives to the continued deployment of U.S. conventional forces in Southeast Asia and other crisis regions.

Nixon and Kissinger centralized decision-making in the White House, excluding key actors in State, Defense, and the intelligence agencies. Their obsession with secrecy and high-level strategic thinking allowed them to formulate a coherent and often bold approach to foreign policy, even if it sometimes diminished their ability to understand major issues fully in areas such as Southeast Asia and Latin America.

That said, Nixon and Kissinger's strategy was a model in its coherence, consistency, and clarity. Articulated most clearly in its first annual foreign policy report, submitted to Congress on February 18, 1970, the administration's strategy centered on détente, rather than Cold War containment. Kissinger largely wrote the report, titling it "a new strategy for peace."¹⁵ He began by explaining that the United States remained the strongest power in the world, but Soviet strategic parity now placed severe limits on the uses of the nation's weapons. In addition, the rise of new nations and the fracturing of the communist alliance (particularly the emerging rivalry between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China) meant that power was more diffused throughout the international system, and U.S. leverage over events on the ground was often quite limited. The war in Vietnam was startling evidence of that last fact.

The Nixon–Kissinger strategy document used simple language to define a three-fold strategy: multilateralism, strength, and negotiations. First, the United States would move away from the unilateralism and forward deployments of the prior decades, turning instead to its partners for more of the day-to-day security management of crucial regions. The United States would provide increased military resources and financial assistance, along with soldiers as a backstop, but it would support the healthier development of local capabilities. Reporters dubbed this the “Nixon Doctrine,” following a speech the president gave in Guam months earlier previewing this policy.¹⁶

Second, the United States would maintain the strength of its strategic deterrence through nuclear weapons and a variety of air-, land-, and sea-based delivery systems. Washington would not necessarily pursue superiority, but it would show all friends and adversaries that it had an assured second strike against communist nuclear aggression, or a direct conventional attack on Central Europe or Japan.

Third, and perhaps most important, Nixon and Kissinger emphasized negotiations with adversaries as a crucial mechanism for protecting U.S. national interests. “Enduring ideological differences” remained important, but the strategy document made it clear that interests must trump ideology. A safe and secure world for U.S. power required some security for adversaries as well. Compromise was necessary to avoid dangerous conflicts, and cordial relations allowed for the

United States to increase its global influence with fewer risks and costs. Kissinger wrote that the United States “must define its interests with special concern for the interests of others. If some nations define their security in a manner that means insecurity for other nations, then peace is threatened and the security of all is diminished.” Within this framework of mutual security, the document explicitly endorsed negotiations with the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China.¹⁷

Nixon and Kissinger sought to frame public and private debates about U.S. foreign policy.

Nixon and Kissinger’s strategy document was widely read and commented upon in the U.S. and international media. That was the intention—to give clear direction to all parts of the U.S. government “as well as”, so that it appears as “government as well as domestic” domestic and international observers. Nixon and Kissinger sought to frame public and private debates about U.S. foreign policy, pushing Cold War strategic assumptions away from containment and counterinsurgency toward multilateralism, deterrence, and negotiation. None of these concepts were revolutionary, but they gained much greater emphasis than before.

U.S. agencies calibrated themselves accordingly to meet the strategic priorities of the White House. The American people adjusted their expectations to match these priorities for a post-Vietnam era. Perhaps most important, foreign adversaries recognized the seriousness of this shift, and they acted accordingly. Soviet and Chinese leaders, in particular, began to take the idea of managed conflict with the United States seriously. The Nixon–Kissinger strategy document imagined a new framework for détente in the early 1970s, and it helped citizens, allies, and adversaries to pursue it.¹⁸

Reagan and NSDD 75

A decade later, Ronald Reagan entered the White House in January 1981, convinced that the Nixon–Kissinger policy of détente had weakened the United States. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolution in Iran were, Reagan argued, evidence that U.S. efforts to substitute compromise for force were eroding U.S. standing in the world. The new president over-simplified a complex international landscape, but that was his short-term advantage as a strategist. He was absolutely clear about his commitment to make the United States a more direct, forceful, and unilateral actor across the globe.

The Reagan administration focused on combating Soviet power, and the influence of Soviet allies, especially in Eastern Europe and the “third world.” After almost two years of disarray within the NSC, Reagan’s second national security advisor, William Clark, produced a cohesive strategy document, which received presidential approval on January 17, 1983. National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 75, “U.S. Relations with the USSR,” was largely written by the Soviet and East European expert on the NSC, Jack Matlock. Matlock later became U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, responsible for implementing many parts of this strategy on the ground.

NSDD 75 was a short 9-page document that opened with three clear strategic goals: reverse Soviet expansionism through competition in “all international arenas”; promote internal change within the Soviet Union “toward a more pluralistic political and economic system”; and negotiate with the “principle of strict reciprocity and mutual interest.” Rejecting stability and cooperation through détente as worthwhile goals, the new strategy emphasized active (often aggressive) measures to transform the main U.S. adversary. Pointing to the period of Soviet leadership uncertainty that had begun with the death of General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev in late

The Reagan administration’s strategy document (NSDD 75) was nine pages.

1982, NSDD 75 predicted: “this was a particularly opportune time for external forces to affect the policies of Brezhnev’s successors.”¹⁹

Matlock and other contributors to the document reflected Reagan’s aggressive strategic posture, and they outlined a clear path for implementation. NSDD 75 emphasized a conspicuous renewal of U.S. military strength: “The [United States] must modernize its military forces—both nuclear and conventional—so that Soviet leaders perceive that the [United States] is determined never to accept a second place or a deteriorating military posture.”²⁰ Military strength would have an economic analog, with tougher sanctions against the transfer of technology and other resources that helped the Soviet military and its command economy.

With renewed strength, the document called for Washington and its allies to claim the “high-ground in the battle of ideas,” marrying power to the intensive advocacy of human rights, democracy, and other basic values. Instead of avoiding these issues, as Nixon and Kissinger did through their pursuit of détente, the Reagan administration would trumpet the evils of communism and the superiority of liberal capitalism. Advocacy would involve public speeches, private pressure, and efforts to reach the citizens of communist states by circumventing censorship through radio transmissions and other technologies. Under the new strategy, U.S. muscle-flexing and loud-talking would go hand-in-hand.²¹

For all its (sometimes flagrant) aggression, the Reagan administration’s strategy was not designed for war. It was a strategy for “peace through strength,” as the president often repeated. A better way of understanding it would be “change through pressure,” rather than the phrase “change through reconciliation” used by European advocates of détente. NSDD 75 called for continued arms control negotiations and expanded superpower dialogue on all issues of concern. The goal was to engage Soviet leaders and persuade them to change, through firm pressure but also a common commitment to avoid war. Although the Reagan administration demanded unequal negotiations, with the United States clearly in the driver’s seat, it was committed to negotiations nonetheless. NSDD 75 was a strategy for international change through intensive but controlled competition.

Historians continue to debate the effectiveness of Reagan’s strategy, but no one denies that he had one. NSDD 75 clearly articulated the main goals of his foreign policy and the chosen means of pursuing them. It gave strong signals to all U.S. government agencies. It provided the framework for the president’s efforts to build consensus at home and abroad. Most important, Reagan’s strategy gave Soviet leaders and other adversaries a coherent image of U.S. aims. Even in disagreement, foreign leaders knew what Reagan was about, what he sought to achieve, and how he would proceed. His consistency

and credibility made him predictable for emerging reformers, especially Mikhail Gorbachev, who had their own reasons for trying to improve relations with the United States.²²

Clinton and Lake's Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement

After the Cold War ended, Bill Clinton entered office with little foreign policy experience, believing that he could focus on domestic economic renewal. In his first year as president, his number one international priority was reimagining the U.S. relationship with Russia. Overall, he hoped to take advantage of a “peace dividend” and shift resources away from defense spending toward social programs.

Clinton’s national security adviser, Anthony Lake, who had served as the president’s top foreign policy adviser during the 1992 campaign, was eager to lay out a strategy to enlighten the public and guide the foreign policy establishment. In the summer of 1993, Lake asked his aide, Jeremy Rosner, to draft a speech that would do for the new era what George Kennan’s containment strategy had done back in the late 1940s: create a foreign policy “understandable enough you could put it on a bumper sticker.”²³ Lake’s speech at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in September 1993 was the precursor of the Clinton National Security Strategy on Engagement and Enlargement, released the following year.

The 1994 Clinton National Security Strategy is notable because unlike every policy document that preceded it, and certainly unlike the next administration’s national security strategy, it was written in response to an opportunity, not a threat. It reflected a permissive international environment in which the communist adversaries who dominated the previous half-century of strategic planning were absent. For the first time since before World War II, the United States was not concerned about rising great powers. Lake wanted to produce a positive message about what U.S. power could accomplish in this post-Cold War “unipolar moment.”

Lake’s message was simple, and he deliberately sought to draw parallels with the United States’ earlier containment strategy: “Throughout the Cold War, we contained a global threat to market democracies; now we should seek to enlarge their reach, particularly in places of special significance to us. The successor to a doctrine of containment must be a strategy of enlargement—enlargement of the world’s free community of market democracies.” So as not to be judged naïve

Anthony Lake’s 1993 speech was the precursor to the 1994 Clinton administration strategy.

about the power of democracy and markets, Lake described this approach as a “pragmatic neo-Wilsonian” worldview. Laying down what would become a common theme across the succeeding U.S. presidential administrations, he declared: “We should act multilaterally where doing so advances our interests—and we should act unilaterally when that will serve our purpose.”²⁴

Lake’s 1993 speech gained little traction at first because few others at the senior levels of government (including the president) spent much time focusing on it, and in early October both the “Black Hawk down” incident in Somalia and the military clash between Russian president Boris Yeltsin and the Russian parliament threw the administration into turmoil. But over the course of the Clinton presidency and throughout the Bush administration, the enlargement of the community of democracies became a central organizing principle. When the 1994 NSS was released, it had at its heart a very American notion: “We believe that our goals of enhancing our security, bolstering our economic prosperity, and promoting democracy are mutually supportive. Secure nations are more likely to support free trade and maintain democratic structures. Nations with growing economies and strong trade ties are more likely to feel secure and to work toward freedom. And democratic states are less likely to threaten our interests and more likely to cooperate with the [United States] to meet security threats and promote sustainable development.”²⁵

The 1993 speech, written by a small group, was much clearer than the 29-page NSS a year later which, like the 2015 Obama National Security Strategy, received little immediate public attention. Lake never built a political effort to roll out a coherent strategy around his SAIS speech, and by the time the NSS was released the following year, too many drafts left an *ad hoc* impression of what the Clinton administration was trying to achieve. Furthermore, the final document did not provide as clarion a call as NSC-68 had at the beginning of the Cold War. NSC-68 argued that resisting Soviet influence was a matter of life and death; the effort to enlarge the democratic community seemed more a luxury than a necessity.

Despite public ambivalence, democracy promotion underlay a number of the big-ticket items during the Clinton years, and significant resources across the bureaucracy were devoted to this strategy. The administration pushed for increased financial assistance to help Russia’s transition toward democracy and markets, it promoted the enlargement of NATO to encourage political and economic reform in Central and Eastern Europe, it intervened in the Balkans to stop genocide, and it worked to bring China into the World Trade Organization. The administration believed that a richer China would trend toward democracy and thus become a better partner for the United States. Clinton’s second-term Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, a refugee of communist Eastern Europe, made democracy promotion across the globe a central feature of her time in office.

The 1993–1994 effort to produce a worthy successor to containment is revealing about U.S. foreign policy and the making of a national security strategy. Containment has been the gold standard of U.S. strategy, and no post-Cold War administration, including Clinton’s, succeeded in producing anything like it. The reason is simple: U.S. strategy during the Cold War was built around a single overarching threat. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has confronted a range of opportunities and challenges, from a rising China to terrorism, climate change, and nuclear non-proliferation. If there was ever a moment, however, when one major threat seemed once again to loom large, it was after the attacks on September 11, 2001.

George W. Bush and Preventive War

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, shocked the entire U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy and created an almost unprecedented focus on threats from transnational non-state actors. Published one year after the terrible events in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington DC, the Bush administration’s national security strategy fused elements of NSC-68’s global vision with the Reagan administration’s aggressive posture.

The most striking part of the new national security strategy discussed the nature of the threat. The document’s main author, State Department Counselor Philip Zelikow, summarized the new security environment clearly: “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones. We are menaced less by fleets and armies than by catastrophic technologies in the hands of the embittered few. We must defeat these threats to our Nation, allies, and friends.”²⁶ The dangers to U.S. security emanated from asymmetrical warfare—the weapons of the weak were now more destructive than ever before. The dangers had sources everywhere, particularly the parts of the globe characterized by disorder, tyranny, and underdevelopment.

The Bush administration’s strategy mixed force, economic assistance, and trumpeting U.S. ideals to correct the conditions that bred terrorism. The national security strategy spoke extensively about expanding “the circle of development by opening societies and building the infrastructure of democracy.”²⁷ Despite its campaign criticism of the Clinton administration’s emphasis on weak states at the expense of the big powers (especially China), the Bush team now saw the virtue in nurturing new military and non-military capabilities, increasing use of foreign intervention, and extending nation-building in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and other areas at risk. The U.S. response to diffuse asymmetrical threats deepened the country’s commitment to the global promotion of its ideals.

The presence of “weapons of mass destruction” in the hands of terrorists gave the Bush administration’s strategy an urgency unprecedented in prior documents. Waiting for specific threats to emerge, and risking repetitions of the September 11, 2001, attacks on a more lethal scale, was not acceptable. Echoing NSC-68, the Bush administration’s strategy document was similarly apocalyptic: “The United States of America is fighting a war against terrorists of global reach. The enemy is not a single political regime or person or religion or ideology. The enemy is terrorism—premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against innocents.” The presumption was that superior force could not deter suicidal terrorists in the same way that communist adversaries had been deterred during the Cold War.²⁸

The most controversial part of the Bush administration’s national security strategy advocated “preemptive” uses of force against “imminent threats.” This meant deploying military capabilities against a potential terrorist threat, and its supporters, when there was evidence of planned future damage to the United States and its interests: “The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction—and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively.”²⁹

This strategy of preemptive (really preventive) attacks on foreign threats drew numerous critics, but it had the clear support of the president, and his advisors imposed it on all relevant U.S. agencies.³⁰ It also provided a framework for public discussion of U.S. preparations and responses to terrorist threats after September 11, 2001. Foreign allies knew what the Bush administration intended to do, even if they often disagreed. Foreign adversaries also recognized the expanding military reach of the United States. The September 2002 national security strategy laid the groundwork for the U.S. invasion of Iraq a year later, and the Global War on Terrorism that would dominate U.S. policymaking for the coming years.³¹

Lessons for Obama’s Successor

The Bush national security strategy transformed U.S. rhetoric, budgeting, law, and war-fighting. It defined the world that Barack Obama inherited when he became president. The Obama team campaigned against what it saw as a completely wrong-headed strategy, leading the United States down the costly and counterproductive path of unending war. The administration seemed to believe that a clear national security strategy was not only unnecessary, but could prove disastrous. President Obama has, therefore, selectively engaged and disengaged from different conflicts, often using new tools, but his administration has deliberately not defined a coherent strategy.³²

Many U.S. agencies, citizens, allies, and adversaries are confused about U.S. aims and commitments, in part because the administration is indeed confused—or at least disjointed—in its activities. This does not mean that President Obama has “failed” as a foreign policy leader, but it indicates the limitations of his *ad hoc* maneuvers. The Obama administration has been more reactive than agenda-setting, more piecemeal than holistic. Although the president has avoided big blunders, his achievements until 2015 were quite small and often short-lived. And even with major breakthroughs toward the twilight of his presidency—the opening to Cuba, the nuclear deal with Iran, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership—the public remains confused about the purposes of U.S. power.

The place to start, even during the presidential campaign, is to return to Clausewitz and the basics of strategic planning. The new occupant of the White House in January 2017 will have to possess the intellectual ingredients to formulate a national security strategy that makes sense of a very complex international system—defining threats, opportunities, and U.S. national interests. A new strategy will need to align the United States’ considerable resources with a clear set of goals, defining specific policies to achieve those goals. Most of all, the next president will have to imagine a new global role for the United States that addresses the complexity of the international system, but offers a compelling narrative for the diverse actors within the United States and abroad. Our citizens, allies, and adversaries need consistency and predictability to calibrate their behaviors around our strategic purposes.

The Obama team would likely respond that the president’s achievements absent a strategy demonstrate that strategy is overrated. After all, the George W. Bush administration followed its strategy to a dismal conclusion. And the other strategies discussed in this article also had their shortcomings, sometimes with respect to resource allocation, at others with respect to missed opportunities and exaggerated threats.

Nevertheless, the Obama administration’s recent ability to negotiate successfully with long-time adversaries, Cuba and Iran, masks the huge challenges that remain for U.S. foreign policy. These challenges require coherent strategic thinking to provide guidance for the bureaucracy and the broader public.³³ The world has changed greatly since the 1990s and the U.S. “unipolar moment.” It is true but misleading when the Obama administration contends that “the vast majority of states do not want to replace the system we have. Rather, they look to America for leadership needed to both fortify it and help it evolve to meet the wide range of challenges.”³⁴ The challenge is not coming from the vast majority of states that seek a continuation of the international order the United States has

The public remains confused about the purposes of U.S. power.

built and maintained. The real challenge comes from those powerful states and non-state actors independently pushing against the U.S.-led order—especially China, Russia, Iran, and ISIS. The top strategic priority for the United States in the coming years is to formulate a carefully calibrated approach that responds to these “revisionist” actors, shoring up U.S. global leadership and protecting U.S. core interests.

Kennan’s original containment strategy was designed to support key regions of U.S. interest: Northeast Asia, Europe, and the Persian Gulf. China seeks to lessen U.S. dominance in the Western Pacific; Russia wants to undermine the NATO and EU effort to build a Europe whole, free, and at peace; and Iran aspires to regional hegemony in the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, the key U.S. ally in Asia, Japan, has declined as a power for more than two decades, and the United States’ most trusted global ally, the United Kingdom, is no longer investing sufficiently in its military capacity and will be consumed in the coming months with its internal debate over whether to remain part of the European Union, which is overwhelmed by the ongoing currency and refugee crises. Kennan’s priority areas are precisely those regions that are under the greatest pressure from states that reject the U.S. vision for international order.

Without a strategy, we risk a slow death by a thousand cuts.

The importance of President Obama’s “rebalancing” of U.S. foreign policy to Asia is also best understood in this context: rebalancing does not mean leaving Europe and the Middle East; it means ensuring U.S. global efforts are balanced across these three key areas, not just where conflict erupts.

The challenges posed by regional powers chafing against the U.S. liberal order are only part of the strategic landscape for U.S. policymakers. Non-state threats emanating from groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda will require an ongoing response, but they are part of a larger challenge that no U.S. president has faced before: the potential unraveling of the state system in the broader Middle East. Will countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Libya exist five or ten years from now? Any U.S. strategy has to consider the implications of multiple failed states across the region.

Finally, a national security strategy has to anticipate quickly evolving non-traditional threats such as cyber-security, as well as the long-term threat with the potential for true global devastation: climate change.

The next president, therefore, will have to define U.S. leadership in far more complex circumstances than the Cold War, when the pressing national security question was whether the Kremlin had a master plan for world domination. Multiplying international complexity requires more intentional U.S. coherence than ever before. Otherwise, we will continue to overreach, under-perform, and allow others to set our agenda. For all of our power, we risk a slow death by a thousand cuts.

National security strategy documents have been important for U.S. policy-makers since 1949. When effective, they have framed the most difficult and important foreign policy decisions. They allow the United States to lead rather than follow, defining priorities around U.S. interests, not the crisis of the moment. The most important strategy documents of the post-World War II period demonstrate that a president's first term is the time for a major statement of direction and purpose. The president, national security adviser, or secretary of state must empower one well-placed individual to lead the drafting, producing a readable document with a clear assessment and a call to action. A major presidential speech explaining the key elements of the president's strategy is crucial for building broad support, and this speech should come early in the new administration, with some previews during the presidential campaign and transition.

Obama has been too hesitant in his approach to strategy. Even if the 2015 National Security Strategy had offered a brilliant assessment of future challenges rather than a restatement of the foreign policy followed since January 2009, it came too late in the Obama presidency to make a difference.

Presidential candidates should begin generating ideas now that they can implement early in the next administration. They should assemble a serious group of foreign policy advisers and begin testing strategic ideas in their policy statements. The conventional wisdom is that Americans vote primarily on domestic issues, but current international conditions have encouraged renewed attention to foreign affairs especially in Iran, Syria, and Ukraine. Presidential candidates should speak to these concerns, laying the foundation for a more coherent policy future.

Early post-war strategy documents, particularly NSC-68, focused on U.S. government agency consumers, aligning internal resources and priorities. Since the early 1970s, the immediate constituencies for U.S. strategy documents have multiplied to include more domestic and foreign audiences—each seeking clear guidance for a complex international landscape. Presidents face more intense pressure than ever before to persuade, explain, and ultimately narrate why they are deploying U.S. power in specific ways. They must enter office already well-informed about how they will articulate a national security strategy that nudges international dynamics to U.S. advantage, organizes the labyrinth of U.S. agencies, and, most important, imagines a better world. After all, “if imagination is entirely lacking,” Clausewitz predicted, it will be impossible to lead.

Notes

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 109–10.
2. President George W. Bush, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 2005, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/21st_century/gbush2.asp.

3. See Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).
4. For the full text, see Barack H. Obama, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 2015), https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf.
5. *Ibid.*, 5.
6. *Ibid.*, 23.
7. NSC-68 is reprinted in Ernest R. May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC-68*, (Boston: Bedford Books, 1993). It is also available online: https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf.
8. On the development of U.S. national security strategy between 1947 and 1950, see Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 24–86.
9. See Leffler, *Preponderance of Power*, 312–60; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 87–124.
10. May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy*, pp. 26, 33.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 61, 80.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 98.
14. See Leffler, *Preponderance of Power*, 361–97; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 87–124.
15. For the full text of the document, see “U.S. Foreign Policy for the 1970s: A New Strategy for Peace,” February 18, 1970, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Volume 1, Document 60, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d60>.
16. Richard Nixon, Informal Remarks in Guam with Newsmen, July 25, 1969, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2140>.
17. “U.S. Foreign Policy for the 1970s: A New Strategy for Peace.”
18. This is a point documented in more depth in Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), and Robert Hutchings and Jeremi Suri, eds., *Foreign Policy Breakthroughs: Cases in Successful Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 101–20.
19. For the full text of NSDD 75, see “NSDD 75 on ‘U.S. Relations with the USSR,’” January 17, 1983, secret memorandum declassified by the CIA and hosted by the Federation of American Scientists, <http://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-75.pdf>.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
22. For the most insightful and fair-minded account of the Reagan administration’s strategy, and negotiations with Gorbachev, see Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004).
23. A discussion of the speech and the reaction to it is in Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* (Public Affairs, 2008): 66ff.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–69.
25. William J. Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington, DC: The White House, July 1994), pp. i–ii, <http://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1994.pdf>.

26. George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: The White House, September 2002), p. 1, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 21–23.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
30. For a discussion of the differences between preemptive and preventive defense, see Colin S. Gray, “The Implications of Preemptive and Preventive War Doctrines: A Reconsideration,” Strategic Studies Institute, July 2007, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub789.pdf>.
31. The best analysis to date of the Bush administration’s national security strategy is Melvyn P. Leffler, “The Foreign Policies of the George W. Bush Administration: Memoirs, History, Legacy,” *Diplomatic History* 37 (April 2013), pp. 190–216. See also John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 69–113.
32. For a thoughtful effort to make sense of the consistencies and inconsistencies in President Obama’s foreign policy, see Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
33. In 2012–13, a bipartisan group of national security experts came together to produce: “Setting Priorities for U.S. Leadership: A New National Security Strategy for the United States,” (co-chairs, James Goldgeier and Kurt Volker), Project for a United and Strong America, March 2013, <http://www.nationalsecuritystrategy.org/pdf/pusa-report-march-2013.pdf>.
34. Obama, *National Security Strategy*, p. 23.

