

THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY OF THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

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INTRODUCTION

The publication of the 2017 National Security Strategy by the Trump Administration came as a surprise to the many who were anxiously awaiting its arrival. The National Security Strategy was published within the first year of the Trump presidency, an unprecedented feat for any administration, but what silenced the endless commentary in its build-up was the complete, almost conflicting nature of the document when held next to the every day campaign rhetoric used by the President. This creates a great veil of uncertainty for foreign allies in the already uncertain stance of a Trump that is highly critical of multilateralism and international institutionalism. However, when examining the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), it is hard not to notice the evident change in its view of both the world and the trajectory of the United States within that world. Rather than the abrasive language so often employed by Donald Trump, it would not be out of line to suggest that the document actually falls in line in many aspects with the strategic practice constitutive of the last two decades, undermining much of what Trump has famously promised at campaign rallies. Therefore, it is evident that the attempted materialization of Trump's 'America First' strategy in a global context has posed a great challenge to the foreign policy establishment of Washington. Through the close

observation of the divergent ontological backdrop of each administration, the main differences in language and policy, as well as the main continuities between the three administrations, the dual personality of the Trump NSS will become evident. The document itself is illustrative of a Trumpian 'America First' meeting the foreign policy bureaucracy in a manner that is representative of the prevailing power of the foreign policy establishment to maintain institutional continuity within the 2017 NSS.

ONTOLOGICAL BACKDROP

When analyzing national security strategy it is important to first understand the world from which it is conceptualized. The election of George W. Bush saw the rise of the highly influential 'neoconservatism' that has dominated the culture of U.S. foreign policy in the modern 21st century. It created an American interest as one that looks forward and attempts to find a world order that is foundationally comprised of virtue in accordance to the interests of the United States. Consequently, the strengthening of the international system and America's stance within it will increase prosperity and security at the domestic level. In a sense, this is based on the idea that the virtues and norms of an American

society are universal – they are something ‘exceptional’. However, it goes beyond this unitary outlook to propose that the world system should not be based solely on the presence of an exceptional United States, but also of a normative system that is comprised of the United States and other virtuous governments: “The culmination of this logic is, of course, the promotion of democracy as part of a ‘muscular patriotism’ is based upon ‘freedom and greatness’. Creating an international order of values is good for both America and the world” (Michael Williams 2005: 319). U.S. national interest is derivative of the maintenance of a ‘benevolent hegemony’ where American national interests are reliant on the maintenance and creation of a ‘virtuous’ system. However, in the wake of transnational terror events, this image becomes intertwined with fear. The events of 9/11 created a new international environment that is based on asymmetrical warfare patterns inflicted by non-state, transnational groups driven by radicalization and backed by technological capabilities matching those of traditional state adversaries. American foreign policy had been largely designed to respond to traditional adversarial confrontations created in the bipolar system of the Cold War, but, “Now, shadowy networks of individuals can bring great chaos and suffering to our shores for less than it costs to purchase a single tank. Terrorists are organized to penetrate open societies and to turn the power of modern technology against us” (The White House 2002: 3). From this backdrop, the 2002 NSS seems to be observant of a world that can be defined as ‘American exceptionalism’ international promotion compounded with a sense of fear.

With the transition into the Obama administration, it was apparent that the ‘Bush Doctrine’ had lost its support at home. In the wake of Afghanistan, Iraq and the Great Recession, it was time to take a new approach. This new approach signals the discontinuity in the means by which the administration came to understand its endgame. Obama focused his strategic rhetoric on the idea of national renewal - under the Bush administration, the identity of America abroad had seemingly diminished, and in order to remain the global hegemonic power, “We must pursue a strategy of national renewal and global leadership—a strategy that rebuilds the foundations of American strength and influence” (The White House 2010). The concept of ‘renewal’ is a humbling acknowledgement that the United States can no longer enjoy a sense of autonomy when it comes to its ability to combat armed conflict on multiple fronts. This stems from the retrospective observation that “The Bush strategy was able to begin by taking prosperity and deployable military power for granted” (Bahram Rajaei and Mark Miller 2011: 18), widening the gap between the capabilities of the United States and their commitments in the wake of a massive financial collapse. Due to this, it is not difficult to understand Obama’s reasoning of why “[The U.S.] must pursue a rules-based international system that can advance our own interests by serving mutual interests” (2010: 20). From this view, it is important to understand that a return of focus on the domestic and its renewal of strength will directly impact that of the United States and its ability to participate in internationalism. Therefore, the Obama world-view can be defined as a project of ‘American renewal’ in order to promote a just and sustainable international order.

The ontological backdrop of the 2017 National Security Strategy is uniquely derivative of the administration's 'principled realist' outlook on world affairs. In stark contrast to the 'Kantian' world of democratic peace observed by both Bush and Obama, Trump's 'principled realism' follows a more 'Hobbesian' outlook of an anarchical international system in which great powers are in competition with one another in an effort to gain advantage by preserving their own individual security. Furthermore, the "Administration understands alliances as temporary alignments of interest, without intrinsic value for the US [...] but if and when interests coincide, the door could be opened for collaboration to others" (Carlota Encina 2018: 7). This world system consists of resurgent great powers that threaten the normative values of the United States, as well as the international system in an effort to exploit international institutions and challenge the United State's economic security. Due to this, the 2017 NSS suggests that the U.S. needs to reexamine its policies of the last two decades: "Policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions [...] would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy actors" (The White House 2017: 3). Instead, the focus needs to be on the domestic front, or rather an 'America first' approach. At first glance, it is highly reminiscent of 'isolationism', though as stated before, it is important to differentiate campaign rhetorics and documentary language when observing the NSS. However, the fact remains that the Trump outlook on the post-World War II world order of internationalism is highly critical, with a novel view that the United States has been a victim of the international system rather than its arbiter, suffering from 'free riders' and multilateral deals

that do not directly benefit the United States. It is this dark turn to a geopolitical ontology that is quintessential Trumpian policy. Consequently, the 2017 NSS portrays a conflicting strategy that consists of traditional U.S. internationalism grafted onto the 'principled realism' that in result creates even more uncertainty in the validity of the 2017 National Security Document.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT?

The substance of the 2017 strategy consists of two entirely antithetical paradigms that create a hybrid strategy, combining traditional U.S. internationalism to the disruptive 'principled realism' idiosyncratic of Trumpian policy. This apparent break presents us with much continuity as well as divergent conceptions that seek to upend past policies implemented by past administrations. As elucidated above, the return to a geopolitical world based on competition creates a platform to take a much more aggressive posture towards 'resurgent' powers such as China and Russia. Looking back at the Bush and Obama administration's NSSs, it is apparent that the two had very optimistic views of Sino-U.S./Russian-U.S. relations that were based on liberal values of integration. The Bush NSS saw Russian involvement through the scope of a post-Cold War world constitutive of globalization and the need to involve Russia in that process: "Russia is in the midst of a hopeful transition [...] We will assist Russia's preparations to join the WTO" (2002: I, 18). Furthermore, Bush saw the events of 9/11 as a unique circumstance to initiate cooperation with its former adversary in the fight against terror. Similarly with China, the 2002 NSS document promotes integration suggesting that China 'is the gateway to Asia-

Pacific relations' (2002: 27). On the same path, the Obama administration followed suit, stating that "We will continue to deepen our cooperation with the 21st century centers of influence – including China, India, and Russia – on the basis of mutual interests and mutual respect" (2010: 11). In fact, this line is stated twice in the 2010 NSS, and it explicitly states that China is essential in addressing the major issues of the times. The 2017 NSS, however, takes a much more pessimistic, state-centric view of resurgent powers in the global order: "China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity" (2017: 2). The NSS cites previous attempts to integrate both states into the international system as a complete failure (2017: 3), and in fact has allowed both states, particularly China, to take advantage of the global system in an exploitative manner. Moreover, the document claims that "China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region" (2017: 25). The competitive nature is illustrative of the realist approach to international affairs, and is in stark contrast to both preceding administrations.

Probably the most novel development within the 2017 NSS is the sharp break that the strategy takes in terms of dismissing the validity of a rules-based international system (Ettinger 2018: 479). The document illustrates the international system as a means for states to pursue their own interests in an exploitative manner that takes advantage of multilateral agreements, creating the need to, as Ettinger says, "Supplant free trade with reciprocity" (2018: 479). This is a major regression back towards a primitive economic practice of early

America, in an assertion of trade policy from a point of domination over partners with the means to "retaliate against discriminatory trade barriers"(2018: 479). In a modern international system, the Bush administration acknowledged that, "Free trade and free markets [have] proven their ability", specifically in their uplifting nature of poverty-stricken states (2002: iii). In fact, one of the main strategic objectives of the 2002 NSS is to work with individual nations and the global trading community in order to construct a free market economic system to promote collective prosperity. Similarly, the 2010 NSS completely dismisses the idea of 'reciprocity' by making the pursuit of free trade fundamental to its strategy: "We will pursue multilateral trade agreements that advance our shared prosperity [...] by resisting protectionism and promoting trade that is free and fair" (2010: 4 and 29). Multilateralism within trade has been a foundational aspect of American foreign policy since the post-World War II era; however, it is not surprising to see a sharp break in this policy under a Trump administration. Trumpian 'principled realism' does not see validity in a multilateral system, but rather one that should resort back to protectionism in a stance that the United States has been a victim to 'free-riders' of the system, and that what is good for the collective is no longer in line with what is good for the United States. The phrase 'free and reciprocal trade' appears multiple times in the 2017 NSS along with the movement away from multilateralism and to a position of one-sided bilateralism in favor of the United States.

Modern American foreign policy has been greatly influenced by the actions of the United States during the Cold War Era to the

time right after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the idea was 'containment' of democracy around the world against the influence of communist Russia, and with the fall of Soviet influence in the late 80s and early 90s, the United States saw an opportunity to move to a stance of enlargement and engagement through the implementation of globalization (Ettinger 2018; Macdonald 2018). The idea of 'state-building' became highly popular with the rise of neoconservatism under the Bush administration, under the guise of the expansion of 'American exceptionalism'. State-building is foundational to the 2002 NSS, in an explicit acknowledgement that "We will actively work to bring the hope of democracy [...] to every corner of the world" (2002). The Bush Document is extremely consistent in its posture towards the advancement of democracy and human rights to a point where it became one of his biggest criticisms. While Obama saw the growing gap between capabilities and commitments, the 2010 document still followed the same foundations of commitment to the promotion of democracy and human rights suggesting that they "Are essential sources of our strength and influence in the world" (2010: 2). Even more fundamentally, the document outlines international development as a major objective for the United States in its advancement in the international system. When it comes to the advancement of democracy and human rights, the 2017 NSS is extremely conflicting in its 'state-building' attitude (the similarities will be discussed in the next section). However, when focusing on the differences, one can see an obvious drawback in international intervention in the non-committal language of the document: "We are not going to

impose our values on others [...] [but offer] encouragement to those struggling for human dignity" (2017: 38). This idea is illustrative of the return of focus on making America 'great again' by focusing on the development of the home front. The promotion of values tends to be the necessity to preserve traditional values at the domestic level, and the mention of human rights is almost non-existent, with only a single mention of it in the entire document.

CONTINUATION OF THE STATUS QUO

As stated before, the 2017 National Security Strategy is a contradictory document that is composed of two very distinct personalities: 'Trumpian realism' and the traditional status quo. The conflicting nature of the strategy is illustrative of the inner struggle between conflicting ideologies within the White House, which has inhibited these influences to collide in a single direction (Ettinger 2018: 476). As we saw in the previous section, there are many novel breaks in traditional strategy that lead to conflicting policies in the strategic documents spanning the past two decades. However, now it is important to point out the consistencies between the three administrations in order to elucidate the traditional undertones that have been added by the traditional foreign policy bureaucracy. Throughout all three administrations, the existential threats remained relatively consistent, specifically the nuclear threat. In past decades, this threat has come from a single source, however each document, in unison, acknowledges the current system to be full of rogue states and adversaries with nuclear capabilities and the intention to use them. The

Obama administration sums it up best by explaining that “The gravest danger to the American people and global security continues to come from weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons” (2017: 8). Furthermore, the 2002 document sees North Korea as a growing threat as the world’s “principle purveyor of ballistic missiles” (2002). All seem to stay in line in an act to promote and enforce non-proliferation of nuclear capabilities, and in this sense, the harsher language of the Trump NSS is seen as more of a response to the same threats that have just materialized since their conception in the 2002 and 2010 NSS, rather than a break of any kind (Emma Ashford 2018: 144). Leading on from this identification of the threat, the strategic objective on how to address the threat remains consistent in a show of military power and defense infrastructure upgrade. In similar words to the 2002 NSS, the 2017 NSS states, “America’s military remains the strongest in the world. However, U.S. advantages are shrinking as rival states modernize and build up their conventional and nuclear forces [...] Our task is to ensure that American military superiority endures and in combination with other elements of national power, is ready to protect Americans against sophisticated challenges to national security” (2017). The most common theme throughout the documents is the necessity for the United States to carry out its strategy with the backing of the entire national system, though how they get to that point may vary.

Along with assessing the threats of nuclear capability, the three administrations continue to view the threat of jihadi terrorism as critical, though the Obama administration has been criticized in its lack of the use of ‘jihadi’

with terrorism (Macdonald 2018). However, rather than looking at the broad scope of terrorism, it is important to focus on Trump’s view on military intervention and state-building in relation to combating terror. Outwardly, Trump has been especially critical of the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, however the 2017 NSS stands in line with Bush in the policy that the U.S. will combat terrorism to its source, even in eliminating terrorist safe havens: “We will act against sanctuaries and prevent their reemergence before they threaten the U.S. homeland [...] We support with our words and actions, those who live under oppressive regimes”. This suggests that the NSS is willing to get more involved in the region than the President publicly claims. Even further, in order to do this the U.S. needs allies in both the region and around the world. In doing so, multilateralism will assist in the implementation of U.S. interests through America’s leadership globally: “We will compete and lead in multilateral organizations so that American interests and principles are protected” (2017). This is a continuation of Obama’s leadership from within the rules-based system. The 2017 NSS recognizes the importance of NATO and the strategic advantage that it grants the U.S. in both Europe and the Middle East, a continuation of a crucial practice of multilateral cooperation in the Middle East (though sometimes, as seen with Iraq, can be a ‘unilateral/multilateral’ cooperation outside of institutions) (Ettinger 2017). This continuation undermines the 2017 NSS’s highly critical nature of multilateralism. While publicly Trump has been overly critical of foreign partnerships and multilateralism, it is very interesting to see the seemingly liberal institutionalism prevailing at certain times throughout the document.

CONCLUSION

The 2017 National Security Strategy is a foundational document for the Trump administration in the sense that it is the first formulation of Trump's foreign policy in a coherent format outside of campaign rhetorics. Historically, the National Security Strategies of the United States have been extremely broad and highly ambitious, covering more than it is possible to address, resulting in what can be described as more of a formality than an actual guideline for intergovernmental agencies and foreign allies (Macdonald 2018). However, the 2017 NSS stands out in the context of uncertainty about the U.S.'s position in the world with the rise of 'principled realism' within the administration. Moreover, the document signals a prevailing view-point of continued internationalism from the foreign policy establishment; however, with the high turnover rate in the current administration and the firings of key security personnel, it is yet to be seen how this strategy will materialize into practice in the coming years.

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