

The Biden administration's new security and defense strategies – a guide for a new Cold War

In October 2022, nearly two years after the Joe Biden administration took power in the United States, a new National Security Strategy and a tighter National Defense Strategy were adopted. Both documents identify China as the main challenge to U.S. national security, at the same time – importantly from the

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perspective of NATO's eastern flank countries – Russia was identified in them as the most important current threat to the international order and the U.S. administration announced a continuation of its policy towards the country, including further support for Ukraine.

Strategies for national security

Prepared under the *Goldwater-Nichols Act* of 1986 by the executive branch for Congress, national security strategies are the most important US security strategy documents. They identify core U.S. interests, the most important threats and challenges to national security, and the ways each administration intends to mitigate them. Prepared since 1987, the strategies have been presented with varying frequency, but customarily no less than once per term of the incumbent president, and are the starting point for narrower strategies, including the National Defense Strategy, which defines the priorities of the US Department of Defense.

National Security Strategy 2022

The foreword to the *National Security Strategy 2022* (NSS 2022), signed by President Biden, already emphasized that there is still a need for strong American leadership around the world. The U.S. is in a period of strategic competition for the shape and future of the international order (in this context, the role of China, which is expected to have the intent and growing capacity to change the international order according to its vision, and Russia, whose aggression of Ukraine has shaken international security, were mentioned). On the other hand, common threats are supposed to force international cooperation at a time when this is increasingly difficult. In this context, the U.S. administration promises to strengthen U.S. capabilities – investment in infrastructure, innovation, revitalizing the U.S. network of alliances and partnerships, and strengthening international institutions.

The NSS 2022 is divided into four parts. Part I (*The Competition For What Comes Next*) describes the vision and role of the United States in the world and outlines the strategic context for the new US strategy. Already at the outset, it points out that the post-Cold War era has finally come to an end and there is now a competition for the shape of the order that will emerge from it. On the other hand, the strategy mentions the growing importance of transnational problems, such as climate change, the food problem, malnutrition, infectious diseases, terrorism, energy shortages and inflation. In the opinion of the strategy's creators, their importance is no less than the importance of geopolitical rivalry between the superpowers, and their solution will become increasingly complicated, precisely because of this rivalry, as well as growing nationalism and populism.

The strategy defines US national interests, which boil down to: protecting citizens, expanding economic prosperity and defending democratic values as the core of the "American way of life." To protect these interests, the U.S., according to the announcement, will build as large coalitions of like-minded countries as possible, and at the same time compete with countries presenting a "more darker vision" and threatening American interests. At the same time, the document points out that the need for a strong and purposeful American role in the world has never been greater, as a result of both the aforementioned global problems and attempts to undermine the international order based on, among other things, the UN Charter. The strategy then identifies the strengths of the

United States and the main threats to American interests and vision of the international order. The latter are to come first from the actions of powers that combine authoritarian systems of government with revisionist foreign policies. In this context, the strategy points to the People's Republic of China and Russia, stressing, however, that the two states pose different kinds of challenges. Russia poses a current threat to a free and open international order, violating its basic principles, while China is the only rival with the will to change this order and the appropriate potential to achieve its goals. The U.S. administration, however, stresses that it does not seek conflict or a new Cold War, and will first and foremost support "freedom of decision" for all states. The main goal of US international action comes down to the pursuit of a "free, open, prosperous and secure international order" that "allows people to enjoy basic universal rights and freedoms." To achieve this goal, the US is to take three types of action: 1) invest in the sources and tools of U.S. power and influence; 2) build the strongest possible coalition of friendly states; 3) modernize and strengthen the armed forces. The US approach is to be based on several assumptions, i.e.: no division between domestic and foreign policy (the success of the former translates into the success of the latter); the US's greatest strategic resource is its network of alliances, and US involvement in one region translates into credibility in others; China is the most important geopolitical challenge, but the administration also recognizes the destructive role of other autocratic regimes (Russia, Iran, North Korea); however, the US will avoid viewing the world through the prism of strategic rivalry and continue to cooperate extensively with other countries; Washington recognizes the positive impact of globalization for the U.S., but also recognizes the significant challenges posed by the process, and notes that the group of countries sharing the U.S. vision is broad and includes various continents (the U.S. approach is to be two-pronged – on the one hand, Washington will cooperate with all countries willing to such cooperation, including rivals, in solving global problems; on the other hand, it will develop cooperation with "like-minded" democracies).

Part II of the strategy (*Investing in Our Strength*) elaborates on the goal of the US investing in its own sources of strength. The strategy mentions strategic public investment as the basis for a strong industrial base. The document lists in this context, among others, investments in critical

infrastructure, cyber security or securing supply chains, including semiconductors (the strategy mentions in this context the *CHIPS and Science Act* passed in August 2023 authorizing some \$280 billion for research and investment in semiconductors), as well as human capital (primarily in the areas of healthcare and education).

The strategy further elaborates on the expansion of alliance networks. The core of the coalitions working in support of the American vision of the world is to be democratic states, but the Biden administration declares that it is ready to cooperate with all states supporting a "law-based order" (which presumably refers, among other things, to American allies in the Middle East region with questionable democratic institutions). The U.S. administration points to NATO countries as key allies, but also mentions the AUKUS format (a security cooperation format with Australia and the UK), or Five Eyes (intelligence cooperation with Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK, among others) as well as QUAD (Australia, India, Japan, the US) or the G7.

As already mentioned, the third dimension of U.S. efforts to enhance its own capabilities is to modernize and strengthen its armed forces. On the military aspect, the strategy emphasizes that the US will not hesitate to use military force to protect the national interest, but the use should be considered as a last resort and only when the mission and objectives are clear and achievable, which is probably a reference to the strategic failure of the long-standing US involvement in Afghanistan. Among other things, the purpose of the armed forces is to support diplomacy, combat aggression and deter aggressors, and protect American citizens and economic interests. The strategy announces the modernization of the armed forces so that they remain "lethal, resilient, sustainable, survivable, agile, and responsive, prioritizing operational concepts and updated warfighting capabilities." The document also stresses the importance of the industrial base, which must be able not only to rapidly deliver proven weapons systems, but also to strengthen and create new solutions for the fast-changing battlefield. Nuclear forces, on the other hand, are to remain a priority and the basis of "integrated deterrence." In this context, it was noted that in the 2030 outlook, the U.S. will have to deter two major nuclear powers for the first time, which is arguably a reference to China's rapidly expanding nuclear capabilities.

Part III of the document (*Our Global Priorities*) points to US goals in the international environment. In this context, out-competing China and constraining Russia's ability to act are listed first and foremost. With regard to China - in addition to repeating observations on the nature of the Chinese challenge (the will and potential to change the order) – the strategy's creators uphold US policy toward the Taiwan's issue (opposition to attempts to unilaterally change the status quo). In the context of Russia, the strategy indicates that it poses an immediate and ongoing threat to international peace and security, and promises to continue to support Ukraine, defend European allies within NATO, respond to Russian actions in the event of an attack on American interests (including infrastructure and democracy), and prevent the Kremlin from benefiting from the use or threats of nuclear weapons' use. The second area of US outreach is to coordinate international cooperation in response to common challenges, such as climate and energy security, pandemics, food security, terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Finally, the U.S. is to seek to strengthen institutions and standards governing international cooperation.

Part IV (*Our Strategy By Region*) outlines U.S. activities in specific regions of the world. In the Indo-Pacific region, the U.S. is to work with other countries to ensure that it remains "open and accessible," which is to be understood as free from possible Chinese domination. In particular, the U.S. will promote freedom of the seas, including the South China Sea, and develop cooperation with ASEAN countries and within the QUAD and AUKUS groups and the *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework* (IPEF) initiative. The strategy also reaffirmed security guarantees for Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Thailand, and announced continued cooperation with India.

With regard to Europe, the U.S. administration declares that the Old Continent will remain the primary partner of the U.S. in addressing global issues, and announces the broadening and deepening of transatlantic ties, e.g. strengthening NATO, increasing the level of ambition in relations with the EU and joining forces with European partners in defense of a rule-based international order. The strategy also announces continued support for Ukraine, support for the European aspirations of Georgia and Moldova, support for democratic institutions in the Western Balkan states, and greater activity toward Turkey or the Central Asian states. In the Western Hemisphere, the U.S. announces

comprehensive measures aimed at economic resilience, democratic stability and human security. Meanwhile, in the Middle East region, the U.S. declares: developing partnerships with states interested in protecting international order; protecting freedom of navigation (including in the Straits of Hormuz and Bab al Mandab); deterring threats while easing tensions through diplomatic means; and promoting regional integration and support for human rights. The administration also pledges to work with allies to deter and suppress destabilizing actions by Iran, and says it will continue its efforts to ensure that the country never acquires nuclear weapons. The strategy also referred to Africa, where it announced cooperation with countries in the region to combat global problems, and the Arctic, where it pointed to the growing presence of Russia and China.

National Defense Strategy

Less than two weeks after the release of the NSS 2022, the Department of Defense presented the National Defense Strategy (NDS 2022), for the first time condensed into a single document with the nuclear force and missile defense reviews previously presented in separate documents. NDS 2022 starts from the same assumptions (with regard to US interests and threats to them) as the Security Strategy, and is in a way its elaboration and refinement from the defense aspect. Therefore, the strategy very much emphasizes the People's Republic of China as a priority for U.S. action (Part I: Introduction). The Defense Department is thus tasked with preventing the PRC from dominating key regions and discouraging China's possible use of aggression as a means of pursuing objectives contrary to U.S. interests (while emphasizing that conflict with China is neither inevitable nor desirable). China, whose aggressive actions in the Indo-Pacific region and the broader international system have been described as "the most comprehensive and serious challenge to U.S. national security," was therefore listed first in the security environment section of the strategy (Part II: *Strategic Environment*), ahead of Russia, defined as an "acute threat." Along with terrorism, both countries were also mentioned as potential sources of threats to US territory, such as in the context of critical infrastructure. The strategy goes on to mention further threats from North Korea, Iran and extremist organizations, as well as challenges from the development of new technology domains,

including for strategic stability, operations in the so-called "gray zone" (between war and peace) or climate change and transnational threats.

Part III of the NDS defines the Department of Defense's priorities, which are to consist of: 1) defending the homeland, paced to the growing multi-domain threat posed by the PRC; 2) deterring strategic attack against the US, Allies and partners; 3) deterring aggression, while being prevail in the conflict when necessary – prioritizing the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific region, then the Russia challenge in Europe; 4) building a resilient Joint Force and defense ecosystem. The document then (Part IV) elaborates on the concept of integrated deterrence, which is to consist of denial of attack, resilience and imposing costs on a potential aggressor. In the context of deterrence, the strategy also mentions, among other things, the modernization of nuclear weapons and identifies specific countries that the US Armed Forces are tasked with deterring from potential hostile action (PRC, Russia, Iran and North Korea) by specific means. The NDS also announces (Part V) comprehensive campaigning to improve the strategic position of the U.S. and its allies and weaken the ability of U.S. adversaries to act, as well as developing cooperation with allies (Part VI), including by involving allies in defense planning and prioritizing interoperability. The strategy then points to directions for the development of the US Armed Forces (Part VII). In this dimension, the Defense Department is to focus on deterring an aggressor seeking the opportunistic aggression to take advantage of potential US involvement in another conflict, through, for example, cooperation with allies, nuclear capabilities and cyber and space capabilities, and the ability to respond to limited crises without committing essential forces. The US Armed Forces are also to maintain superiority in information and in command, control and communications. Speed of detection and targeting and the ability to break through enemy means of battlefield isolation are also to be improved. The final two chapters are intended to outline directions for the future, including steps in spurring the development of forward-looking technologies and an industrial and research base, and mitigating threats to the strategy.

A logical complement to the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy is a review of the nuclear posture. It indicates that strategic deterrence remains a priority for the Defense Department and that nuclear weapons provide a unique effect in this regard that cannot be

replaced by other capabilities in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, the U.S. is expected to work to create an environment that will eliminate such weapons. The Biden administration reaffirmed nuclear guarantees to allies and stressed the need for confidence on their part that the United States has the will and capability to deter the entire spectrum of strategic threats. The Biden administration also decided not to make any doctrinal change and adopt a policy of “no first use” of nuclear weapons and use them only for “sole purpose” (to respond nuclear attack), which was explained by the interests of allies threatened by a broad conventional attack, but stressed the preservation of the requirement of extreme circumstances to defend the core interests of the US and Allies. The review also devotes considerable space to the risk of limited use of nuclear weapons in a regional conflict and emphasizes the need for the US Armed Forces to prepare for such an option. In the disarmament context, the administration stressed its readiness to negotiate a new Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty with Russia, which could replace *New START*, which expires in 2026.

Conclusions

1 National security strategies are the most important U.S. security strategy documents. They define the core U.S. interests, the most important threats and challenges to national security, and how each administration intends to mitigate them.

2 The new National Security Strategy and the complementary National Defense Strategy identify the policy of China, which the Biden administration believes has the will and capability to change the existing international order, as the most serious and comprehensive challenge to US national security. Comprehensive rivalry with China is therefore to be the administration's priority, and its military deterrence the goal of the development of the US armed forces.

3 Importantly from the perspective of the countries of NATO's eastern flank – Russia was identified in the new US strategies as the most important current threat to the international order, and the US administration announced the continuation of its policy towards the country, including further support for Ukraine.

4 The timing of the presentation of the new U.S. strategy documents seems not coincidental given the upcoming so-called "mid-term elections" to Congress. Although a far-reaching cross-party consensus is evident on policy toward China and Russia, some cracks are being drawn on the extreme wings of both parties regarding the scale of further aid to Ukraine. Against this backdrop, the Biden administration in the upcoming elections will present itself as and guarantor of the continuation of current policies aimed at, among other things, weakening Russia through comprehensive support for Kiev.

Author: Tomasz Smura, *Director of Research Office of The Casimir Pulaski Foundation*

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