

The U.S. 2022 National Security Strategy:

Balancing Cooperation and Competition in the Next Decade

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Introduction

The purpose of a U.S. administration's released national security strategy is to present a vision of America's role in the world, outlining key national security challenges and priorities for the administration. The National Security Act passed by Congress in 1947 mandated that the president produce an annual national security report, but not until the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act did the issuance of an annual national security strategy by the executive become law. The intent was to provide Congress with more transparency and say in a foreign and security process that had been largely outside its control.

The National Security Strategy, or NSS, performs several functions. It outlines U.S. national interests and provides guidance and direction for U.S. federal agencies.¹ It also serves as a signaling device directed at several audiences: to Congress and other federal agencies, especially in how priorities will impact budget negotiations; to the public and important business and financial sectors; and to international audiences to communicate U.S. commitments and priorities. The nature of the process means the national security strategy reflects political tensions and differing views that create inconsistencies and contradictions. This often leaves the impression that the national security strategy is "not entirely national, not truly centered on our security, and certainly not strategic."² The National Defense Strategy (NDS), released following the NSS, lays out the Department of Defense's role in implementing the president's strategic vision for the country. The National Defense Strategy flows from the NSS and provides the foundation and strategic guidance for U.S. armed forces. (See Addendum)

Nevertheless, NSS documents perform an important function and are closely read because they reflect an administration's thinking about existing and future challenges and threats and how best to respond to protect national interests. President George W. Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy ushered in a new U.S. strategic era by defining a new foreign and military policy aimed at fighting and countering global terrorism. President Barack Obama sought to shift American strategic thought away from an emphasis on military force and toward prioritizing American soft power and non-traditional security issues. President Donald Trump ended the central focus on counterterrorism in U.S. national strategy, replacing it with an aggressive revival of great power competition aimed at China and Russia and a more isolationist and nationalist "America First" trajectory abroad.³

The existing liberal international order was upended by Trump's strategic vision of a return to great power competition and a U.S. foreign policy untethered by alliances, multilateral cooperation, and international obligations. Once in office, Biden moved quickly to reverse Trump policies, but his administration was also clear that there was no going back to the post-Cold War international order as it stood before Trump. The rise of China, Russia's war against Ukraine, climate change, and the ongoing socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic all exposed gaps in the international rules-based order and displayed how difficult it was for the international community to rapidly deal with systemic crises. The NSS is the U.S. administration's outline for meeting these challenges and preserving American security, prosperity, and values.

With the Biden administration's 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG) and the 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS), Biden has set out a strategic vision for the United States that moves to reverse underlying premises of Trump's foreign policy. What does a reading of the 2021 Interim Guidance and the 2022 NSS say about the direction the Biden administration will take? What significant changes to U.S. strategic thinking are evident? What aspects of U.S. strategic thinking have not changed?

2022 National Security Strategy: Continuity and Change

The November 2020 victory of Joe Biden brought an administration to power that acted quickly to reverse the most controversial policies implemented by Trump. It is instructive to set Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy alongside the Biden administration's 2021 Interim Guidance and the 2022 National Security Strategy to assess the similarities, differences, and motives that define the Biden administration's strategic vision for the coming decade.

2022 NSS: Continuity

- > Geopolitical competition: core threat from China and Russia
- > Strategic importance of U.S. military posture
- > Domestic U.S. revitalization as a strategic priority
- > Trade no longer seen as positive sum; U.S. harmed by countries violating trade rules
- > U.S. leadership in technological innovation as a strategic priority

2017 Trump National Security Strategy

Trump's foreign policy approach was a frontal attack on U.S. foreign policy institutions and policies and the international order built over the previous 70 years of U.S. foreign policy engagement in the world.⁴ While the 2017 NSS document avoided much of the "America First" rhetoric and hyper-unilateralism of Trump's policy, it nevertheless signaled a new American foreign policy posture embodying "principled realism" and a return to hard power politics.⁵ The new security threat was great power competition, focused on China and Russia as the primary strategic threats. The strategic shift promised a more adversarial relationship with both countries.

The undertones in the 2017 NSS reflected the view that the United States had been taken advantage of—the U.S. economy crippled, for example, by unfair trading practices by friends and foes alike. U.S. sovereignty and bilateralism were emphasized as American commitments to multilateral organizations and institutions were downgraded. Allies and partners were referenced only to state they must do more to meet their

burden-sharing obligations. No references to climate change appeared. The 2017 NSS also sidestepped questions related to democracy and human rights, while news reports showed President Trump routinely meeting with leaders from authoritarian countries.

2021 Biden Interim National Security Strategic Guidance

The March 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance—the first of its kind—reflected the Biden administration’s return to the liberal internationalist tradition in U.S. foreign policy. For many observers, its appearance only months after Biden’s inauguration was a signal that the administration planned to move without delay to restructure U.S. foreign policy.⁶ The Interim Guidance served as a prelude to the strategic vision that would define the administration’s official national security strategy. The document indicated a return to established U.S. foreign policy tenets—the need to strengthen democracy and human rights, prioritize diplomacy, and expand networks of alliances and partnerships to cooperate globally to address shared challenges. The document links the dual strategic challenges by portraying the United States as a leader in the struggle between democracy and autocracy.⁷

The 2021 Interim Guidance provided insights into the Biden administration’s thinking on specific issues. Relations with China would not be driven solely by hostile competition; it will be necessary to meet China’s challenge, but it is in the U.S. national interest to find points of cooperative engagement. It recognizes the need to rebuild alliances and partnerships with state and multilateral organizations and stresses America’s role in leading and sustaining a stable and open international system.⁸

Significantly, the 2021 Interim Guidance acknowledges there can be no return to the past. The need is to “chart a new course,” and the only way forward is to link current challenges to strengthening democracy and “modernizing” the architecture of international cooperation to meet the challenges collectively.⁹ This signals a move away from a traditional realist view of security to a broader and more inclusive definition of security to handle the shared challenges of the decade ahead more capably.

Equally important, the 2021 Interim Guidance pointed to the need for democracies to demonstrate they can still deliver for their people. The administration’s “Build Back Better” agenda and the need to address social and economic inadequacies to reinvigorate the American middle class is placed centrally within a foreign and security context. The message is that domestic issues and foreign policy issues can no longer be divided.¹⁰ America’s national security strategy and priorities are inextricably linked to domestic-based concerns such as strengthening democracy and expanding economic prosperity and opportunities. Strengthening both sides of the ledger will give the United States a firm foundation from which to respond to the challenges in today’s security environment.

2022 National Security Strategy

The Biden 2022 NSS extended the themes laid out in the 2021 Interim Guidance, rebalancing the U.S. strategic landscape while incorporating new approaches that redefine the contours of U.S. national strategy in the 21st century. The clear message: the present security landscape is defined by two strategic challenges, geopolitical competition and transnational “shared” challenges. This, in turn, requires embracing an inclusive conception of security in which military power is but one of a much broader set of tools of statecraft and is applied only as a last resort. Such threats can only be met through cooperation among states willing to engage in collective action. To prevail in strengthening the international order requires an equally strong democracy at home. To succeed, the challenge is to move in concert within alliances and partnerships.

Strategic Challenges

The central theme of the 2022 NSS is the tension inherent in balancing competition against cooperation, e.g., how to build cooperation among states to tackle transnational threats in a strategic environment defined by geopolitical competition between major powers. Advancing the three interrelated strategic efforts cited in the NSS—addressing shared global challenges, responding to threats to the international order, and helping define new rules to guide the international order—will require a combination of both.¹¹

Geopolitical Competition

The 2022 NSS explicitly argues that the post-Cold War era has ended, and the world is increasingly shaped by a global competition among major powers (the term “great power competition” doesn’t appear in the document). The competition between democracies and autocracies is the defining characteristic of this competition, and China (the NSS speaks only of the People’s Republic of China or PRC) and Russia are the states that exemplify the threat to the established international order and to the future of democracy. It identifies China and Russia as both major strategic competitors but, in a departure from the 2017 Trump NSS, sees different challenges emanating from each country that require differentiated responses.¹² The United States must “out-compete” China while “constraining” Russia.

China. The 2022 NSS calls China “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.”¹³ Its intention is to use these capacities to impose its own autocratic model on the international order. The US must muster a broad array of resources at all levels over decades to meet the challenge by strengthening the U.S.

at home and building networks of allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region and globally to counter China’s increasingly aggressive actions.

Assessments of the Biden administration’s NSS concur that the post-Cold War era has evolved into a competition between major powers, but many regional experts were concerned that the NSS over-emphasized the necessity of competition over cooperation. Competing with China must not sidetrack the United States from collaborating with China on finding workable solutions to transnational problems.¹⁴ Additionally, setting relations with China as an either-or choice of confrontation or cooperation will hinder U.S. efforts to strengthen its relations in the Indo-Pacific region. Most Asian countries have strong trade relations with China and see no advantages in being forced into a new cold war. How to incentivize China to act as a responsible global player will be a hard task for the administration if the message conveyed to Beijing is one of irreconcilable confrontation.

Russia. Russia is a more immediate threat to the international order and to European security—to questions of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and the preservation of fundamental principles of the UN Charter, though in the administration’s estimation it does not pose the same long-term and comprehensive threat as China. The invasion has, the NSS argues, severely diminished Russia’s power on the battlefield and damaged its relations with countries such as China, India, and Russian allies in Central Asia. The Biden administration declares the United States is unwavering in its support of Ukraine and its European allies and remains committed to making “Russia’s war on Ukraine a strategic failure.”¹⁵

Support for the administration’s determination to deter Russian intentions is strong, but reactions have been mixed. Many object that implying Russia is less of a threat than China ignores the consequences should Russia prevail in its violation of international laws and norms. The NSS seems to contend, however, that while the United States will work with its allies and partners to deny Russia victory, it will not be diverted from its unrelenting focus on China.¹⁶

Shared Challenges

The second challenge acknowledges that a globalized world has fundamentally changed the definition of security. The “shared challenges” the world faces are transnational and, as the COVID-19 pandemic showed, can be global in their impact. To meet them, the United States cannot go it alone. Some level and configuration of cooperation is required. This is perhaps one of the more consequent shifts in the Biden NSS—a more inclusive concept of security implied by the prioritization of shared challenges that argues that climate change, food insecurity, and pandemics as well as technology, trade, and cyberspace are as much a potential threat to U.S. security and prosperity as nuclear weapons or military expansion. Cooperating on shared challenges will require working with all countries on common threats while finding ways to collaborate and deepen cooperation with “like-minded” partners.

Allies and Partners: Regional Security

Woven throughout the NSS document is the assertion that meeting America's security goals will require reinvigorating and building out alliances and partnerships. The Biden administration sets out this task on several levels. Central to this effort are two strategic arenas: the Indo-Pacific region and Europe.

Indo-Pacific Region. The NSS calls the Indo-Pacific region “the epicenter of 21st century geopolitics” and China the most significant geopolitical challenge.¹⁷ Countering China's strategic challenge calls for strong military and economic allies and partners to guarantee a free and open Indo-Pacific region. To keep Chinese military aspirations in check, the NSS highlights the need to modernize existing treaty alliances—with Japan, South Korea, and India—and highlights a new security partnership, AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States), implemented in 2022 to align and deepen security cooperation among its members.¹⁸

On the non-military front, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, known as Quad (United States, Japan, Australia, and India), has intensified its efforts at cooperation on a variety of issues, among them climate mitigation, maritime cooperation, disaster response, and technology and education. Finally, in May 2022 the United States launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) with 12 regional states to intensify cooperation in five areas: trade; supply chains; clean energy; decarbonization and infrastructure; and tax and anti-corruption.¹⁹

Europe. With Europe as America's “foundational partner,” the NSS calls for a deepening and broadening of the transatlantic relationship in the security arena, such as with NATO, and in broader transatlantic agenda issues such as trade, investment, technology, and competition.²⁰ Russia's war against Ukraine is the priority. The Biden administration assures Europe that it will strengthen its defense forces as it enjoins its European allies to do the same. Additionally, the United States will work closely with Europe to strengthen democracies and assist European countries on a range of other issues—improving ties with Turkey, preventing terrorism, and advancing good relations with other regions such as Eurasia.²¹

Notably, the NSS states that America's relationship with Europe is global in nature and so moves transatlantic cooperation into the Indo-Pacific region by stating that “U.S. interests are best served when our European allies and partners play an active role in the Indo-Pacific, including in supporting freedom of navigation and maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.”²² On this specific point there are misgivings on the part of policy experts who remain skeptical about building a European military presence in the Indo-Pacific region given the urgency of countering Russia's war in Ukraine.²³

Western Hemisphere. The Western Hemisphere is closely associated with America's long-term prosperity and thus retains an important domestic political dimension. The NSS cites expanding economic cooperation, strengthening democracy, and building security as the administration's priorities. More important, perhaps, is the problem of

migration and immigration. It is cited as a complex challenge that has strategic, economic, and human rights dimensions, but domestically migration is also a highly politicized and polarizing issue and one the administration must address. Legislative efforts to pass comprehensive immigration reform have failed for decades, and the Biden administration continues to struggle to contain the flow of migrants and refugees seeking to enter the United States. The Republicans have already signaled their intention to use the issue to push for political advantage against President Biden.²⁴

Middle East. The Biden administration declared an end to the two-decade long U.S. military campaign against global terrorism in the region; America will retain its military posture, but it will no longer be used for regime change. The new framework presented in the NSS prioritizes diplomacy and human rights, working with regional states to reduce instability, deterring Iranian nuclear ambitions, and encouraging economic and military reform.

Most policy experts identified a marked shift in policy towards the Middle East and were critical of the prioritization of China as a major strategic threat. To them, this prioritization appears to have reduced the region’s relative importance. This perception aligned with the view that the move to pull U.S. forces out of Afghanistan in 2021 was a strategic decision that allowed the Biden administration to complete the “pivot” to China.

The Middle East, as one commentator put it, is now a “secondary theater...meant to fit into a broader global agenda, rather than dominate it.”²⁵ It is here where the tensions and contradictions in the 2022 NSS are exposed. To many observers, the recent tensions with Saudi Arabia show that the persistent instability in the Middle East will continue to pose real threats to U.S. interests.²⁶ Similarly, the NSS document’s emphasis on fighting for democracy and against autocratic regimes is especially problematic in the Middle East, where strong and deep U.S. strategic interests have overridden legitimate concerns about human rights violations in the region.²⁷

Africa. Regarding Africa, the NSS asserts that America’s relationship with Africa must acknowledge the emerging geopolitical role Africa will play in the coming decades and work across existing organizations, such as regional bodies and civil society, and with new initiatives on economic development, climate mitigation, and food security. However, given the NSS’ emphasis on shared transnational challenges and building alliances and partnerships, as well as the significant inroads China and Russia have made in Africa, one would have expected a higher prioritization of Africa in the 2022 NSS than was evident.

2022 NSS: Change

- > Geopolitical competition: China as a greater threat than Russia
- > China-US relationship as both cooperative and competitive
- > Equal strategic priority given to transnational challenges
- > Climate change as core existential threat to nations
- > Strategic significance of alliances and partnerships
- > Commitment to multilateralism
- > Elevates U.S. soft power and diplomacy
- > No division between domestic policy and foreign policy
- > U.S. “industrial policy” as a priority
- > Strengthening U.S. democracy as a national strategic priority
- > Commitment to human rights
- > Middle East as a lower strategic priority

Shaping the Rules of the Road

The Biden administration has stated clearly that the institutions and mechanisms of the existing rules-based international order must be reformed because they no longer reflect current realities. As such, the need for redefining the rules of the road in the fields of economics, trade, and technology are particularly acute, since they have not kept pace with economic and technical advancements and are thus no longer capable of finding solutions to current challenges.²⁸

It is on the issue of trade where the NSS is perhaps the most consequential—not just in terms of U.S. trade and foreign economic policies but in terms of a far-reaching and fundamental shift in perception about the benefits of globalization and the efficacy of free trade itself. Two issues stand out: trade with China and the benefits of free trade and, for the first time, a call to establish a domestic industrial policy that links foreign policy to domestic policy aimed at strengthening the American middle class.

China. Trade relations with China have become increasingly confrontational. The Biden administration's recent actions seem to signal a significant break with established U.S.-China trade relations, with the potential for serious escalation of disputes and possible Chinese retaliation. In October 2022, the Biden administration announced it will impose export controls on the sale of semiconductors and chip-making equipment to China with the intent to deny China access to technology essential to its economic and military development. The order also places restrictions on foreign companies that continue to supply China with sensitive technologies.²⁹

But this is only the first step. With what Biden officials have called the “protect agenda” in a new China trade and technology strategy, the administration is set to announce further executive orders that will create for the first time a new federal authority that will regulate U.S. business investments in China, and an additional executive order that will restrict Chinese apps from accessing data from Americans.³⁰

Many experts and observers are uneasy about the Biden administration's targeted actions against China. The United States is critically dependent on trade with China. In 2021, the value of U.S. goods imports from China reached \$500 billion, in part because of China's centrality in global supply chains. Economists and trade experts are worried about the consequences of a trade war if China retaliates. But it is because of this dependency on supply chains and other trade issues, such as forced technology transfers and WTO violations, that views have shifted against China. In Congress, the necessity of taking a tougher stance against China is strong on both sides of the aisle,

and the new Republican leadership in the House has signaled their party's intention to increase pressure on Biden to do more.³¹

Upholding the rules-based international order has traditionally meant upholding a commitment to a free and open global economy. Now there are concerns for the American role as standard bearer for a free and fair rules-based global trade system. The NSS goals simultaneously support building inclusive coalitions to foster global economic cooperation, while excluding “non-democracies” the administration sees as conducting unfair and harmful trading practices, China being the major offender.³² The NSS agrees the United States benefits greatly from international trade yet voices strong skepticism about the merits and benefits of free trade and large negotiated free trade agreements, in part because many Americans feel that free trade has not necessarily been fair trade for American workers.

What is most striking is the absence of language in support of a “free trade system” that for decades was routinely inserted in strategic documents.³³ The NSS aligns with what has been a growing anti-trade sentiment now established in both political parties, rejecting traditional foreign trade agreements in favor of “economic arrangements” such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF).³⁴ Trade analysts charge that the 2022 NSS fails to acknowledge that few other states share this view. Most countries continue to see economic advantages in global free trade and free trade agreements. Furthermore, current large trade agreements do incorporate environmental and labor standards, weakening the standard objection to trade agreements.³⁵

Domestic and Foreign Policy. These trade issues are tied to the Biden administration's emphasis on the linkages between domestic and foreign policy through its call for a “modern industrial and innovation strategy”—the first time such phrases have appeared in an NSS.³⁶ Implementing the strategy means robust public investment to undergird U.S. national interests and its central leadership role in the global economy. To that end, the administration has passed significant legislation, such as the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act, to invest in a huge array of sectors—physical infrastructure, cybersecurity, clean energy and energy production and manufacturing, semiconductor supply chains, and biotechnologies and emerging technologies, to name just a few. The Inflation Reduction Act includes several major healthcare, energy, and climate change provisions as well.³⁷

In the end, global challenges require cooperation and coalition-building, but states have their own interests and goals that won't necessarily align with U.S. interests. Balancing competition and cooperation with its allies and partners will require the kind of diplomacy and transparency cited in the NSS. But it is clear from the Biden NSS that domestic economic priorities are now part of the mix in foreign policy decision-making considerations and, as seen in the reactions across Europe to the Inflation Reduction Act, will complicate administration efforts at building a united front on key issues.³⁸

Conclusion

By and large, the policy community's assessment of the 2022 National Security Strategy was positive. Overall, policy experts gave the Biden administration good grades for a more realistic appraisal of the strategic environment facing the United States over the next decade, but the document is not without its share of contradictions and tensions.

On the positive side, the Biden administration's strategic vision is a clear assessment about the nature of the challenges facing the United States in the next decade that require the United States to alter fundamental assumptions about the purpose and direction of U.S. foreign policy. It reflects an acceptance of a more inclusive definition of security that is far better suited to address the challenges in the next decade: geopolitical competition coming together with transnational threats. The 2022 National Security Strategy reverses Trump's nationalist unilateralism but admits the United States cannot return to the status quo ante but must modernize the architecture of the international order to meet its strategic challenges.

Importantly, the NSS acknowledges the United States cannot overcome these threats alone, and so requires reviving and building out a broad network of alliances and partnerships. Global challenges require global cooperation in a world defined by confrontation, with aggressive powers intent on re-making the international rules of the road. The NSS sets out some markers, but there is a question of whether the political commitment and resources will be on hand for the kind of sustained action and at the needed scale that will be required to resolve such complex problems.

What has changed is the disappearance of the option of preferring either competition or cooperation as the primary mode of action—and the United States is not the only country for which this option has disappeared. While priorities have to be set as a nation-state's guide to action, the reality is that U.S. priorities may be interrupted at any time by eruptions of other issues somewhere in a rapidly shrinking world.

Addendum

U.S. National Defense Strategy 2022

Weeks after the release of the NSS in October 2022, the Defense Department released its National Defense Strategy (NDS), a quadrennial document required by Congress. Annexes included the Nuclear Posture Review and the Missile Defense Review. The timely coordination of the four documents was unusual and suggests increased policy integration across the US executive branch.

China

- > Reflecting the NSS, China is described as a “multi-domain threat” – not just in terms of the Indo-Pacific – and is explicitly prioritized above European issues, including the war in Ukraine.
- > Security architecture is the key term: modernizing and integrating security cooperation with Japan, investing deeply in Australia’s security, and developing cooperation in high-tech areas with AUKUS and the Quad.
- > Geographically, Taiwan, the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the Indian-Chinese border (Line of Actual Control) are all within a zone of concern. The two seas alone directly affect the security of six countries plus Taiwan (South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines).
- > China is described as a threat to the U.S. homeland, “using non-kinetic means against our defense industrial base and mobilization systems, as well as deploying counterspace capabilities.”

Europe

- > For the Defense Department, Europe and NATO are almost equivalent. Developing NATO’s capabilities is the Pentagon’s European issue.

These dovetail with the war in Ukraine, but the war does not guide all the Pentagon’s European concerns.

- > “Bedrock commitment” is the key term. The NDS discusses, within NATO’s framework, making unspecified “improvements to our [U.S.] posture in Europe and our extended nuclear deterrence commitments.” Working bilaterally and multilaterally, the United States will “better focus NATO capability development and military modernization to address Russia’s military threat.”
- > Under “Implementation Risks,” the NDS signals a policy of “ruthless prioritization”: “for example, we must not...redesign our forces for regional crises.” Active war is a time to build out the strategic structures of cooperation, not a diversion.
- > Russia’s threat is described as both military aggression and coercive gray-zone activity, the latter to be countered by building Europe’s long-term resilience.

Russia

- > Russia’s effort to “reimpose an imperial sphere of influence” includes a wide range of overt and covert steps, of which military aggression is just one type.
- > “Acute threat” is the key term. The war in Ukraine should be seen as one of many instances of territorial aggression, large and small.
- > Strategically, Russia has returned to the goal of fracturing NATO that guided Soviet policy in the past.
- > The NSS’s calibrated assessment of Russia’s threat potential is fully accepted in the NDS, which neither builds up or relativizes the White House’s view.

Endnotes

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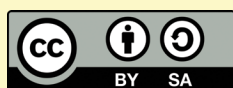
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