



BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S INTERIM NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGIC GUIDANCE REPORT: THE ESSENCE

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The White House issued its first Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (NSSG) report on March 3, 2021, which lays down the organizing principles of the Biden administration's plan of action for the next four years.

The 24-page document paints broad strokes of the new administration's agenda issues both domestic and global. It conveys to the world a clear message of how America, under Biden's leadership, will engage with its competitors, its allies, and multilateral organizations. The report also provides architecture of guidance for various domestic policies, departments as well as agencies within the US government that require changes and restructuring in their work and practices.

The interim NSSG¹ is a blend of policies undertaken by both President Obama and President Trump.

- It talks about deeper and more effective partnerships with countries like China and Russia, and, at the same time touches upon policies of engagement and containment concerning China and Russia.
- China, Russia, Iran, North Korea and 'influential' non-state actors are identified and who "continue to pursue game changing capabilities and technologies which threaten the interests of US and its allies."
- The foreign policy outlook of the Biden administration on several issues, especially bilateral relations has taken its cue from the Trump administration's policies.

¹ "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," White House, March 3, 2021.

- Engagement with international as well as multilateral organizations such as the United Nations and pressing global issues such as economic prosperity, human rights, and climate change.

	Transnational Threats	Global Economics	International Security
Immediate Steps	The United States should continue the processes launched on day 1 of the Biden administration to rejoin institutions that address transnational threats, including the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organization, and demonstrate tangible commitment to these organizations.	The United States should recommit to the World Trade Organization by: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allowing for the appointment of Appellate Body Judges. 2. Institutionalizing U.S.-China trade disputes through the WTO. 	The United States should re-enter security treaties that had been allowed to terminate or were exited, including: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Renegotiate and rejoin the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) 2. Negotiate extension to the New START treaty.
Longer-term Goals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strengthen the UNFCCC climate negotiations through active U.S. leadership. 2. Develop alternate club-style governance models on climate change. 3. Renew domestic human rights and racial justice commitments and reflect these values in international actions. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Transform the international trade system to better serve the interests of the American people. 2. Steward domestic and international political capital toward a new Pacific-trade agreement/club that reflects America's interests. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Build political support to ratify for UNCLOS 2. Develop stronger cyber governance structures (e.g. through 2015 GGE norms list).

Source: *Brookings*²

The report is divided into two broad themes dealing with the global landscape and the national security priorities.

Global Security Landscape

The Global Security Landscape in the reports highlights the sense of urgency prevalent in the US to establish its credibility back on the world stage. It highlights five main ingredients to bring back the US to the world and undo its image that was tarnished during the four years of President Trump's tenure:³

1. Meet threats with collective action.

² A Strategic Roadmap for Reentry 2021 and Beyond: U.S. Institutional Commitments in a New Geo-strategic Environment, *Brookings*, Perry World House, University of Pennsylvania, February 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/fp_20210218_engagement_report_v3.pdf

³ "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," White House, March 3, 2021.

2. Protect democracies across the globe.
3. Deal with the reality of the distribution of power and new emerging threats.
4. Act, adapt, reform, and embrace bold initiatives that bring like-minded states and influential non-state actors together in new ways.
5. Reinvest in retaining scientific and technological edge and once again the US lead in technology that poses both peril and promise.

National Security Priorities

The second section of the report deals with the national security priorities of the Biden administration. The most prominent national security priorities include:⁴

1. Protect the security of the American people.
2. Expanding economic prosperity and opportunity.
3. Realizing and defending the democratic values.
4. Reinvigorate and modernize alliances and partnerships around the world.
5. Earn back our position of leadership in international institutions.
6. Make smart and disciplined choices regarding our national defence and the responsible use of our military, while elevating diplomacy as a tool of first resort.
7. Build back better at home.
8. Responding to the public health and economic crises unleashed by COVID-19.
9. Join like-minded allies and partners to revitalize democracy.
10. Strengthen advantages to prevail in strategic competition with China or any other nation.
11. Invest in national security workforce, institutions, and partnerships.

⁴ "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," White House, March 3, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>

Priority Areas

The first two national priorities outlined by the Biden administration in the report coincide with the first two pillars of President Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy; 'Protect the American People, the Homeland and the American Way of Life,' and the second pillar; 'Promote American Prosperity.'⁵

The report nonetheless, unlike its predecessor has paid greater attention to diplomacy as a preferred tool for the US to pursue its interests throughout the globe followed by military and kinetic might. It further sees issues like the Covid pandemics and climate change as rising existential threats to the US and the globe. It echoes President Biden's commitment to rejoining Paris Climate Accord, and the need for the US to reengage with Iran and get back to the JCPOA. It also reflects upon the importance the current government is willing to pay to get back to its role in the UN and its working bodies such as the World Health Organization.

Biden's third priority, defending democratic values, was part of Trump's NSS document and was touched upon in a sub-section under "Advance American Influence". However, Biden's NSSG highlights the idea of democratic values with more prominence. Moreover, the third pillar in the Trump administration's NSS document Preserve Peace through Strength, acknowledged how a strong military is important to ensure the safety of the US diplomats around the globe and in return make them capable to operate from a position of strength.

Nuclear Issues

On the issue of nuclear weapons, there is a visible disconnect between the policy outlined in the report and the statements made by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and other officials at the Department of Defense, that identifies nuclear weapons as DoD's highest priority mission.⁶ The interim guidance chalks a reduction of the role of nuclear weapons in Americas' national security strategy under the new administration. This comes in contrast to the fact that while Washington identifies Beijing and Moscow as two principal competitors who have actively embarked upon modernizing their nuclear arsenals, the US continues to rely on antiquated platforms and aged weapons.⁷

⁵ National Security Strategy, White House, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

⁶ Proceedings and Debates of the 117th Congress, First Session, Congressional Record, January 21, 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/117/crec/2021/01/21/CREC-2021-01-21.pdf>

⁷ Thomas Spoehr, "Hits & Misses in Biden's Interim National Security Guidance," *Heritage Foundation*, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/hits-misses-bidens-interim-national-security-guidance>

Key Takeaways

Hailed as an epiphany, a revelation, the report, builds upon the policies undertaken by the previous administration with an added emphasis on building alliances and returning to multilateralism. A larger portion of the report is dedicated to issues digressive of national security and more domesticated such as voting rights, clean energy, and racial justice. The report also covers the issue of climate change, human rights, building partnerships, arms race, nuclear deterrence and technological modernization.

In a nutshell, the strategic guidance report is a starting point of the foreign and domestic policy agendas of the new US administration and provides a useful insight into the trajectory of the new Biden administration at home and abroad for the next four years.