

Assessing Biden's National Security Strategy 2022

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

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

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With almost closing two years in the Oval Office Biden administration recently released its National Security Strategy 2022¹ document on October 12, 2022, representing its view on the greatest and gravest challenges to America. The document is an extension of the Intern National Security Strategic Guidance² report that came out last year in March. The 48-pager document starts with the reclamation of the US as the center of power around the globe with a clear shift from President Trump's 'America First' approach to 'reclaim American leadership' throughout the globe.

Theoretical Architecture of an NSS Document:

The National Security Strategy (NSS) is a legislatively mandated document that every President of the US publishes after coming into office to demarcate important policy-based areas. The first NSS Document was published under President Reagan's administration in 1987 setting a total of 19 National Security Strategy documents published since. Two during Reagan's administration; three during George H. Bush's administration; seven during Clinton's administration; two during George

¹ National Security Strategy 2022, White House, October 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

² Intern National Security Strategic Guidance, White House, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>

W. Bush's administration; two during Obama's tenure; one under Donald Trump; and two under the current administration in 2021 and 2022.³

Every US administration that comes into power outlines its conceptual approach to the most immediate, most important, and potent threats to the American national interest, including multi-tier threat assessment which is not entirely limited to hard strategic security calculus. It put forth key fundamental questions keeping in mind the present environment and certain assumptions overlooking the US's definition and approach to the advancement of its national security. Conceptual approach to national security matters as well as signalling its key priorities, particularly as executive branch departments and agencies prepare their Fiscal Year (FY) budget submissions.⁴ The document is drafted and coordinated by National Security Staff associated with the President to ensure that the document is an accurate reflection of the President's intent and guidance; implying the administration's intent to advocate and facilitate the appropriate amount of resources to ensure implementation of the strategy.⁵ Once endorsed by the President the document becomes a legitimate paper of guidance shared with Congress and the public to highlight the administration's priorities at home and globally and its national interests and threats. The document is an amalgamation of articulated national interests, threats, values, and strategic vision.

National Security Strategy 2022:

The document starts with a clear determination of a world that is divided between assumptions of 'us' and 'them.' Where the 'us' represent the US and its like-minded allies; where else, whereas 'them' indicate those who either do not share US's values and interests or are encircled as its strategic competitors. It builds a border between the brighter visions of cooperation and collaboration that the US leads against the 'dark vision' of cooperation that competing powers offer that threatens US interests. The document is divided into five parts covering areas such as democracy against autocracy; shared challenges; strategic approach; innovation, coalitions, and cooperation; military modernization, out-competing China and constraining Russia; shared challenges and cyberspace; and specific regional strategies.

NSS-22 outlines two parallel moving challenges; i) strategic challenges – which identify clear competition between major powers to shape the post-Cold War international order and, ii) shared

³ National Security Strategy Archive, <https://nssarchive.us/>

⁴ The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, Congressional Research Service, March 20, 2021, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/IF11798.pdf>

⁵ Maria DuMont, "Elements of National Security Strategy," Atlantic Council, February, 28, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/strategy-consortium/elements-of-national-security-strategy/>

challenges – effects of shared challenges such as climate change, food insecurity, communicable diseases, terrorism, energy shortages, or inflation. However, shared challenges may fall victim to an increasingly competitive international environment and geopolitical competition, as well as the growing atmosphere of nationalism and populism throughout all continents.

The larger part of the NSS document is set against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war and the continued US-China competition. It also showcases biased undertones on the usage of the United Nations Charter and the protection it accords to all states from being invaded by their neighbors or having their borders redrawn by force when it talks about the Russia-Ukraine war. However, while the US chants the slogan of universal Human Rights – as it does in the document – it has always remained silent on the issue of Kashmir, and Palestine which not only are the oldest shelved conflicts in the UN but also a clear example of invasion and forced drawn borders.

Main Features

Democracy or Autocracy:

Democracy or Autocracy – a dilemma that is categorized in the NSS as the most pressing strategic challenge to the American vision, powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy. As the US in its documents puts its idea of democracy on a higher pedestal and calls out autocracies, China and Russia in particular as mindsets that wage or prepare for wars of aggression and others as presenting an alternative. The US forgets its invasion of Afghanistan, a fruitless and unceremonious withdrawal and a false fully led invasion of Iraq totaling 11 officially declared wars during five separate military conflicts from 1821 to the Afghan invasion.⁶

Russia and China; the Bigger Aggressor?

While the NSS-2017 that came out under the Trump administration demarcated China and Russia as an interchangeable threat to US security, NSS-22 draws clear distinctions between the two. It categorizes Moscow and Beijing as posing different challenges that demand different responses and solutions. The document categorically enunciates that the US 'will prioritize maintaining an enduring competitive edge over the China while constraining a still profoundly dangerous Russia.' The policy pundits in the US consider Russia as more of an arsonist as it aims to find a more solid footing in the international order, while on the other hand, Beijing aims to move slowly to create architecture for revised world order.

⁶ Dave Roos, "How many Times has the US Officially Declared War," History, January 21, 2022, <https://www.history.com/news/united-states-official-declarations-war>

Shared Challenges:

The document dedicates a comprehensive portion to cooperation on shared global challenges such as climate change and energy, pandemics and bio-defense, food insecurity, arms control, and non-proliferation and terrorism. While the world is divided and contesting between power hierarchies the report proposes an approach that involves working with US allies and partners, as well as geopolitical rivals, to address shared global challenges. The document also acknowledges the challenges associated with confronting the advancement of cooperation on transnational threats in an era of heightened geopolitical competition. To meet this challenge the documents propose multiple-prong approaches;

1. Fully engage all countries and institutions to cooperate on shared threats, including by pressing for reforms where institutional responses have proven inadequate.
2. Deepen cooperation with like-minded partners.
3. Engage with all countries on global public health, including global competitors.
4. Reforming international institutions that have fallen short.
5. Engage globally and through international institutions.

Technology:

The document calls advancement of technology central to current times' geopolitical competition and the future of the US's national security, economy, and democracy amplifying the growing role of technology in the safekeeping of national interest and national security, along with the integration of foreign policy with technology.

The document presses on the significance of emerging technologies and the consequences it can bear on transformational warfare whether cyber, Artificial Intelligence, space, missile defense, or quantum. Control to protect and harness technologies along with maintaining a technological superiority will provide the US with an unrequited advantage. The role of allies and partners is important in implementing the tech advancement strategy through reliance on dense collective action and partnerships. It refers to technology and security as a connecting tissue between partners, whilst acknowledging that national security requires technology cooperation among US allies.

Regional Strategies:

Regions that have previously remained at the center of the US national security and foreign policy, have taken a back seat as the document shares an American worldview on regional strategies, as it embarks on a role of a global leader as it confronts a wide array of challenges. The document overextends the importance of the Indo-Pacific and Europe. It highlights the significance of the Indo-Pacific by linking the prosperity of America while Europe takes the role of the US's foundational partner in addressing the full range of global challenges.

The Middle East on the other hand at best stands out as a sore thumb and an uneasy fit as the document leads the democracy-driven vision of the Biden administration's idea of partnership. Nonetheless, the document outlines a five-principle framework that builds on the recent progress regional states have made to bridge the enduring divides;

1. Support and strengthen partnerships with countries that subscribe to the rules-based international order.
2. Not allow foreign or regional powers to jeopardize or dominate freedom of navigation through the Middle East's waterways.
3. Reduce tensions, de-escalate, and end conflicts through diplomacy.
4. Promote regional integration by building political, economic, and security connections between partners.
5. Promote human rights and the values enshrined in the UN Charter.

The South Asian region on the other hand remains a complete miss from the document. The sheer ignorance of the region reflects the lack of importance of the region to the Biden administration; a region that is home to 3 nuclear power states, and a looming humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan post-US withdrawal at the least.

Conclusion

Reading between the lines, the Biden administration's NSS reveals several contradictions through its repeated and muscular focus on great power competition. The document in many ways looks upon the world through the prism of strategic competition and how to decrease if not eliminate the 'competition' – a world that the US has been in in the recent past have been obsessing with is used 44 times in the document. In reality, the repeated reiteration of the idea of the US's omnipresence

through leadership and global righteous torch-bearing reflects its approach to the world and dislike of other powers.

While the US constantly reacts to Beijing's growing engagement with countries throughout the globe, Washington has failed to realize that China steps in where it fails as seen around Africa and Central Asia as well as Pakistan. Similarly, a repeated focus on containing Chinese influence and the growing presence of Moscow, and the constant need to outcompete the competition has led the United States to persuade other countries to align with its vision of free and fair international order. This approach has further multiplied the existence of blocs and organizations such as the QUAD to work with a single focus eventually leading to an imbalance in power globally as well as regionally.

As the document stresses shared global challenges, by failing to diversify its own diplomatic, economic, and security outreach and openness the US is creating a hindrance instead of the opposite. Global challenges require collaboration and cooperation amongst multiple actors including rivals and competitors to help developing countries like Pakistan, especially those who are vulnerable to climate change crises or global power politics. While the NSS-22 acknowledges this challenge it fails to address a clear path to overcome it. The bold global outreach that President Biden claims through the document in light of 'universal Human Rights,' 'a world without rigid blocs,' 'exercise of freedom' and 'support nations regardless of their sizes' lacks credibility as there is a significant difference in what the US NSS says and what is practiced by the US. The document reflects Washington's strategic approach as it demands full alignment with the US interests and in a way forces others who are not like-minded to choose between itself and Beijing.