Forum for American Leadership

How to Think About the National Defense Strategy

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President Biden's Pentagon is soon to release the next National Defense Strategy (NDS). This congressionally mandated document will only be the second of its kind. The 2018 NDS succeeded two decades of Quadrennial Defense Reviews — largely bureaucratic exercises that preserved continuity more than they accelerated change.

To have impact, the NDS will need to provide clear guidance on key issues. It should identify and prioritize threats, specify strategies to counter them over specific time periods and by domain and/or region, detail priority missions as well as those that can be shed, and provide explicit guidance for force design and development as well as global force management.

These are the key questions the 2022 NDS should answer:

1. **Does the strategy clearly state that China is the pacing threat, the Indo-Pacific the pacing theater, and a Taiwan contingency the pacing scenario for the Department of Defense?**

Prioritization is the essence of strategy. If the NDS fails to clearly articulate the priority threat, theater, and scenario, it will invariably falter upon implementation. The NDS should codify Department of Defense (DoD) affirmations that China is the pacing threat; the Indo-Pacific is the pacing theater; and a Taiwan contingency is the pacing scenario. Clearly stated priorities will also help the Department to work with Congress to meet near-term demands, especially as related to force readiness and posture improvements, while simultaneously balancing those near-term demands with longer-term modernization requirements. As Russia's threats against Ukraine and events in the Middle East demonstrate, challenges to U.S. interests will persist globally. Clear prioritization among threats, as well as roles and missions of the Armed Forces, is the first step in ensuring that the urgent does not outweigh the important for U.S. defense strategy.

2. **Does the strategy provide sufficient policy guidance to the military services and Joint Staff regarding the military posture and capabilities necessary to deny the People's Republic of China the ability to forcibly execute a fait accompli against Taiwan on a realistic timeline (i.e., by 2027)?**

The United States has entered a period of urgent concern in the Western Pacific. Beijing may conclude that achieving its long-stated political intent to absorb Taiwan is increasingly implausible by non-military means. At the same time, Beijing may assess that it has sufficient military capability to seize Taiwan by force. As the former commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Phil Davidson testified on the specter of Chinese attack against Taiwan: "I

think the threat is manifest during this decade, in fact, in the next six years." Deterring China through 2027 and beyond will demand the military's near-singular focus on the Taiwan scenario.

But it ought not invest exclusively in exquisite capabilities unlikely to come online before 2030. Instead, the Department should also transform regional force posture in the near-term by prioritizing:

- accelerated procurement and prepositioned storage of advanced munitions;
- survivable and self-contained platforms;
- distribution of forces within Japan and across Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands;
- expeditionary command, control, and communications (C3) capabilities;
- resilient airport and seaport infrastructure, including emphasis on passive defenses;
- enhanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and
- training and readiness for operations in contested environments.

The NDS should send an unambiguous signal to the military services and the Joint Staff: the U.S. military must maintain the capability to deny a Chinese *fait accompli* against Taiwan. This is not only imperative from a strategic standpoint. It is also in keeping with the Taiwan Relations Act and congressional intent. To this effect, Congress just passed annual defense policy legislation requiring the Department to maintain the capacity to resist a *fait accompli* that would jeopardize the security of the Taiwanese people. The NDS should comport with this directive.

3. Does the strategy identify hard choices necessary for prioritizing China?

America cannot hope to maintain its status as a first-rate global power if it becomes a second-rate regional power in the Indo-Pacific. China's increasingly global ambitions are premised on its ability to blunt American power in the Indo-Pacific and secure the foundations of regional hegemony. America will be most effective in countering China's global influence by preventing it from achieving preeminence in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, America's prioritization of the Indo-Pacific region is essential for preserving its ability to defend its security, freedom, and prosperity against global threats--not counter to it.

Strategic insolvency manifests when a nation pursues ends in excess of means. China is the most challenging great power competitor the United States has ever faced by virtue of the economic foundation on which its military power rests. Moreover, structural trends in U.S. non-defense discretionary spending and rising inflation rates will wither the sinews of military power. A strategy that supposes the U.S. can simultaneously confront the China challenge without significant changes to its approach to other threats is simply unserious.

Effectively prioritizing the challenge posed by China will require the United States to make do with limited resources elsewhere, which will require disciplined global force management, much more significant and focused efforts by allies and partners to assume their share of the defense burden, and, as prudent and feasible, relying more on tools other than conventional forces, including ultimately strategic deterrent capabilities. This is not to deny America's interests in other regions of the world or underestimate the threats to them. It is rather to recognize the

dangerous erosion of conventional deterrence in the Western Pacific and the enormous scale of the task of restoring it in the face of China's continuing military modernization.

Smart strategy should guide decisions on the hard choices we face. The 2018 NDS was clear: Great power competition, not terrorism, is the nation's primary concern. Warfighting readiness, not presence, must be the armed forces' overriding mission. And high-end lethality, not middle-weight capacity, is the force development imperative. President Biden's National Defense Strategy should identify hard choices in *interests* (i.e., where it accepts risk), *missions* (i.e., what it ceases to do), and *forces* (i.e., how it divests). For instance, less-than-strategic objectives, extended peacetime presence missions, and middle-weight platforms like light attack helicopters should be on the chopping block. The NDS ought to keep DoD's focus on warfighting, and resist pressure from progressives to assume additional missions–like "combatting" climate change. DoD officials have stated that China is the pacing threat and Taiwan the pacing planning scenario for the Department. Embracing hard choices will be prerequisite to keep pace and keep the peace.

4. Is the strategy explicit, realistic, and serious about the defense budget that will be required to implement it?

America can afford a strong national defense. The fact is that there is widespread agreement that the defense budget is not sufficient to support what the nation is asking of the armed forces. Real annual growth of 3-5% is widely understood by defense experts as the baseline for sustaining anything like America's traditional defense strategy. This is what the nation should support.

Yet there is concern that the Biden Department of Defense may produce a strategy designed to fit under lower budget toplines that are driven by political or ideological rather than strategic imperatives. Should the new strategy reflect such cart-before-the-horse thinking, it will fail to generate bipartisan support and leave America less safe. The defense budget should be threat-driven and strategically coherent – budget-informed but not budget-driven.

Too often, defense strategies accurately assess threats but fail to adequately explain how the U.S. military will prepare to meet them. The Defense Department should not take this analytical shortcut. Arbitrarily keeping budgets flat for political expediency and then building the best military within that budget is not the proper method to identify funding needs and risks leaving core interests unprotected. Military compensation, maintenance, and modernization costs have all been growing faster than inflation. But now, inflation is rising, with especially serious impact on the armed forces, as inflation rates for defense accounts are often higher than that for the wider economy. When budgets cannot even keep up with inflation, military capability and capacity shrink, but missions do not contract. That creates a growing mismatch between the missions that the department is expected to accomplish and the resources available to meet them.

Given these factors and the overriding need to deter China for the foreseeable future, a minimum budget growth of three to five percent above inflation appears necessary, as reaffirmed most recently by former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Hyten. Former Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work has also argued that such increased funding is necessary

even to sustain a more focused and prioritized defense strategy. This level of defense funding was also endorsed by the bipartisan 2018 National Defense Strategy Commission.

5. How does the strategy manage multi-theater demands?

Fighting and winning two wars at the same time was once thought necessary for the United States. In the post-Cold War period, force planners sized and shaped the military to prevail in near-simultaneous fights against so-called rogue states like Iraq and North Korea. Military dominance and the absence of a peer competitor allowed the United States to buy-down the risk of regional contingencies.

The 2018 NDS determined this was no longer sustainable or advisable considering the force requirements for deterring or winning a war against a single great power like China. Therefore, the NDS set out a force sizing construct designed to focus the armed forces on being able to defeat a single great power, above all China in Asia, rather than focusing on being able to fight two lesser powers simultaneously. The Biden official responsible for developing the 2022 National Defense Strategy has rightly indicated that ensuring America can prevail in one great power war should remain the driving standard for force development. The Biden NDS should retain this clear prioritization that the Joint Force prepare to win a war against China over any other considerations. At the same time, the NDS should lay out how the United States can better work with and support allies – like NATO – and partners to fill gaps in other theaters to deter regional aggression.

6. Does the strategy clearly articulate direction for global force posture, and does global force posture change as a result?

Across multiple administrations, the Department of Defense has been talking about the need for a more distributed and resilient force posture in the Indo-Pacific for more than a decade. But actual progress toward that goal has fallen far short of the rhetoric.

The 2018 National Defense Strategy prioritized a transition "from large, centralized, unhardened infrastructure to smaller, dispersed, resilient, adaptive basing" backed by investments in "prepositioned forward stocks and munitions" as well as "non-commercially distributed logistics and maintenance." But since the publication of the 2018 NDS, there have been few notable posture shifts or investments to accelerate that transition.

President Biden's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance initiated a review of U.S. global force posture, which many hoped or expected would increase and reposition forces in the Indo-Pacific while right-sizing U.S. presence in other theaters. But the Global Posture Review released in November was dominated by process concerns and resulted in no major changes to U.S. force posture globally.

Strategy should determine posture. But the Pentagon conducted a posture review *before* the publication of a new strategy. The success of the 2022 National Defense Strategy will depend in part on finally ending the Pentagon's "say-do" gap on posture.

7. How does the strategy approach burden-sharing with allies and partners?

The Biden administration has embraced allies and partners as a hallmark of its foreign policy. Secretary Austin stated in December that "Integrated Deterrence," the strategic concept at the heart of the National Defense Strategy, favors diplomatic and international pressure over military power. To be sure, global alliances are an asymmetric advantage for the United States vis-à-vis China. Ultimately, though, they are vehicles of aggregating military power and outsourcing security provision. Allies are for deterrence and warfighting, not just sentiment and ornamentation.

In developing those relationships, DoD alliance managers should focus on promoting allied self-sufficiency in secondary theaters and higher capacity to integrate in the primary scenarios. This means increased focus on the members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and expansion of military technology transfer within the Australia-US-UK security pact.

NATO is a critical alliance. The U.S. should remain engaged and support NATO while shifting its military focus to the Pacific. Our NATO allies need to share more of the collective defense burden. This is not merely a matter of equity. Deterring China in the requires an efficient division of labor between the United States and its allies and partners. As recent events show, European states, in particular, will need to contribute much more to deterring Russia and countering transnational threats. Several NATO members remain deficient in spending two percent of their national economic output on defense, an alliance commitment affirmed at the 2014 Wales Summit. Arguably, the significant deterioration in the European and global security environment has rendered the two percent target insufficient. The current Ukraine crisis in particular should spur our European allies to increase their defense budgets. But more than aggregate spending targets, the National Defense Strategy and guidance on its implementation should emphasize tangible and specific recommendations on how allies and partners can improve burden-sharing while improving collective security.

8. How will the new NDS accelerate adaptation of new technologies, both for modernization of warfighting equipment as well as streamlining internal bureaucracy?

In October 2021, then-Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Hyten described the rate of Chinese military modernization as "stunning." China has the world's largest standing army, navy, coast guard, maritime militia, and missile force. And with its industrial might, these forces will continue to expand rapidly in size. While the U.S. military must not neglect the "quality of quantity," today as in the Cold War it must depend on technological advantage to offset the challenges posed by numerically superior forces.

But too often, innovation and adoption of new technologies is not treated with the seriousness it deserves. Higher R&D spending, rather than the technology it produces, becomes an end in itself—a political bumper sticker to justify budget cuts elsewhere. Experimentation and innovation efforts produce more press releases than new capabilities in the hands of warfighters. When adopted, new technologies are fit to legacy structures and platforms rather than the other way around.

China is investing heavily in emerging technologies and producing demonstrated capability, such as in hypersonic missiles, on impressive timelines. Meanwhile, U.S. efforts continue to lag and lack urgency. Acquisition reform and more intelligent and creative use of authorities are necessary but insufficient. Starting with the National Defense Strategy, DoD leaders need to reshape bureaucratic and financial incentives to instill urgency, prioritize rapid adoption of new technology at scale, and offer a coherent strategy for regaining America's innovation advantage.

9. **How is industrial base capacity being expanded to support a strategy of denial? What lessons learned from combating the COVID-19 supply chain disruptions are being incorporated to make DoD supply chains more resilient?**

Defense supply chains and industrial base capacity are not static. They ebb and flow based on DoD demand signals, commercial market dynamics, and unanticipated events. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the interdependence and potential fragility of modern supply chains. The National Defense Strategy needs to adequately address threshold issues with DoD's lack of an enterprise-wide industrial base risk management process and limited multi-tier visibility into its supply chain. Such a process would regularly integrate war planning with industrial base considerations, such that commanders and policy makers would understand – in real time – how long will it take the industrial base to regenerate the losses from our most taxing war plans at day 30, 100, and 365+.
