



Forum for American Leadership

The Biden Administration is preparing its National Defense Strategy (NDS), mandated in law to be delivered to Congress in 2022. This seminal document shapes policy and budgetary decisions throughout the Pentagon and will determine how the nation prepares to fight and win the wars of the future. We cannot afford to get this strategy wrong.

Below are key objectives that should guide next year's NDS.

The National Defense Strategy must prepare the nation for the threats to come.

Key Objective: Ensure the U.S. military meets key strategic objectives alongside allies and partners, especially vis-a-vis China in the Indo-Pacific – at a reasonable cost to taxpayers.

Key Recommendations: The Department of Defense (DoD) must:

- 1. Modernize the force to deal with Communist China.*
- 2. Strengthen America's global network of allies and partners.*
- 3. Focus DoD on its core warfighting mission.*
- 4. Evolve DoD processes and human capital for a digital world.*

What are the most important threats facing the United States?

The unipolar moment has been replaced by a period of intensifying great power competition characterized above all by the rise of a far more powerful and ambitious China. Powered by its economic rise, Beijing is positioning itself to use military force or its threat to achieve hegemony over the Indo-Pacific and eventual global preeminence. In such a position, Beijing would be able to dominate global commerce and coerce other countries, including the United States, with grave implications for American prosperity and, ultimately, freedom and security. The United States, in concert with allies and partners, must prevent such an outcome.

China's growing military power is a driving force of intensifying U.S.-China competition. Even as the United States seeks to compete more effectively politically and economically, it must strive to maintain a military balance of power favorable to American interests. Beijing's growing military power—and willingness to use it—adds leverage to China's political and economic influence, often at the expense of the United States and like-minded allies and partners. The People's Liberation Army already boasts the largest navy and land-based missile forces in the world, as well as the largest air force in the region. It seeks to match America's military in technology terms in this decade, and to exceed it by the next. Beijing, meanwhile, has also shown its increasing willingness to use this military power against its neighbors. Therefore, the military dimension will be critical to averting Chinese domination over the Indo-Pacific region. As such, addressing the military challenge from China must be the organizing principle for the U.S. Department of Defense.

At the same time, while China must be its overriding priority, the United States faces threats from a dangerous Russia, as well as North Korea, Iran, and transnational terrorists. Accordingly, the United States must build and sustain a coalition of allies and partners to address these threats effectively and sustainably.

In light of this, the Department of Defense (DoD) must:

#1: Modernize the force to deal with Communist China.

The Joint Force needs to be modernized to address the threat posed by China, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. We must prepare for long-term competition with China along ideological, military, diplomatic, and economic lines. The role of the U.S. military is to ensure America's important interests are defended. Above all, this includes guaranteeing favorable regional balances of power that safeguard America's interests and access across all domains. This includes open access for trade and peaceful engagement, and a world in which sovereign states are free to make their own choices and are not coerced into an autocratic "common destiny" under China. Therefore, Congress and the administration should promote policies that:

- Ensure our ability to defeat China's theory of victory – especially a *fait accompli* – against U.S. allies and key partners, especially those most vulnerable to Chinese aggression such as Taiwan and the Philippines.
- Develop and implement new warfighting doctrine and concepts optimized for defeating the People's Liberation Army, by exploiting America's advantages in joint, all-domain operations.
- Prioritize a more robust, distributed, and resilient forward posture in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Fund modernization of all three legs of America's nuclear arsenal as well as strategic undersea, space, and cyber capabilities.
- Make the necessary hard choices around force structure while measuring defense investment decisions against specific operational warfighting objectives.
- Align emerging technology development and reforms to DOD acquisition, financial, and business systems to support new warfighting concepts and rapidly modernize the force.
- Ensure DOD is positioned to execute its role in promoting U.S. technological advantage and supply chain resiliency.

#2: Strengthen America's global network of allies and partners.

Alliances and partnerships are critical elements in ensuring American interests in free and open access to the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and other important regions, and thus in competition with China and Russia. The United States maintains formal treaty relations with 59% of the world's economy. This network provides the means for sharing the burden of global commitments, a source of mutual support, as well as platform for imposing costs on competitors. To this end, Congress and the administration should promote policies that:

- Ensure allies and partners bear their share of the effort in constructive fashion, especially Japan, Germany, and Taiwan.
- Encourage allies and partners to focus military efforts on addressing key threats in their respective regions.

- Balance the need for NATO to focus its military efforts on the Russian threat to Eastern European allies with the need for increased political focus on China to the extent practicable.
- Expand and deepen military partnerships with key partners like India, Indonesia, and Vietnam, while building on multilateral formats such as the Quad. Oppose efforts to subject critical new partnerships, especially in the Indo-Pacific, to ideological litmus tests.
- Refocus military tools like FMS, FMF, DoD security assistance, IMET, and others on enhancing U.S. competitive advantage against China and Russia while enhancing interoperability and empowering allies and partners to defend themselves.

#3: Focus DoD on core warfighting mission.

Military power is foundational to a whole-of-government strategy to protect U.S. interests. The ability to prevail in conflict cannot be replaced by other elements of national power, nor should it substitute for them. At the same time, using DOD as a utility tool for non-defense objectives dangerously dulls the military's warfighting edge. Therefore, Congress and the administration should promote the following:

- End DoD scope creep and politicization.
- Focus high-end military systems on preparing for high-intensity missions in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. Simultaneously develop lower-cost methods (i.e. Security Force Assistance Brigades, light attack aircraft) to address missions such as counter-terrorism in theaters like the Middle East and for more narrowly scoped conduct of day-to-day "competition" missions.
- Support efforts to strengthen capability and capacity of other departments and agencies to execute their missions.
- Drive closer alignment of service roles, missions, and budgets with DoD-wide strategic priorities.
- Contain cost growth and resource demands of the Combatant Commands by refocusing their Unified Command Plans on warfighting and strengthen State Department, USAID, and other non-defense contributions to security cooperation.

#4: Evolve DoD processes and human capital for a digital world.

The U.S. Space Force's pronouncement as a "digital service" portends the future. Digital engineering, open system architectures, SecDevOps, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and 5G all bestow military advantage as well as cost saving operational efficiencies. Therefore, Congress and the administration should promote policies that:

- Accelerate DoD's digital transformation through modernization of its IT infrastructure, data strategy, and business processes to exploit efficiencies from advanced analytics and other digitally-enabled decision support capabilities
- Require all new Major Defense Acquisition Programs to be AI-ready and nest with existing and planned joint all-domain command and control networks.
- Modernize defense resourcing structures to make them responsive to joint program planning and execution.
- Reform the personnel system to ensure personnel can enter, leave, and re-enter the Department much more fluidly in order to recruit and retain the best, diverse talent from within and outside the U.S. government.

- Reduce back-office costs through lean process design, intelligent process automation, and advanced analytics. This will enable a right-sizing and reshaping of the civilian workforce and free up funding to re-invest into force modernization.
- Allow the Pentagon to recapture lost buying power each year by letting expiring funds be reinvested into other defense priorities.

Success along these four lines of effort will require consistent focus and funding by DoD political leadership and bipartisan support in Congress.

The Forum for American Leadership (FAL) is a non-profit organization that presents expert analysis and national security recommendations to policymakers in Congress and the Executive Branch.

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