



Forum for American Leadership

Priorities for the National Security Strategy

December 21, 2021

Summary

The Biden Administration will soon issue its National Security Strategy. The NSS should guide policies and investments that protect and sustain the American experiment of republican liberty, and a world in which it can flourish, from the despotic, threatening intentions and efforts of adversarial powers, principally the People's Republic of China. This FAL policy memo is not a comprehensive national security strategy, but it sets out the priorities and elements necessary to meet the severe and intensifying challenges to U.S. security, prosperity, and liberty. It prioritizes waging a peaceful, successful competition against the PRC. It outlines a strategy that will serve the interests of the American people now, and for the long term, and can garner their bipartisan, lasting support.

Americans' Commonsense Concerns

Americans want to sustain and improve their way of life, which includes their ability to find a job, work hard, live in safe and thriving communities, and have their lives and those of their children get better over time. Their commonsense concerns include:

- The ability to find and succeed in a good job is foundational for individual, family, and community dignity and well-being.
- U.S. workers can compete with anyone when there is a fair playing field, and seek an international order that provides it. Americans want a growing economy, not to live in fear of acute economic dislocations sweeping away jobs, savings, or their children's futures, and not to be coerced by any foreign power or actor.
- Americans seek supply chain resilience, the ability to obtain what is most needed when it is needed, and not be dependent upon foreign adversaries for it.
- Americans seek safe, secure, and thriving communities, free from terrorism, drug trafficking, and human trafficking; from cyberattack, attacks on infrastructure, or data theft; and from foreign attempts to destabilize our society.
- America's efforts over much of the last 30 years to facilitate the economic rise of China and thereby turn it into a responsible international actor have backfired. Americans know this. The PRC's power has grown exponentially. Its regime is aggressively undermining America's leadership and strength, and working to subvert, if not replace, the America-led order of the last eighty years. Americans understand that if the United States comes to lack the power or will to lead in setting and enforcing the rules of the international road, the world will be more perilous and their way of life more endangered.
- Americans are wary of costly combat, particularly in the Middle East, but they also understand that the absence of U.S. leadership and presence abroad, or precipitous and irresponsible U.S. withdrawals, can and often do make things worse.

An effective, sustainable national security strategy will address these commonsense concerns. It will aim to foster conditions in which Americans and their way of life can flourish over the long term.

Priority Interests/Objectives

In keeping with those expectations, the National Security Strategy should prioritize the following interests and objectives:

- **Defense of the American homeland and a safe neighborhood.** Our security and prosperity depend upon secure borders; military, intelligence, and other capabilities that deter and prevent attack from terrorists and adversary nations; and robust cybersecurity and secure infrastructure and data.
- **A favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and Middle East.** To maintain its physical security, constitutional system, and ability to prosper in the world, the United States, together with allies and friends, must prevent the destabilization or domination of those regions from any hostile power or group of hostile powers.
 - This will enable Americans to trade with and access the most economically and geopolitically important regions on fair grounds.
 - Failure to do so will undermine Americans' ability to compete and thrive in the world. It will also increase the risk of major armed conflict. That is an enduring lesson of history, learned from the painful experience of two world wars.
 - This will require a strong, forward-deployed military posture in all three regions, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and Europe; sufficient overall military capacity; and effective alliances and partnerships.
- **Access to lines of communication and the commons.** The United States and friendly nations must have assured, full, and fair access to the sea, air, space, and cyber commons, free from harassment or coercion. This is a prerequisite for economic flourishing of the American people and must be underpinned by U.S. leadership and presence in those commons.
- **Free and fair access to international markets around the globe.** American interests lie in reestablishing a fair playing field in trade, allowing American businesses and families to benefit from selling goods and services to markets abroad and accessing them on fair terms. Chinese economic and commercial coercion and abuse are menaces to those interests.
- **Sustained technological leadership and economic prosperity.** Confronted by China's strategy for economic and technological primacy, the United States must invest in domestic innovation, engage in vigorous economic competition on terms that advantage Americans, and work with allies and partners to promote shared values of liberty, security, property, and privacy in a digital world.
 - Americans sense, and are repulsed by, the implications of the PRC's leading the cutting edge of technologies such as artificial intelligence, bioengineering, and nanotechnology, and fear the dystopian misuse of them that may result.
- **Leadership and influence over the international "rules of the road."** The United States must lead, together with its allies and friends, in setting the standards of relations among nations.
 - The Chinese Communist Party seeks to shape an international order that actively undermines the interests of Americans. If America is no longer the preeminent power

in the world, things will get drastically worse for Americans, and quickly. America's and its friends' ability to set and enforce the rules of the road rests on hard power—primarily economic and military power—both absolute and relative to those of others.

Those enduring U.S. national interests and objectives are threatened most significantly and comprehensively by the PRC, a unique challenge in American history. The NSS must focus on guiding policies and investments that will best position the United States to win a peaceful competition with Communist-led China. Key priorities are:

- **Acting urgently to check the erosion of the balance of military power and regain the advantage in the Indo-Pacific.**
 - China poses a growing military threat to U.S. forces, allies, and partners in the region. The U.S. ability to deter and, if necessary, win a future conflict in the Indo-Pacific are increasingly open to question.
 - The U.S. faces the urgent necessity of both enhancing readiness and increasing available fighting power in the very near term, and accelerating innovation, developing new concepts of operation, and enhancing end strength over the next decade and beyond. This is not an either/or proposition. [Doing both will require bigger defense budgets](#). The United States must prioritize that over other choices.
- **This is a full-spectrum rivalry.**
 - The United States must take steps now—including making investments that best position it for the long haul—to compete more effectively not just militarily, but economically, technologically, and ideologically with the PRC.
- **China is not the only threat.**
 - The current leadership of Russia is determined to play spoiler to and destabilizer of U.S. interests when and where it can.
 - Islamist terrorist movements actively plot attacks against Americans at home and abroad.
 - The revolutionary regime in Iran seeks nuclear weapons and to destabilize the Middle East.
 - A durable, effective U.S. national security strategy will keep China as its first and foremost priority, but cannot ignore or wish away these other threats.

Challenges and U.S. Responses:

China, and the Indo-Pacific

A bifurcated U.S. approach to the PRC that neatly separates domains of “competition” and “cooperation” is not consistent with how the Chinese Communist Party perceives its own interests or how it behaves. If America pursues that approach over the long term, it will fail.

The Challenge:

- The China challenge is unique: the United States has never faced an adversary with an economy nearly as large as our own nor one that is so enmeshed into—and parasitic on—the international order we and our democratic partners have built.

- The CCP leads an ethno-nationalist Leninist party state that seeks to establish a tribute-state system in eastern Eurasia, and ultimately to challenge the United States for global preponderance. The CCP regime has launched the largest nuclear and conventional military buildup in Asia since World War II, seeks to dominate the region, eject the United States, uproot American primacy globally, and foster an international order that secures its repressive rule at home and strengthens its power at the expense of other nations. The PRC has intimidated its neighbors militarily, coerced its partners economically, and transformed a deadly virus into a global pandemic that has thus far killed at least six million people.
- China's rulers believe their own people pose the greatest danger to their regime and view basic human rights and freedoms, embodied in the political systems and societies of the United States and its democratic allies, as threats to their survival. In order to secure its grip on power, the CCP has established a technology-enabled Orwellian surveillance state, whereby it seeks to monitor and control the thoughts and actions of its people, and is increasingly assertive in attempting to silence critics and intimidate governments in other countries.
- Beijing seeks to use access to its massive market to induce and compel obeisance from other nations, and it is keen to dominate what the regime describes as the "commanding heights" of technology and future economic development. It has stolen or coerced transfer of historically unprecedented quantities of intellectual property, while coopting and subverting the World Trade Organization and other international institutions that set or mediate international standards and rules of the road. Access to its own market has often proved illusory, temporary, or contingent upon loss of technology for Western companies, and conditioned on political subservience and compulsion for partners around the world. It seeks to propagate its own technological standards and advantage its own products, in order to lock in a posture of asymmetric access to data, natural resources, and markets. All nations, and humanity as a whole, will suffer if the PRC succeeds.
- Even in the United States, the CCP has aggressively worked to cultivate key advocacy nodes in the media, academia, and finance to quell popular demands to counter its aggressive military expansion, unfair economic practices, and malign influence.

Strategic U.S. Objectives:

- Peaceful long-term competition that draws on and favors relative U.S. advantages and strengths.
- Proactively shape the environment in which the CCP operates, deterring CCP decision-makers from pursuing potentially catastrophic choices in the near term and compelling them to pursue courses of action more in line with U.S. interests over the long term.
- Build and lead a coalition of allies and partners that also seek to deter Chinese aggression, expansion, and coercion.
- Strengthen Taiwan's ability to defend itself and deter potential Chinese aggression across the Taiwan Strait.

What to Do:

- **Defense:** The United States must urgently regain the military advantage in the Indo-Pacific and simultaneously make major investments in U.S. defense for the long run. This includes investing in America's defense industrial base and securing U.S. and allied leadership in the

essential defense technologies of the future, such as AI, quantum, telecommunications, and nanotechnology. FAL's policy memo setting out the elements of an effective national defense strategy is available [here](#).

- **Allies:** Increase the military capacity of our frontline allies and partners and continue to build on joint and integrated operations and forward basing. India is a critical piece of this, in addition to our treaty allies and other partners throughout the Indo-Pacific.
- **Political:** The CCP's aims and methods are increasingly evident to the world, from its use of the Belt and Road Initiative to exploit and dominate other countries and extend its military reach, to its attempts to subjugate its region, to its genocide against Uighurs within its own borders. America is already faced with a political and ideological competition; the question is whether to acknowledge and respond to it. The CCP is prone to overreach and brutality and humiliation of other nations. These are vulnerabilities. The United States must push back on the CCP's attempts to compel and coerce nations, communities, and individuals from serving its political ends. This will mean taking actions to:
 - Expose and challenge the PRC's coercive, corrupt, and illegal economic practices as well as its efforts to intimidate states and subvert international standards and efforts that benefit all, from human rights to trade.
 - Expose and oppose the PRC's efforts to corrupt and/or immobilize international organizations that play a significant role in establishing the rules of the international road.
 - Defend countries Beijing is attempting to coerce, and rally others to confront and prevent the CCP from making further attempts.
 - Highlight Beijing's continuing, gross abuses of human rights and refute its claims to have developed an alternative model of political and economic organization superior to liberal democracy.
- **Economic:** Restructure our trading relationship with China so that it better serves the security of the United States and the prosperity of the American people. Among other measures, this will require working with other advanced industrial democracies and taking unilateral measures to:
 - Better monitor and regulate China's hitherto virtually unrestricted access to our markets, technology, and capital. That includes much closer and more effective scrutiny and controls over not just technology, but also capital flows.
 - Restructure supply chains to reduce dependence on Chinese sources of critical products, components, and raw materials.
- **Technological:** Invest in U.S. technological leadership through increased R&D and expanded support for domestic innovation and high-tech production, including funding for [semiconductors](#), and stricter rules and enforcement against IP theft and forced technology transfer.
 - This also requires that companies and research centers in the United States that either undertake or finance cutting-edge advances in the highest-stakes technologies must be able and willing to have such technologies and knowledge serve America's national security interests, directly or indirectly—and at the very least, not serve the opposing interests of the CCP.
 - Spotlight and take significant steps to counter China's attempts to exploit our academic and research institutes.

While the central front of this challenge will be along the Asian littoral, it will not be limited to it: Indo-Pacific first cannot and should not mean that specific region only. Preventing the dominance or destabilization of the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East by adversaries of the United States—as well as other enduring U.S. national interests—require American forward presence, security architecture, and leadership in all three regions.

Europe, and Russia

- The United States has a strong interest in maintaining peace and stability in Europe, one of the world’s wealthiest regions and America’s most important trading partners.
- America shares interests and fundamental democratic values with its twenty-nine formal NATO allies, and other partners in the region.
- European allies must do more to strengthen their own defenses, in coordination with the United States, to hold up their end of the mutually beneficial NATO alliance and the transatlantic freedom and prosperity that the alliance underpins.
- The expansion of NATO and the EU strengthened the borders of basic freedoms and prosperity, and those borders should not be erased and pushed back by Russia.
- Russia has effectively invaded or destabilized multiple sovereign nations in Europe. [The United States must act swiftly and punishingly to deter Russia from further undermining sovereign states.](#)
- The United States must make Russian military adventurism extremely painful in the short term to alter its current calculation of the costs and benefits of continued subversion and outright invasion. That may include, and require, expanded lethal aid to law-abiding countries menaced by Russia; heavy, comprehensive sanctions on Russian entities and individuals closest to the current leadership; and maintaining, plausibly, the risk to Russia of even greater responses.
- Corruption and illicit finance are a core component—and a vulnerability—of Russian leaders and must be addressed forthrightly and strongly by America and its allies and partners.
- The United States should, contrary to its recent actions regarding Nord Stream 2, assist Europe in reducing its energy dependence on Russia, which empowers and props up Russia’s current leadership at Europe’s long-term expense.
- NATO allies are a critical bulwark against Chinese malign activity, both in Europe and across the world, and must do more to confront it.
- FAL’s policy memo setting out objectives for U.S. policy toward Europe is available [here](#).

Greater Middle East

- The United States retains enduring interests in the Middle East, including counterterrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, freedom of navigation, access to energy by our allies and partners, and the survival and flourishing of Israel. Those interests demand sustainable but persistent U.S. involvement, presence, and leadership.
- The United States must orient resources toward the competition with China, but abandoning the Middle East either out of weariness or to focus on other theaters will harm its interests, forsake strategic opportunities, and potentially draw the U.S back in from a disadvantageous position and at greater cost. America can and should find a durable level of presence and involvement in the region.
- The United States must prevent and deter Islamist terrorist movements from gaining territorial footholds or safe havens capable of launching or inspiring attacks against us or our

allies. Counterterrorism objectives can and should be accomplished with a light U.S. footprint in the region and relatively few combat casualties. The precipitous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has made America's counterterrorism task more difficult: [Al-Qaeda and ISIS are operating in and around Afghanistan](#), and we lack bases in the area.

- The U.S. must prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability and roll back its malign activity in the region. Failure to do so could lead to a cascade of regional instability and proliferation. Iran seeks nuclear weapons and will only be prevented through a policy of pressure and strength, not inducements and weakness.
- The United States should build a new regional order on the foundation laid by the Abraham Accords. This order can and should foster a security architecture with likeminded countries, improve those countries' capacities to address shared threats, and increase their cooperation and trade with each other. The United States should remain the linchpin, but this order would make the U.S. presence more sustainable and lower costs.
- The United States must support the unimpeded flow of the region's vital energy resources to global markets to protect economic growth and ensure the energy security of U.S. allies and partners. Technological innovation has greatly reduced American dependence on Middle Eastern energy resources, but these energy resources remain essential to many of America's allies and partners, including in the Indo-Pacific.
- U.S. adversaries have strong interests in the Middle East, including their own dependence on the region's energy resources. The United States should work to counter and exploit this dependence, limit Chinese inroads in strategic economic sectors, and prevent the growth of Chinese and Russian military relationships with U.S. partners.
- The United States should work with partners in the region to promote economic and political reform that contributes to state resilience, regional stability and prosperity, and the advancement of basic human rights.
- FAL's policy memo setting out American strategy in the Middle East is [here](#).

Our Homeland and Our Neighborhood

- Adequate defense of the homeland and the American people is impossible without secure borders.
 - The ongoing tragedy along the southern border is not just a humanitarian catastrophe: it undermines law enforcement and endangers Americans, whose safety and well-being are eroded by the trafficking of drugs and people by criminal networks.
 - Regaining control of U.S. borders and working with Mexico and Central American nations to enact a vigorous and orderly screening process will help ensure the safety and rights of Americans and of asylum seekers, refugees, and aspiring economic immigrants who request permission to enter U.S. territory.
- One of America's comparative advantages remains our ability to attract remarkable individuals and families who contribute to the country. American security and prosperity will be enhanced by continuing to welcome, through legal immigration, enterprising people from around the world, especially those with needed skills.
- Russia, China, and other adversaries seek to harm U.S. security, prosperity, and stability through cyberattacks, data theft and exploitation, disinformation and misinformation, and attacks on and probing against critical infrastructure. The United States must harden its defensive capacity against such actions; publicly identify the responsible regime and its proxies when appropriate; and develop and deploy offensive measures, both overt and covert,

to alter those regimes' calculations. FAL's policy memo on defending critical energy infrastructure from cyberattacks is [here](#).

- The United States should develop viable and affordable alternatives in our own hemisphere to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, which has already made major inroads in our neighborhood, and deter China, Russia, and Iran from foreign intervention in the region, through the continued and increased deployment of sanctions and other measures.
- The United States should impose costs on regional dictators whose [corruption and criminality hold back basic freedom and economic prosperity](#), and it should provide operational support to democratic actors in those countries. It should empower American allies in the Western Hemisphere and work together to foster our shared values and interest in broad-based regional prosperity.

Africa

- The United States retains a strong interest in working with countries in Africa to advance the enormous opportunities in the region for economic growth and health advancement; pursuing security interests in the region, including counter-terrorism objectives; and in preventing corrupting influences from China, which seeks narrow economic and military gain.
- The United States should remain a reliable partner for nations in the region to enhance economic growth through private investment and trade, and support for democratic norms and standards.
- The United States supports each country's ownership of and responsibility for its own development, and seeks to build on successful collaborative development initiatives in public health, infrastructure, and security.

Missile Defenses, and Nuclear Weapons

- The U.S. nuclear arsenal defends the free world. America extends its nuclear umbrella to allies around the globe. This advances U.S. interests by maintaining geopolitical stability in critical regions and by discouraging the spread of nuclear weapons.
- China, Russia, and North Korea are all expanding and modernizing their nuclear weapons. China is projected to quintuple the size of its nuclear arsenal by 2030, while disclaiming any willingness to accept future arms control restraints or obligations. Russia is building exotic and nonstrategic nuclear weapons not covered by arms control treaties.
- The United States needs to [complete the bipartisan plans to modernize the U.S. nuclear arsenal](#).
- Given the deteriorating nuclear security environment and increasing demands on the conventional force, the U.S. should not "reduce reliance" on nuclear weapons.
- America should [pursue expanded and advanced missile defenses](#).

Resources and Capabilities

- To support these strategic priorities, America must both deploy and sustain resources, including through expanded defense spending. FAL has proposed strategy and budgetary outlines that align with these essential ends, available [here](#).
- America can afford self-defense. But setting priorities to ensure our long-term security means making choices. A fiscally-sound federal budget is the essential foundation for a strong national defense. Reforms to control the drivers of the federal debt and deficits—which are

not the defense budget—will ensure the vitality of the American economy and strengthen policymakers’ hands.

Climate Change

- The environmental impact of global warming is a long-term threat to Americans’ prosperity and well-being.
- The U.S. should work with other nations to help establish conditions that actually mitigate the causes of climate change, especially through technological advances. America’s per-capita CO2 emissions peaked in the 1970s and are currently at a seven-decade low. China is the world’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases, emitting more greenhouse gas emissions than the United States, EU, Japan, and India combined. The CCP has demonstrated scant interest in or commitment to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions to benefit all.
- It would be a mistake to treat climate change as a discrete area where China will choose to cooperate with us and like-minded countries, while competing in other areas. Doing so risks failure on climate and America’s other objectives. As Beijing has become increasingly aggressive, hoped-for areas of shared interest or mutual concern, such as climate change and even global public health, are difficult to pursue.
- America must take that reality into account. China may only be likely to take effective action regarding the climate if it sees it as its best or only option—for example, if it fears falling far behind the United States and like-minded nations in the development and expansion of innovative technological solutions.
- The United States must also avoid ostensible solutions that increase our vulnerability to Chinese resources or supply chains, dependencies that China will be eager to accrue and potentially exploit.

Public Health

- The Covid-19 pandemic has devastated American families and communities, killing over 800,000 Americans to date.
- The virus becoming a historic, global plague was not predetermined. The nature of the CCP—its purposeful lack of transparency within its institutions and with the world, and its attempts to mislead, obstruct, and warp the workings of global public health entities like the WHO to serve the narrow interests of the CCP at the expense of the rest of the world—cost the rest of the world critical time and information, and took lives.
- China has also sought to dominate supply chains necessary for pandemic response and to spread disinformation and misinformation, and to pursue propaganda points by providing countries access to vaccines of marginal effectiveness.
- The United States should demand greater transparency and accountability from China both to understand how Covid-19 originated and spread and to prevent future outbreaks.
- The United States must work forthrightly and vigorously to expose and reverse China’s efforts to subvert international health institutions, requirements, and norms to the detriment of all.

Human Rights

- The primary threats to U.S. security come from states that deny freedom to their own people. The United States has interests in encouraging responsible and representative governments

that uphold fundamental human rights, including a free press and the right of individuals to live according to the dictates of their god.

- Achieving this requires acknowledgment of the contrast between the nature and behavior of the regimes that threaten America's interests and those in the democratic world. The very nature of the American experiment is a structural and competitive advantage.
- Hard power is essential to the salience and attractiveness of American values. Invoking and championing fundamental values are most potent when America is strong and respected.
- FAL's policy memo outlining actions America should take to advance the strength of democracies and reverse authoritarianism is [here](#).

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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