

THE BUSH NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

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“The Bush National Security Strategy is an ambitious and important work and it is not surprising that the document has attracted considerable attention and wide debate,” say Professors Keir A. Lieber of the University of Notre Dame and Robert J. Lieber of Georgetown University. “The NSS is broadly consistent with American strategic tradition while setting forth a coherent grand design for American policy in the face of new and dangerous threats.”

President George W. Bush’s first National Security Strategy (NSS) report, released by the White House on September 20, 2002, has attracted great attention at home and abroad as a compelling statement of American grand strategy in the post-September 11th world. The new document, entitled, “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” has been both praised as a clear, farsighted, and impressive response to the threats America now faces, and criticized as a radical and troubling departure from American foreign policy tradition. Although the new Bush NSS is a bold and candid proclamation of American objectives, much of the document articulates what has been implicit in American strategy since the United States became a great power a century ago. Moreover, what is new is generally reasonable given the nature and magnitude of the threats that have emerged in the post-September 11th international environment.

The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 requires the president to submit an annual report to Congress setting forth America’s grand strategy. Although the law calls for a “comprehensive description and discussion” of U.S. interests, goals, and capabilities, these reports have more often consisted of lofty rhetoric or uncontroversial restatements of official policy. Exceptions to this tradition exist. NSC-68, Paul Nitze’s classified report to President Harry

Truman in 1950, drew a comprehensive picture of a monolithic communist threat of global domination that could only be met through a massive American military build-up and doctrine of containment. President Bill Clinton’s first NSS, although no NSC-68 to be sure, made the case for the administration’s widely cited doctrine of “engagement and enlargement.” On the whole, however, documents such as the NSS rarely mark a significant departure in U.S. strategy or spark public debate.

Four key themes of the Bush NSS have generated controversy. First, the NSS calls for pre-emptive military action against hostile states and terrorist groups seeking to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Second, the NSS announces that the U.S. will not allow its global military strength to be challenged by any foreign power. Third, the NSS expresses a commitment to multilateral international cooperation, but makes clear that the United States “will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary” to defend national interests and security. Fourth, the NSS proclaims the goal of spreading democracy and human rights around the globe, especially in the Muslim world. The remainder of this article explores each of these themes in turn, paying particular attention to the logic, degree of change or continuity, and implications of each national security objective.

PREEMPTION

The Bush NSS advocates the preemptive use of military force against terrorists or state sponsors of terrorism that attempt to gain or use WMD. These are the most serious threats facing the United States and, according to the document, "...as a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed." The preemptive use of force in the face of imminent attack makes good strategic sense, and is supported by international law and the just war tradition. This aspect of the Bush doctrine is controversial, however, because it broadens the meaning of preemption to encompass military action "even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack." Critics argue that this attempt to include preventive military action under the category of preemption has no legal or practical basis, and thus see the Bush doctrine as a worrisome break from tradition.

The United States has often walked a fine line between preemption and prevention. In fact, there have been only a handful of clear-cut cases of military preemption by any states in the last two hundred years. (Israeli preemption in the Six Day War in 1967 is perhaps the most cited example.) The current NSS declaration that "our best defense is a good offense" reflects a long-standing willingness to use military action before an actual attack is imminent. In addition to a number of cases of U.S.-supported regime change during the Cold War, a prominent example is President Kennedy's naval quarantine of Cuba in 1962 to force the removal of Soviet nuclear missiles. In another case, the American campaign to oust Iraq from Kuwait in 1991 was partly justified among U.S. policy-makers on the grounds of a future WMD threat from Iraq. As another example, the 1994 Agreed Framework accord with North Korea was negotiated under the implicit threat of American military action to prevent North Korea from developing a nuclear arsenal.

Some analysts believe that it is counterproductive to make explicit the conditions under which America will strike first, and there are compelling reasons for blurring the line between preemption and prevention. The attacks of September 11th demonstrate that

terrorist organizations like al Qaeda pose an immediate threat to the United States, are not deterred by the fear of U.S. retaliation, and would probably seize the opportunity to kill millions of Americans if WMD could effectively be used on American soil. A proactive campaign against terrorists thus is wise, and a proclaimed approach toward state sponsors of terrorism might help deter those states from pursuing WMD or cooperating with terrorists in the first place. Other critics have argued that the Bush NSS goes well beyond even the right to anticipatory self-defense that has been commonly interpreted to flow from Article 51 of the U.N. Charter, and thus the Bush strategy will undermine international law and lead other states to use U.S. policy as a pretext for aggression. The most common examples are that the broad interpretation of legitimate preemption could lead China to attack Taiwan, or India to attack Pakistan. This logic is not compelling, however, as these states are not currently constrained from taking action by any norm against preemption, and thus will not be emboldened by rhetorical shifts in U.S. policy.

MILITARY PRIMACY

The Bush NSS confidently acknowledges America's unparalleled position of power in the world and unapologetically holds that a fundamental goal of U.S. grand strategy should be to maintain U.S. primacy by dissuading the rise of any challengers. "Today, the United States enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence. In keeping with our heritage and principles, we do not use our strength to press for unilateral advantage. We seek instead to create a balance of power that favors human freedom...." And, in a passage that has stimulated much discussion and debate, the NSS declares, "...[O]ur forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States." Critics of the Bush NSS see in this proclamation a worrying move toward U.S. overconfidence and imperial overstretch.

The desire to maintain American primacy by seeking to prevent the rise of a peer competitor has guided U.S. foreign policy for the better part of the last

century. The basic strategic logic explains in large part why the United States eventually intervened in both World Wars, and why American forces were brought home after World War I, but were recommitted to the defense of Europe not long after the end of World War II (i.e., the presence of a peer competitor in the latter case, but not the former). Even the objective of seeking to preserve American military hegemony is not new. In 1992, a leaked Department of Defense strategic planning document offered a blueprint for precluding the rise of any peer competitor, using strikingly similar language to the current Bush NSS. (The 1992 document language was subsequently disavowed by U.S. officials, but the basic concept was not abandoned.)

There are compelling reasons to think that U.S. primacy is, in fact, good for global peace and stability, as well as far preferable to the alternatives. Perhaps the best evidence in support of this claim is the fact that a U.S. military presence is welcomed in a great number of areas around the globe. Regional state motivations may range from free-riding on the American security umbrella, to the pacifying or stabilizing impact of an American presence, but the basic effect is the same. Despite obvious and expected political tensions inherent in stationing U.S. forces abroad, many states see U.S. military primacy as necessary for stability, and preferable to the alternatives, especially in Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf.

At the end of the day, this element of the new Bush NSS is less likely to reshape the contours of American foreign policy. For example, the United States is unlikely to take deliberate actions aimed at retarding the economic and military growth of potential great powers such as China. On the other hand, American defense spending is likely to continue to rise with the war on terrorism, thus further widening the military gap with potential competitors. This may actually dissuade potential adversaries from seeking to challenge the U.S. militarily.

A NEW MULTILATERALISM

The NSS declares that, “We are guided by the conviction that no nation can build a safer, better

world alone. Alliances and multilateral institutions can multiply the strength of freedom-loving nations. The United States is committed to lasting institutions...” The document goes on to say, “While the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone....”

Some have interpreted the new Bush doctrine as one of unabashed unilateralism befitting a Texas Lone Ranger, or as simply the rhetorical velvet glove covering the mailed fist of brute American power. These views are wrong. The Bush NSS is clear about the benefits and necessity of multilateral cooperation, especially with other great powers, and is thus more genuinely multilateralist than even the administration’s own recent behavior might suggest. What is different is that the Bush administration appears to reject the single-minded pursuit of multilateralism for its own sake; that is, as something inherently necessary for international legitimacy or morality. Instead, the Bush NSS holds that a basic willingness to “go it alone” is consistent with, and might even facilitate, productive multilateral cooperation. Here again, the break from the past can be exaggerated. Even the Clinton administration, which was self-consciously committed to multilateralism, frequently subordinated its multilateral principles in the pursuit of more direct national interests when the two clashed.

The explicit willingness to act alone makes good strategic sense. The Bush NSS stipulates that the global war on terrorism requires international cooperation among like-minded states. But it is also apparent that others will make their own calculations about the costs and benefits of working with (or against) the United States. Even those countries that bristle at U.S. unilateralism will often end up working with the United States if the alternative is to stand on the sidelines. A case in point is the recent unanimous passage of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1441 demanding full Iraqi compliance with its disarmament obligations. Several permanent members of the Security Council (Russia, China, and France) as well as an Arab state (Syria) initially had varying disagreements with American policy, but ultimately opted to cooperate by voting in favor.

THE SPREAD OF DEMOCRACY

The Bush NSS is not just about power and security in any narrow sense. It commits the United States to spread democracy worldwide and promote the development of “free and open societies on every continent.” To this end, the document calls for a comprehensive public information campaign — “a struggle of ideas” — to help foreigners, especially in the Muslim world, learn about and understand America.

This commitment embodies deep-seated themes within American grand strategy and evokes long-standing American beliefs about foreign policy. In particular, the idea that the exercise of American power goes hand in hand with the promotion of democratic principles can be found in the policy pronouncements of U.S. presidents from Woodrow Wilson to John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton. This combination of values reflects both a belief in democracy and freedom as universal ideals (“The United States,” the document declares, “must defend liberty and justice because these principles are right and true for all people everywhere.”), and a judgment that promoting these principles abroad not only benefits citizens of other countries, but also increases American national security by making foreign conflicts less likely.

The Bush NSS commits the United States to “actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development,

free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world.” This objective is driven by the conviction that the fundamental cause of radical Islamic terrorism lies in the absence of democracy, the prevalence of authoritarianism, and the lack of freedom and opportunity in the Arab world. In the past, this idea might have been dismissed as political rhetoric. After September 11, even the United Nations in its Arab Development Report has identified the problem and called for ways to extend democratic institutions and basic human freedoms to the Muslim Middle East.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the Bush National Security Strategy is an ambitious and important work and it is not surprising that the document has attracted considerable attention and wide debate. The NSS is broadly consistent with American strategic tradition while setting forth a coherent grand design for American policy in the face of new and dangerous threats. In scope and ambition it is a worthy successor to the most important previous statements. It is likely to remain for some time the definitive statement of American grand strategy in the post-September 11th world. ●

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