

H-Diplo|ISSF Commentary

Series on the 2022 US National Security Strategy

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

23 December 2022 | Vol. I: No. 3

<https://issforum.org/to/CI-3>

Essay by Joseph M. Parent, University of Notre Dame & Paul K. MacDonald, Wellesley College

[Our essayists decided that the best analysis of the Biden administration's 2022 strategy would take the form of a Gothic dialogue between American founders –ed.]

Outside Philadelphia, Two Ghosts Walk into a Bar.

James Madison: [cheerily] Who wants a drink? President Biden's *National Security Strategy* [NSS] is here!

John Adams: Convince me to care. Every few years, some poor national security team is forced to propose a comprehensive vision for the world, which is impossible, and to appease the most antagonistic audiences, which is worse. The inevitable result is a pile of abstraction, platitudes, and preening—little of which is actually followed. I've seen things, man...

James: Like what?

John: [staring into middle distance] Like every NSS. It's the eternal recurrence of the same. The president prefaces the report by chest thumping about how great the country and his accomplishments are. Then, he urges the United States to renew its economic base, strengthen its alliances, update its forces, integrate its foreign policy instruments, and confront rising challenges because the time for action is now! Since 2000, we seem to be constantly in a pivotal period that doesn't much pivot.

The NSS always lays out the same goals: security, prosperity, and democracy. How will they be achieved? Everybody emphasizes that the US economy is the foundation of American grand strategy, and they all have plans on how to renew it. All stress that economic development needs to be fair, and those left out or behind ought to be helped. All call for political unity. All understand that the military is a cornerstone of security, and all staunchly advocate modernizing it, so that others cannot catch up. All pay tribute to US alliances as crucial to the nation's security and call for broadening and strengthening them. All recognize that tools of statecraft are best used bundled, and so they lobby for integrating them every which way. All nod in the direction of favoring democratic allies, but concede they will offer "clear-eyed" cooperation to any state that

advances the American interest.¹ All express serious concern about transnational terrorism, criminal organizations, diseases, and energy security; all but Donald Trump's NSS express serious concern about climate change. The reports typically end with a regional tour of American policy, generally leading with Asia, then Europe, then the Western Hemisphere, Middle East and Africa follow, with the Arctic and global commons rounding out the list.

This isn't a strategy, it's a wish list. And it's hard to watch—few of these gifts ever show up on America's doorstep. After decades of the same song and dance, the United States is decreasingly secure, its growth rates are falling, and democracy at home and abroad is crumbling. The country is massively disunited and can't even agree on obvious facts, income inequality is sky high, most citizens think the nation is headed in the wrong direction, most allies have serious misgivings about cooperating with the United States, and the US military edge continues to erode. Fat lot of good the NSS is.²

James: You're wrong. [**gracelessly**] Okay... not about everything. The document is pretty formulaic and there is a lot of consensus. But that, too, shows you're wrong. Isn't formulaic consensus revealing? For more than twenty years, despite big swings in domestic politics, the most powerful state in the world with the fewest foreign policy checks in history has largely had the same foreign policy? Americans still have something in common! A national interest! There is a comprehensive vision; it can appease antagonistic audiences; the task isn't impossible. And on a lot of measures, the country is doing well: great powers are at peace with each other for a record length of time, the United States is extremely wealthy, and parts of its culture remain the envy of the world. National security policy hasn't exactly gotten us nowhere.

Besides, there are differences, and they're important. The Clinton administration faced a world with "record prosperity, no deep divisions, no overriding threats, and history's most powerful military."³ The Bush administration's response to 9/11 was all-consuming, and produced an anomalously ambitious NSS that stridently denied tradeoffs between its policies and goals. The Trump administration abandoned any mention of a two-state solution to Israeli-Palestinian relations, turned its back on climate change, and obsessed about border security. The multi-administration fixation on Afghanistan and Iraq has come and gone. Since 2000, the country has shifted its focus from the Atlantic to the Pacific. None of these differences are trivial.

Plus, the same words can mean different things to different people. Every administration wants to promote democracy, but since the last Bush Administration no one proposes doing it at gunpoint. Both the Trump and Biden administrations sought increases in the defense budget, but for very different reasons. The only strategic thinking in Trump's request was domestic politics; Joe Biden's defense request seems connected to international realities.⁴ Both Trump and Biden endorsed the National Defense Strategy documents that

¹ The White House, *National Security Strategy* (October 2022), preface. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>. Hereafter *NSS* October 2022.

² See Thierry Balzacq and Ronald R. Krebs, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pt. VI.

³ The White House, *A National Security Strategy for a Global Age* (December 2000), preface; <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2000.pdf?ver=vuu1vGikFVV1HusDPL21Aw%3d%3d>.

⁴ See Caitlin Talmadge, "Trump's Military Budget Minus a Plan," *New York Times* (6 March 2017). Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/opinion/trumps-military-budget-minus-a-plan.html>.

elevated China as a key competitor, but the character of their grand strategic responses differ. Sometimes a threat is not just a threat, and how foreign policy tools are used matters as much as which foreign policy tools are used.

Imagine where we would be without an NSS. If you don't write your budget down that doesn't mean you're not spending money. I know, nothing ever goes according to plan—the world is complicated—but planning is essential. Planning compels policymakers to prioritize and plans tells bureaucrats what to do and citizens what they're trying to do. Democracy can't work without accountability.

John: [impolitely] Fine, you win. What's in this particular *National Security Strategy*?

James: Two main challenges: the competition to shape what comes after the Cold War era, and shared challenges like climate change, food insecurity, arms control, disease, terrorism, energy, and inflation.

John: Aren't those kind of the same thing?

James: Sometimes, but one looks more cooperative than the other. Anyway, there are always tensions and tradeoffs in any strategy, but it's critical to watch how each administration frames them. Biden's NSS leads with a coming competition between democracy and autocracy, echoing George Kennan that this competition, like the Cold War, will be about who delivers better for people.

John: Oh really? Better how?

James: That's the Biden NSS's mantra: free, open, prosperous, and secure.⁵ That's a mouthful, so let's shorten it to FOPS.

John: Alright then, how will more Americans become FOPS?

James: Three ways: investing in underlying sources of influence, building the strongest coalition to shape shared challenges, and modernizing and strengthening the military.

John: Yes, but what does that *mean*?

James: Hard to tell. Investing in influence looks... mostly like more US industrial policy. Building the strongest coalition looks... mostly like more diplomacy. Modernizing the military is a big question mark, though. The rather short section on this is a mélange of defense acquisition policy, updating the nuclear arsenal, and supporting America's service members. What America's procurement, deployment, or training priorities are is not in here. But whatever they are, I'm guessing they will be, uh, modern and integrated?

John: That's not reassuring. Just more of the same then. Who are the main threats?

James: China, followed by Russia, Iran, then North Korea.

⁵ NSS October 2022, 6-8, 11, 16, 48.

John: [rubbing his temple] Sounds familiar. So far, almost all the Biden NSS could have been written by Trump's team. Same threats, same order. The United States military and its allies are "unmatched" but need to be vaguely modernized.⁶ The United States prefers democracies but will cooperate with anyone. It will pursue threats abroad, but others do not need to be remade in America's image. Above all, the country must stay on top by investing in its economic base.

James: True, but margins matter. After Trump's atypical interpretation of border security, the Biden team has restored it to a more traditional role and stressed that immigration laws ought to be humane, a point that should not need to be said but, following an administration that sought to deter migrants through inhumanity, now needs to be said. The same goes for Biden's restoration of climate change at the top of the foreign policy agenda, and recommitment to a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine.

Probably the most seminal difference will be the attempt to characterize the Sino-American competition in Cold War language. After eras of behaving otherwise, it is now a defining aim of American foreign policy "to preserve the autonomy and rights of less powerful states," as opposed to China and Russia, which do not.⁷ This might come as a surprise to China and Russia, who were no fans of American interventions abroad after the Cold War, especially those that justified violating sovereignty norms with a "responsibility to protect." I'm curious to see what American voters and other countries will make of this division of the world.

John: Yeah, I'm not optimistic. I'll tell you what won't surprise China or Russia: that we think of them mostly as adversaries. Our words and deeds align for a change. You think this strategy will work?

James: Depends how closely the Biden administration sticks to its script. Sticking to plan isn't always a virtue though: George W. Bush was so faithful to his quixotic vision that the country is still traumatized, and Trump was so faithless to his strategists' vision that he made the world nostalgic for Bush.

But it seems to me that, on its own terms, Biden's strategy is unlikely to succeed. Framing the Sino-American competition as democracy versus autocracy is more a wager on Chinese dysfunction than on American flourishing. If democracy were such a priority, we should see some stronger commitments to restoring its health.

Look, there is nothing inherently wrong with FOPS, but in the present international system they all seem like distant goals. The world is becoming increasingly hostile to freedom, and nothing in the Biden NSS will change that. Its policies will not shore up the country's corroding domestic system nor make democracy more attractive abroad.

It's also ironic that the Biden NSS stresses openness. What distinguishes Biden's approach thus far is how *against* openness it is, raising protectionism and pushing the nation in a *dirigiste* direction.⁸ If this is openness,

⁶ NSS October 2022, preface.

⁷ NSS October 2022, 9.

⁸ See *The Economist*, "The Risks of Bidenomics Go beyond Inflation: Joe Biden's Protectionism is Costly for America and the World," (27 Oct. 2022). Available at: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/10/27/the-risks-of-bidenomics-go-beyond-inflation>.

imagine what the alternative is. The Biden administration's controls on US semiconductor exports are a form of economic warfare against China beyond anything the Trump Administration did.⁹

As for security, Biden's foreign policy has accelerated hostility to China and Russia. That may be popular and it may work out—Chinese hostility should help heal American divisions—but it is unlikely to make Americans feel more secure anytime soon. American involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian war also pulls the country deeper into continental affairs, which may be hard to sustain.¹⁰ By poking a bear and a dragon at the same time, the United States is courting trouble at a time of weakness and volatility.

The outlook is slightly brighter for prosperity though. The Biden Administration scored some legislative victories like the CHIPS [Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors] and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act. Investing in innovation and the fight against climate change are smart moves, and in the long run they may pay off. They may also work better with more hostile relations with China.¹¹ But, with a darkening economic outlook, these rewards look remote. Even so, we are all bad at prediction and I could imagine the whole strategy working eventually.

John: That's a reach. Well, one out of four goals isn't bad.

James: Maybe. But how one weighs the goals—and whether they're the right ones—depends on your point of view. You might prefer to put a premium on long-run security while my overriding objective might be keeping the United States united in toto and forever. The accounting is opaque and the arithmetic is political, this is why it's important for us to debate these things.

Still, current conditions aren't welcoming for American values, and *anybody* championing them would have to measure success by degrees of failure. World politics is being hit by lots of storms right now. Perhaps the best we can hope for is to wait for better weather to overhaul a badly damaged ship of state.

John: That's not what we did.

James: [staring into middle distance] Who needs a drink?¹²

Joseph M. Parent is professor of political science and co-director of the Hans J. Morgenthau Program on Grand Strategy at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of *Uniting States: Voluntary Union in*

⁹ See Martin Wolf, "Geopolitics is the biggest Threat to Globalization," *Financial Times* (1 Nov. 2022). Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/8954a5f8-8f03-4044-8401-f1efefe9791b>.

¹⁰ See S.C.M. Paine, "Centuries of Security: Chinese, Russian, and US Continental versus Maritime Approaches," *Military History*, vol. 86, n. 4 (Oct. 2022): 813-36.

¹¹ See Robert J. Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The US Standard of Living Since the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Mark Zach Taylor, *The Politics of Innovation: Why Some Countries are Better than Others at Science and Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹² See Elizabeth Belfiore, "Wine and *Catharsis* of the Emotions in Plato's *Laws*," *Classical Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 2 (January 1986): 421-37.

World Politics (Oxford 2011), and coauthor (with Joseph Uscinski) of *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford 2014) and (with Paul K. MacDonald) *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (Cornell 2018).

Paul K. MacDonald is professor of political science at Wellesley College. He is the author of *Networks of Domination: The Social Foundations of Peripheral Conquest in International Politics* (Oxford 2014) and (with Joseph M. Parent) *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (Cornell 2018).