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The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance

On March 3, 2021, the White House released an Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG). This is the first time an administration has issued interim guidance; previous administrations refrained from issuing formal guidance that articulated strategic intent until producing the congressionally mandated National Security Strategy (NSS) (originating in the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 P.L. 99-433, §603/50 U.S.C §3043). The full NSS is likely to be released later in 2021 or early 2022.

The INSSG states the Biden Administration’s conceptual approach to national security matters as well as signaling its key priorities, particularly as executive branch departments and agencies prepare their Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 budget submissions. With respect to the latter, FY2022 will be the first budget prepared after the expiration of the budget caps required under the Budget Control Act (BCA) of 2011. Details regarding how the Administration’s conceptual approach will be implemented across different regions and functional issues are likely to be expressed in the full NSS.

Conceptual Approach

In drafting national security strategies, every administration faces central questions about how the U.S. government should define and advance national security. The Biden Administration argues that the COVID-19 pandemic and other systemic issues, including (but not limited to) climate change and the rise of anti-democratic authoritarian populism, are forcing the United States to take an expansive view of what constitutes matters of national security. In so doing, the INSSG articulates some continuity with the Trump Administration in identifying the challenge that strategic competition with China poses to U.S. national security.

By comparison, “traditional” security analyses contend that security ought to be synonymous with the mitigation of military risk and the effective deterrence—or prosecution—of warfare between states. “Human security,” a concept of security centered on the individual, rather than the state, and concerned with the overall well-being of people within society, became another way that scholars and practitioners began evaluating security. Over time, issues including, but not limited to access to health, transnational crime and violence, migration and internally displaced persons, poverty, infectious disease, impacts of climate change, and food and energy security have all become associated with the concept of human security. Terrorism and counter-terrorism are also nontraditional security challenges that are key areas of focus for scholars and practitioners.

A key question for policymakers over multiple administrations has been how to manage the tension between traditional and nontraditional security challenges,

and what the right emphasis - in terms of budgets, priorities, and activities—ought to be between the different kinds of security challenges. The 2017 Trump Administration NSS framed the key U.S. national security challenge as one of strategic competition with other great powers, notably China and Russia. While there were economic dimensions to this strategic competition, the 2017 NSS emphasized American military power as a key part of its response to the challenge.

By contrast, the Biden INSSG appears to invert traditional national security strategy formulations, focusing on perceived shortcomings in domestic social and economic policy rather than external threats as its analytic starting point. The Biden Administration contends that the lines between foreign and domestic policy have been blurred to the point of near nonexistence. Security, in this line of thinking, ought to be measured by effects of strategic choices on American’s lives and on the resiliency and preparedness of U.S. society to meet challenges from abroad, rather than relative to external threats or departmental budget shares. Further, the INSSG argues that national security strategy must be more fully integrated with—if not driven by—domestic policy priorities. Central to this vision of security are strengthening American democracy, promoting racial equality, countering authoritarian populism, and pursuing an economic agenda that explicitly focuses on working class families. As this logic goes, addressing key domestic challenges will allow the U.S. to outwardly model aspirational goals and, in so doing, demonstrate international leadership.

While noting the importance of preparing and maintaining a military that is capable of contending with external threats, the guidance emphasizes diplomacy as a “tool of first resort” for contending with the complexity of the international security environment and its increasing intersections with American domestic policy. Ultimately, the INSSG lays out a vision of American statecraft that focuses on shoring up key areas of domestic social and economic policy while simultaneously bolstering international partnerships, alliances and institutions. The INSSG can be viewed as a statement of what the United States ought to achieve for its own purposes, even apart from challenges from other states such as China or Russia. With respect to China, the INSSG contends that “revitalizing our core strengths is necessary but not sufficient,” and that the United States must be prepared to “answer Beijing’s challenge.” In the Biden Administration’s view, achieving this vision will position the United States to meet a variety of external strategic challenges, including (but not limited to) China, Russia, the COVID-19 pandemic, violent extremist terrorism, and nuclear weapons proliferation.

INSSG: Key Priorities and Tasks

The Biden Administration articulates three key priorities and several correlated tasks in the INSSG.

Key Priorities

- **“Protect the security of the American people** by defending against great powers, regional adversaries and transnational threats.”
- **“Expand economic prosperity and opportunity** by redefining America’s economic interests, primarily by focusing on improving working families’ livelihoods and achieving an economic recovery grounded in equitable and inclusive growth.”
- **“Realize and defend the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life** by reinvigorating American democracy, living up to our ideals and values for all Americans, and uniting the world’s democracies to combat threats to free societies.”

Key INSSG Tasks

- “Defend and nurture the underlying sources of American strength, including our people, our economy, our national defense, and our democracy at home;”
- “Promote a distribution of power to deter and prevent adversaries from directly threatening the United States and our allies, inhibiting access to the global commons, or dominating key regions;”
- “Lead and sustain a stable and open international system, underwritten by strong democratic alliances, partnerships, multilateral institutions, and rules;” and
- “Invest in our national security workforce, institutions, and partnerships, inspire a new generation to public service, ensure our workforce represents the diversity of our country, and modernize our decision-making processes.”

The INSSG: Some Key Questions

Is the INSSG’s focus broad?

Strategy is ultimately about choices and priorities. If everything is security, nothing is security; the concept of security becomes tautological. Does the expansive scope of the INSSG inhibit conceptualization and prioritization of, or even undermine carrying out, traditional security matters? Or, does the INSSG reflect an increasingly interconnected and interdependent international security landscape?

Does the INSSG “securitize” domestic policy?

In recent decades, some observers and practitioners have expressed concern about issues such as development assistance and immigration being considered as matters of national security. When national security is the frame through which broader social or economic problems are analyzed, they say, security and military oriented solutions tend to follow rather than diplomatic, economic or technical solutions. Does thinking about matters such as domestic democracy promotion and racial inequality in national security terms undermine domestic institutions and

agencies? Or, does thinking about domestic matters as matters of national security reflect a degree of urgency with respect to these issues and their centrality to the Biden Administration’s agenda?

Are Allies and Partners Always Essential?

The INSSG notes that the international strategic challenges facing the United States—from contending with China (which is described as a “pacing threat”) to countering authoritarian populism, to pandemic response—require a return to coordinated, if not collective, international action. Yet allies and partners are sovereign states that have interests that differ from those of the United States. Is the reliance upon these relations with other states a critical vulnerability in the strategy? Or, does the priority placed on these relations reflect a strategic necessity of building a new international consensus on key matters of national interest? Is it prudent to assume that allies and partners can be force enablers? Does U.S. entanglement with allies and partners introduce risk of strategic entanglement? Does such an approach discount the autonomy that allies and partners exert as sovereign states in their own right? Are there problems that the United States must solve on its own?

How might Interagency Resources be Rebalanced?

Since 2001, the Department of Defense (DOD) and U.S. military have taken on missions beyond traditional warfighting responsibilities (including, but not limited to, providing more security assistance and assisting with international disease responses). The State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Trade Representative, and other agencies provide critical national security capabilities, but possess narrower authorities and command fewer budgetary and personnel resources.

Reflecting on State Department and USAID budgets in particular, some national security officials have long argued that imbalances in authorities and resources between civilian and military agencies weaken U.S. responses to a variety of national security challenges. If domestic economic and social conditions also have direct relevance to U.S. national security then the authorities and budgets of other entities, such as the Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services or the Environmental Protection Agency, also could require reconsideration. What does the INSSG suggest about the Administration’s views on the balance of spending on civilian vs. military agencies and activities? How might Congress act to rebalance such investments, if at all? How does the Administration view the relationship between its more expansive concept of national security and resources?

For Further Reading

Joseph R. Biden, Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, March 2021.

Joseph R. Biden, Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference, February 19, 2021.

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