

Research Paper

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# Obama's National Security Strategy

## Predicting US Policy in the Context of Changing Worldviews

## Summary

The National Security Strategy (NSS) that US administrations are periodically required by law to produce provides a useful window into their strategic worldview and a base on which to calibrate expectations for their policies. A survey of past NSS reports shows that such documents are broadly accurate predictors of policy intent – but that an administration's declared strategic priorities are necessarily tempered by external reality. Actual foreign policy, in other words, tends to evolve to reflect often unforeseen global events and challenges.

Since the publication of the first NSS in 1987, the definition of the national interest articulated therein has been stable, encompassing three elements: security of the territory and people of the United States, security of the economy and American 'way of life', and the spread of liberal values and government abroad. A division between 'core interests' and lesser ones has been attempted periodically, but the clarity of the distinction has proven difficult for policy-makers to maintain when applied to specific issues and cases.

Since the Clinton administration, each NSS has communicated an identifiable dominant theme. The Clinton administration emphasized globalization, the importance of trade and a desire to use those forces to increase the number of 'market democracies'. Accordingly, that presidency saw the signing and ratification of a number of major trade agreements. The George W. Bush administration was notable for its focus on the threat of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, its willingness to engage in pre-emptive use of force even with limited international support, and aggressive rhetoric on the exclusive legitimacy of liberal democracy as a basis for political order.

In its 2010 NSS<sup>1</sup>, the administration of Barack Obama accurately signalled its approach in a number of key areas:

- **Military intervention.** The Obama administration has been reluctant to launch major military operations abroad, even more so if substantial international backing has been unavailable, and entirely unwilling to initiate new boots-on-the-ground or nation-building operations in the mode of what its predecessor attempted in Afghanistan and Iraq.
- **Iraq.** The NSS made it clear that the United States would withdraw from Iraq, something it went on to do comprehensively. America has subsequently used direct military action in Iraq with great reluctance.
- **Iran/nuclear proliferation.** The administration signalled its intention to pursue a diplomatic rapprochement and negotiated solution if at all possible, and it has followed through on this course.
- **Counterterrorism.** The administration has pursued a proactive counterterrorism strategy, which has included a programme of targeted killing, the increased use of drone strikes and the

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<sup>1</sup> White House, 'National Security Strategy', May 2010, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf).

killing on Pakistani soil of Osama bin Laden. In this regard, there has been more continuity with the policies of its predecessor than would likely have been predicted on the basis of the administration's original positions. But the administration has moderated other aspects of Bush-era policy in this field (e.g. it ceased some controversial interrogation practices such as 'waterboarding' and the capture of new suspects for indefinite detention).

- **Budgetary constraint.** The administration has sought to restrain and rebalance military spending, including making the first real-terms reductions in defence spending in the 21st century.
- **Rise of Asia.** The administration declared its desire to 'pivot' to Asia, a position later reframed in less stark terms as a rebalancing of US global commitments. The diplomatic and economic elements of this shift have thus far outshone the military aspects that were initially anticipated in the region as a central element.

The above themes will remain central to the Obama administration's strategy. When the administration eventually releases its next NSS, however, three areas are likely to stand out in light of challenges arising since 2010:

- **Criteria for use of force/intervention.** Unforeseen threats in Iraq and Syria (and, of a different sort, in Ukraine) have forced the administration to adjust its national security policy in practice. This calls for the articulation – not yet effected – of a principle-based framework for determining the conditions under which foreign intervention is in the national interest. The administration's aversion to avoidable intervention came through strongly in the 2010 NSS. Events have led the administration to be more interventionist in practice than it would have wished, and it will be the role of its revised strategy to articulate where the limits of this interventionism are located.
- **Promotion of democracy/liberalism.** With the promise of the 'Arab Spring' dissipating, the United States also needs a principle-based rationale for its policy towards political conflicts where no party seems inclined towards liberal democratic ideals. This will require President Obama to reconcile his avowed support for democracy and democratization in some contexts with the apparent diminishment of democracy promotion as a priority in others.
- **Expanding Chinese ambition.** The rise of Chinese power is the most strategically significant event unfolding in the world at present. The ideal outcome for US leaders is that China becomes a responsible stakeholder in the existing liberal order. China's recent assertive behaviour towards its neighbours, including expanding claims to maritime territory and airspace, has made it clear that this outcome is far from assured. US strategy must balance the need for a productive relationship with China with the imperative of meeting America's security commitments to its Asian regional allies.

## Introduction

The Obama administration is legally required to produce a National Security Strategy (NSS) for its second term, but in early January 2015 the document had yet to appear. This is now the longest gap between the release of NSS reports since the law mandating their publication came into force in 1986. During 2014, the administration was subject to steady criticism focused on the issue of whether a functioning strategy undergirds its day-to-day foreign policy. This was fuelled by the president's much-reported statement in August that 'we don't have a strategy yet' to combat the rise of Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria.<sup>2</sup> National Security Advisor Susan Rice recently sought to swat away questions over the failure to deliver the NSS on schedule, with the statement: 'If we had put it out in February or April or July, it would have been overtaken by events two weeks later.'<sup>3</sup>

This defence would be all well and good if we supposed the production of the NSS to be merely a distraction from the real business of responding to fast-changing events. But the purpose of strategy, properly conceived, lies precisely in providing a framework that can guide policy choices while leaving sufficient flexibility to allow for response to unforeseen developments. It also underestimates the importance of the NSS not only in steering administrations to think in a coherent way about the beliefs and purposes behind their foreign policy, but also in the vital task of communicating those beliefs and purposes to audiences outside the White House. The current extended waiting period, therefore, is a good time to reflect on the history and utility of the NSS as a guide to national policy. It is also an opportune moment to anticipate what the new Obama strategy, if and when it is formally articulated, will contain.

The NSS is intended to present the strategic thinking of a presidential administration in its clearest and most direct form. Real strategic thinking requires not just listing goals and threats, but also the far more difficult task of joining up ideal-world aspirations with the reality of limited power and resources by setting priorities decisively. This is more easily mandated in theory than realized in practice, due to the political realities with which administrations must contend. Making priorities explicit and unambiguous is difficult, because declaring goals or threats to be 'low-priority' offends advocates for their importance and risks advertising high-level disengagement to those with hostile intent. Moreover, should the authors of the NSS fail to predict or accurately characterize an issue that turns out to be a major concern in subsequent years, they run the risk of looking foolish and undermining the perceived value of the entire document. The public nature of the NSS renders it authoritative, since the administration must answer for its contents over years to come, but this also creates incentives for hedging.

Therefore, in practice and by necessity, the NSS is a pale reflection of the decisive, unambiguous strategy that might be produced without such constraints. Nevertheless, it has real value, with two caveats. First, given the political risk of being unequivocal, the NSS only communicates an implicit hierarchy of priorities. Second, any particular NSS only captures one administration's worldview and self-image at the moment of unveiling, and can quickly become dated.

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<sup>2</sup> Spencer Ackerman, 'Obama: "We don't have a strategy yet" to combat Isis militants', the *Guardian*, 28 August 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/28/obama-us-strategy-isis-iraq-syria>.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Landler, 'Obama Could Replace Aides Bruised by a Cascade of Crises', *New York Times*, 29 October 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/30/world/middleeast/mounting-crises-raise-questions-on-capacity-of-obamas-team.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/30/world/middleeast/mounting-crises-raise-questions-on-capacity-of-obamas-team.html?_r=0).

NSS reports have reflected significant differences in thematic emphasis and priorities between presidencies. There was the liberal, economy-oriented globalism of the Clinton years; the George W. Bush administration's bold, stark assertions of US primacy in power and ideology; and the Obama administration's emphases on domestic renewal and tightened limits on American intervention and use of force. These positions reflected substantive differences in the way each administration saw the world.

This paper proceeds in three stages. First, it provides a brief background on the history and function of NSS reports. Second, it analyses the connection between them and actual policy in past administrations. And third, it focuses on the Obama administration, discussing both its previous NSS and the likely points of emphasis of an updated strategy.

## Background: What is the National Security Strategy?

Injecting a greater degree of institutionalized long-term strategic planning into the foreign policy process has been a deliberate effort on the part of the US government since at least 1947. That was the year George Kennan was appointed as the State Department's first Director of Policy Planning, during the transition from the Second World War to the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> It was, in hindsight, something of a golden age for the influence of strategic thinkers in government, with the construction and adoption by policy-makers in relatively quick succession of the strategy of containment, the Marshall Plan for aid to Europe, and the extended military mobilization outlined in NSC-68 (drafted by Kennan's successor, Paul Nitze).<sup>5</sup>

The production and publication of National Security Strategies is a product of the Goldwater–Nichols Act of 1986, the first major reform of the national security establishment's institutional arrangements since the Truman era. This sought to address the perceived problem of institutional incoherence, believed to have contributed to major failures of policy, especially the nadir of the Vietnam War. The NSS process was intended to combat this dysfunction by compelling routine collaboration between executive departments to produce a single document that explained an administration's unifying grand strategy. At its inception, the NSS was intended to be an annually revised document, submitted to Congress as an accompaniment to the budget authorization and appropriations process. For the first few years of its existence, the NSS did serve something approximating its legislatively envisioned purposes: communicating a rationale to Congress for resource requests, communicating elements of presidential priority, and putting the sub-units of the executive branch through their paces by obliging rolling annual coordination in designing an agreed statement fit for consumption by the rest of government.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The National Security Council was created the same year, as were the Central Intelligence Agency and the Department of Defense (originally under the title 'National Military Establishment').

<sup>5</sup> George Kennan ['X'], 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct', *Foreign Affairs*, 25:4, July 1947, pp. 566–582, <http://www.shafr.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/XArt.pdf>; George Marshall, 'Marshall Plan Speech', 5 June 1947, Marshall Foundation, [http://marshallfoundation.org/library/documents/Marshall\\_Plan\\_Speech\\_Complete.pdf](http://marshallfoundation.org/library/documents/Marshall_Plan_Speech_Complete.pdf); NSC-68, Truman Library, 14 April 1950, [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Don M. Snider, 'The National Security Strategy: documenting strategic vision', Strategic Studies Institute, 15 March 1995, <http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Snider.pdf>.

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Over the past two decades, the balance between these purposes has shifted. The element of obligation to Congress has shrunk to a vestige, while the document's role as a vehicle for communication to wider audiences has taken centre stage. It continues to serve as a mechanism for agreeing and disseminating strategy within the executive branch, but more and more its job is to signal intent to audiences beyond the federal government: the domestic public, allied governments and adversaries alike. One sign of this shift is that in practice it is not produced on an annual basis. The George H.W. Bush administration was the first to miss individual years, but since the election of George W. Bush in 2000 it has become practice – apparently without meaningful Congressional resistance – for administrations to produce only a single NSS document per term.<sup>7</sup> This freedom to publish at wider intervals and at the time of an administration's own choosing has facilitated the shift towards use of the document as a vehicle for wider communication.

The new *de facto* status of the report as a discretionary exercise on the part of the administration of the day has been underlined especially deeply by the practice of the present administration. President Obama published his first NSS in May 2010. His second has, at the time of writing, still not appeared, in spite of White House suggestions during 2013 that it would be forthcoming in early 2014.<sup>8</sup> It will now appear, if it eventually does so, less than two years before the election that will choose the president's successor; hardly ideal for a report that aspires to serve as a current and forward-looking guide.

## What does the past tell us? National Security Strategies from 1987 to 2006<sup>9</sup>

The NSS is the result of a bureaucratic process that obliges multiple executive departments, often rivals for resources and influence, to come together and produce a single report. That being the case, there is an inherent risk that the end product will represent only a lowest common denominator: statements of aspiration too vague to be purposeful, or an undifferentiated laundry list of every possible issue.<sup>10</sup> Examination of the reports published to date, however, allows us to place the content into three broad categories:

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<sup>7</sup> The *de facto* demise of the annual requirement is reflected in the fact that it has now become a matter worthy of media report and commentary if a new document may be forthcoming in a particular year. Scott Wilson, 'Obama to issue a new statement of U.S. national security strategy', *Washington Post*, 29 November 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-to-issue-a-new-statement-of-us-national-security-strategy/2013/11/29/cd6531f8-5937-11e3-8304-caf30787c0a9\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-to-issue-a-new-statement-of-us-national-security-strategy/2013/11/29/cd6531f8-5937-11e3-8304-caf30787c0a9_story.html). Those who have worked in the White House are apparently comfortable referring to NSS preparation as a task that the national security staff confronts only 'every few years'. See Julianne Smith and Jacob Stokes, 'Obama Needs a New National Security Strategy', *Politico*, 10 March 2014, [http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/03/white-house-national-security-strategy-104491.html#.Uo2ju\\_m-osA](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/03/white-house-national-security-strategy-104491.html#.Uo2ju_m-osA).

<sup>8</sup> Scott Wilson, 'Obama to issue a new statement of U.S. national security strategy', *Washington Post*, 29 November 2013.

<sup>9</sup> This survey commences with the first NSS, published by the Reagan administration, and then proceeds on the basis of examining one sample report for each presidential term thereafter. This is justified because even when the NSS was submitted annually, major change only occurred between documents on a termly basis. The documents included in the survey therefore are: 1987, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002 and 2006. The 2010 NSS is treated separately in the section that follows. All are archived online as follows: White House, 'National Security Strategy of the United States', January 1987, <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/1987.pdf>; White House, 'National Security Strategy of the United States', March 1990, <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/1990.pdf>; White House, 'A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement', 1 July 1994, <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/1994.pdf>; White House, 'A National Security Strategy for a New Century', October 1998, <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/1998.pdf>; White House, 'The National Security Strategy of the United States of America', September 2002, <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/2002.pdf>; White House, 'The National Security Strategy of the United States of America', March 2006; <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/2006.pdf>. Each is referred to by year in footnotes that follow.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Freedman, speaking of government efforts at strategy generally, has concluded: 'Certainly many "strategy" documents deliberately avoid the topic, lack focus, cover too many dissimilar or only loosely connected issues and themes, address multiple audiences to the satisfaction of none, and reflect nuanced bureaucratic compromises. They are often about issues that might have to be addressed rather than

- Constants across reports, especially regarding the concept of national interest;
- Issues that rise and fall across the arc of the period; and
- Signature themes reflecting individual administrations' priorities and worldview.

## Constants

All National Security Strategies are built around an idea of the national interest. Although the precise wording has varied from one administration to another, they all cover the same key elements. The first Reagan administration NSS presented them in perhaps the clearest and simplest form:

1. The survival of the United States as a free and independent nation, with its fundamental values and institutions intact.
2. A healthy and growing US economy.
3. The growth of freedom, democratic institutions, and free market economies throughout the world, linked by a fair and open international trading system.
4. A stable and secure world, free of major threats to US interests.
5. The health and vigor of US alliance relationships.<sup>11</sup>

These, especially the first three, represent the recurring definition of the national interest consistent across the period to this day.<sup>12</sup> The core concept of the American 'way of life' has been invoked by all administrations since that of George H. W. Bush.<sup>13</sup> The idea that the United States occupies a position of 'leadership' is also a consistent feature, with a status somewhere between assumed established fact and normative assertion.<sup>14</sup>

Also constant is the difficulty all administrations have faced in identifying a hierarchy among interests that is explicit, systematic and sustainable. The closest any NSS comes is the Clinton administration's 1998 effort, which offers a hierarchy with three categories: 'vital interests', 'important national interests' and 'humanitarian and other interests'.

Despite this good-faith effort to rank and define these categories, the distinctions between them are not so easy to sustain. 'Economic well-being' is cited under vital rather than important interests, but is a phrase of potentially wide scope. At what point does a threat to it cross the line between what is merely economically painful and what is existential? And what if today's threat to a merely

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ways of dealing with specific problems. Consequently their half-lives are often short.' This is an assessment that might well be applied to some instalments of the NSS. L. Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) pp. 610–11.

<sup>11</sup> 1987, p. 4. For similar statements made by other administrations, see 1990, pp.1–3; 1994, pp. 5–6; 1998, pp. 5–6; 2002, pp. 1–2; 2006, p.1.

<sup>12</sup> This consistency in the aims of American strategy has been noted previously by Peter Feaver, '8 myths about American grand strategy', *Foreign Policy*, 23 November 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/11/23/8-myths-about-american-grand-strategy/>.

<sup>13</sup> 1990, p. 1; 1994, p.1; 2002, p.7; 2010, p.15.

<sup>14</sup> 1987, p.1; 1990, pp. 2, 4, 6, 10; 1994, p. i; 1998, pp.1–2; 2002, pp. vi, 7; 2006, pp. 7, 12, 22.

'important' interest is tomorrow's threat to a vital one? Would events abroad that might trigger an economic recession in the United States qualify as a threat to 'economic well-being' sufficient to imperil vital interests? The formulation presented at the conceptual, strategic level leaves much latitude for an administration to frame things either way on a case-by-case basis, depending on its enthusiasm for action in any given instance.

The 'humanitarian and other' category was also framed using language leaving wide scope for interpretation. In imagining the cases falling under its domain, the Clinton report referred to circumstances where 'our nation may act because our values demand it'.<sup>15</sup> This choice of phrase sits uneasily with the idea of such interventions as purely discretionary and raises the question of whether there are to be cases where American values 'demand' action but none is taken. It also raises the question of whether and at what threshold humanitarian outrages in faraway places undermine respect for the international liberal order, or spill across borders to threaten stability and security internationally, in such a way as to cause a vital national threat.

This is by no means to single out the 1998 NSS for special criticism; in fact, quite the opposite. That document made a more deliberate effort than any other to address directly the need to rank interests as a first step towards determining priorities for action. The point is, rather, that its limited success in redefining the terms of American strategy underlined the difficulty of doing so. As a result, although there has been broad consistency in how US interests are defined, there has always remained significant scope for interpretation on the part of policy-makers as to the gravity of the interests at play in any particular case.

## Issues up, issues down

Since the first Reagan NSS, there have been notable shifts in the prominence accorded to certain issues.

### *Terrorism*

Unsurprisingly, terrorism has become a more central topic, though it was never absent. The issue received multiple mentions in Reagan's 1987 NSS, which noted the 'growth of worldwide terrorism' as a threat to US interests, though at that stage American strategists thought of it as intimately linked to the Soviet Union and its efforts to destabilize Western and Western-oriented states.<sup>16</sup> Though it did not think the Soviet Union was directly in control of terrorist groups, the Reagan administration believed that it supplied and assisted them using its 'middle men' such as 'Cuba, North Korea, Nicaragua, Syria and Libya, which deal directly with radical terrorists and insurgents'.<sup>17</sup> The administration's interest in the issue reflected the imperatives of the period: US embassies had been bombed in Kuwait and Beirut in 1983; in the same year, 241 American servicemen had been killed in the Beirut barracks bombing; and Pan Am Flight 103 was brought down by a bomb over Lockerbie in 1988.

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<sup>15</sup> 1998, p.5.

<sup>16</sup> 1987, pp. 5-7.

<sup>17</sup> 1987, p. 6.

In the 1990 Bush NSS, terrorism continued to merit mention as a 'scourge', as one of a number of 'threats to the security of the United States and its citizens and interests short of armed conflict', and as a threat to 'democratic institutions'.<sup>18</sup> By the time of the Clinton administration, 'combating terrorism' had graduated to meriting its own subsection, in which it was framed as one of the several 'transnational' threats that had acquired increased prominence in the post-Cold War security environment.<sup>19</sup>

The 2002 NSS, following the events of 9/11, saw terrorism surge to the top of the ranking of threats to American security. It merited one of the report's nine chapters to itself, as well as new prominence in the report's discussion of relations with other powers – upon whom new, heavy pressure fell to cooperate fully with US counterterrorism efforts – and the reconfiguration of America's security institutions.<sup>20</sup> This central place for the terrorism threat was reinforced in the 2006 NSS.<sup>21</sup>

### *Illegal drugs*

Since the George H.W. Bush administration, illegal drugs have traced an opposite path to terrorism, becoming less and less prominent in successive NSS reports. In 1990, the effort to combat 'illicit drugs' and drug-trafficking was granted two dedicated subsections of the report, and reducing the flow of drugs to the United States merited a place as one of six items in a list of issues relevant to 'the survival of the United States as a free and independent nation, with its fundamental values intact and its institutions and people secure'.<sup>22</sup> The threat to US security was considered to be direct: the 1990 NSS asserted that 'traffic in illicit drugs imposes exceptional costs on the economy of the United States, undermines our national values and institutions, and is directly responsible for the destruction and loss of many American lives'.<sup>23</sup>

Under the Clinton administration, drug-trafficking continued to receive dedicated attention, retaining its own headlined subsection, though now alongside 'combating terrorism' and 'other missions' in a larger section reflecting the rise in prominence of non-state security threats.<sup>24</sup> By the time of the George W. Bush administration, however, references to drugs and 'drug cartels' had become almost incidental, mentioned in 2002 only indirectly and in passing while discussing the problems of weak states generally and regional conflict in Latin America, and in 2006 as one of many problems aggravated by globalization.<sup>25</sup> This trend has continued under the Obama administration. It is worth noting that since 2010 the United States has addressed the problem of illegal drugs via a separate report, the National Drug Control Strategy, perhaps signalling a desire to 'de-securitize' the issue relative to its handling by some previous administrations.

### *Nuclear weapons*

The 1987 and 1990 reports included extensive discussion of nuclear weapons in the context of maintaining a strategy of deterrence *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> Arms control featured as a

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<sup>18</sup> 1990, pp. 2, 3, 29.

<sup>19</sup> 1994, pp. 8–9, 14; 1998, pp.15–16.

<sup>20</sup> 2002, pp. 5–7, 14, 26, 27, 30.

<sup>21</sup> 2006, pp. 8–13, 43.

<sup>22</sup> 1990, pp. 2, 7, 28–29.

<sup>23</sup> 1990, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> 1994, p. 9. 1998, pp. 18–19. By 1998 'international crime' had also merited its own heading within this section.

<sup>25</sup> 2002, pp. v, 10; 2006, p. 47.

<sup>26</sup> 1987, pp. 21–23; 1990, pp. 23–25.

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significant topic, but as part of a broader strategy that required the implicit threat of American use of nuclear weapons as part of a worst-case scenario.<sup>27</sup> By 1994, discussion of strategic nuclear weapons had shrunk to a couple of brief mentions noting that the United States should 'retain robust strategic nuclear forces' and hold onto its deterrent as a hedge against the rise of any future 'hostile foreign leadership with access to strategic nuclear forces'.<sup>28</sup> All other references were in the context of discussing arms control or the desire to prevent proliferation. By 2002, the only references to nuclear weapons were in the context of arms reduction and the threat of proliferation.<sup>29</sup>

The 2002 NSS stated at its outset that the 'gravest danger' faced by the United States lay not in a major nuclear exchange with a hostile superpower but 'at the crossroads of radicalism and technology', signalling a fear not just of hostile state actors but also the nightmare scenario of nuclear terrorism.<sup>30</sup> Aside from the George W. Bush administration's interest in the possibility of using low-yield 'bunker-buster' nuclear weapons during the middle of the last decade, consideration of how and when strategic nuclear weapons might have to be employed by the United States fell away from the front rank of policy-makers' active concerns.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Budgetary constraint*

The budgetary climates in which the National Security Strategies were developed varied widely across this period. In 1987, its boom years behind it, the Reagan administration made several explicit references to budgetary limits on policy-making, noting that 'the resources of our national budget are under pressure', that 'severe budgetary restraints' limited scope for aid to foreign governments, and that 'administration foreign operations budget requests have been severely cut by Congress'.<sup>32</sup> In 1990, the theme recurred less frequently, but the Bush administration did similarly note that 'budgetary stringency' was a factor in planning, that 'action to reduce budget deficits' was required, and that 'budget constraints being felt by us all' presented a rationale for burden-sharing with allies.<sup>33</sup> In 1994, the Clinton administration argued that 'budgetary constraints are tighter than at any point in the last half century'.<sup>34</sup> Thus all these initial NSS reports were formulated with an eye on resource constraints. By 1998, in contrast, warnings about these had disappeared, reflecting the improved budgetary outlook of the federal government with the budget having entered surplus that year. Despite the return of budget deficits under George W. Bush, there was no return to concern for budgetary restraints or fiscal limits on strategy: resource considerations do not feature at any point in the 2002 or 2006 reports. (They would return under his successor.)

#### *Military intervention*

As noted above, the Clinton administration made the greatest effort in an NSS to define an explicit hierarchy of tiers of US interests. This is likely because its early years in office were marked by three searing experiences (Somalia, Bosnia and Rwanda) that each called in the end for fine judgments

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<sup>27</sup> 1987, pp. 23–24.

<sup>28</sup> 1994, pp. 11, 12, 13.

<sup>29</sup> 2002, pp. 13–14; 2006, pp. 19–21.

<sup>30</sup> 2002, p. 13. These threats were intimately connected, since one of the key attributes of 'rogue states' in the Bush strategy's definition was that they 'sponsor terrorism around the globe', 2002, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Wade Boese, 'Nuclear Bunker Buster Revived in Budget', *Arms Control Today*, March 2005, [http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2005\\_03/BunkerBusterSS](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2005_03/BunkerBusterSS).

<sup>32</sup> 1987, pp. 10, 17.

<sup>33</sup> 1990, pp. 9, 21.

<sup>34</sup> 1994, p. 29.

regarding the appropriateness of limited American military action in foreign theatres, and where policy-makers were unsure even after the fact whether they had done the right thing. These events made it seem reasonable to suppose that ethnic conflict and state fragmentation would be among central challenges facing the United States in the post-Cold War era, and that setting the terms of engagement for the US response in such situations would be a crucial part of strategy. The 1994 NSS dedicated sections to explaining the reasoning regarding the parameters for US intervention in civil conflicts or the assignment of troops to peace-keeping and peace-making operations.<sup>35</sup>

In the event, this question proved rather less enduring in its prominence on the agenda for US policy-makers in the 21st century than seemed likely in the mid-1990s, as reports from the 2000s barely discussed the question. However, in light of ongoing, bloody sectarian conflict and disorder in the Middle East, the issue of intervention in civil conflicts and the conditions and limits under which it should take place is today a renewed priority.

### Signature themes

A new National Security Strategy is an administration's opportunity to present its worldview on its own terms, as well as to set out its preferred narrative of the major forces at work in the world and the United States' optimal response. Recent administrations have made deliberate efforts to mark a significant new departure from their predecessors. Under President Clinton, the NSS came after a concerted effort led by National Security Advisor Anthony Lake – informally termed 'the Kennan sweepstakes' – to establish a memorable conceptual framework encapsulating the president's vision.<sup>36</sup> When the process of preparing the 2002 NSS began, according to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, the decision was taken that it should be 'different and consequential' and that it should take 'as the model the historic NSC-68'.<sup>37</sup> In 2010, UN Ambassador and close Obama advisor Susan Rice sold the administration's strategy to the press as a 'dramatic departure' from that of its predecessor, which suggests the NSS continues to be seen as a useful vehicle for signalling key themes and major shifts in strategy to audiences within and beyond government.<sup>38</sup>

In its first years, the NSS was more subdued in its efforts to weave together and present a singular vision. The Reagan administration's 1987 report was a straightforward outline of Cold War thinking. It laid out a classical conception of the Soviet threat and a robust variant of the orthodox strategic response that was containment. Coming in the lame-duck phase of a long presidency, it served more as a retrospective justification of the Reagan years than as the launch-pad for new thoughts.<sup>39</sup>

The Bush administration's 1990 effort also predated the use of the NSS primarily as a major tool of public messaging. Condoleezza Rice, who also served in the elder Bush's National Security Council, recalls the NSS as something 'people both inside and outside the administration failed to take seriously', which was 'to be finished with as little effort as possible so that one could get on to more

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<sup>35</sup> 1994, pp. 1, 10, 13–14.

<sup>36</sup> Douglas Brinkley, 'Democratic Enlargement: the Clinton Doctrine', *Foreign Policy*, 106, Spring 1997, pp. 110–127.

<sup>37</sup> Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: a memoir of my years in Washington* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011), p. 153.

<sup>38</sup> David E. Sanger and Peter Baker, 'New U.S. Strategy Focuses on Managing Threats', *New York Times*, 27 May 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/28/world/28strategy.html?ref=world&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/28/world/28strategy.html?ref=world&_r=0).

<sup>39</sup> 1987, p. 41.

important things'.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, it arrived at a time of momentous transition in the world order and in American strategy, and in a situation in which 'US-Soviet bipolarity gives way to global interdependence and multipolarity'.<sup>41</sup> This phrase is interesting in light of subsequent developments, suggesting the administration was planning not for the dawn of a new era of unchallenged American hegemony, but for a multipolar order, albeit one in which the United States should seek a 'continuing lead role'.

It was with the Clinton administration that the shift towards using the NSS to communicate a core thematic concept became apparent. The ultimate winner of Lake's 'Kennan sweepstakes' was the concept of 'democratic enlargement'. In simple terms this meant seeking to consolidate free-market democracy in those places where it appeared to have the best chance of taking root, and thus to steadily expand the community of democracies on the world map. In a rare act of editorial subtitling, the word 'enlargement' even made it into the name of the report itself in 1994.

The Clinton reports considerably expanded the prominence of the international economic dimension of US security. The Reagan strategy acknowledged the status of American economic strength as a component of national security and noted the encroaching 'challenges of the global economy'.<sup>42</sup> George H.W. Bush's 1990 NSS recognized the dawning of 'a new era of technological innovation and global markets', and noted the unfolding of a 'diffusion of economic power that will almost certainly continue'.<sup>43</sup> The Clinton administration, however, took this to another level, weaving its analysis of global economic trends into security strategy more deeply than its predecessors. It was the first to use the term 'globalization' in its NSS, and framed the primary strategic challenge facing America as that of 'harnessing the forces of global integration for the benefit of our own people and people around the world'.<sup>44</sup> As this suggests, its strategy did not simply focus on the United States' need to sustain economic growth amid general talk of 'challenges'. Rather, it made its understanding of the changing global economic environment – with free trade, technological innovation and intensified global interconnectedness as its principal forces – a central component in its re-conceptualization of American security in the post-Cold War era.<sup>45</sup>

This focus on the integration of economics into security strategy was an accurate reflection and predictor of policy under President Clinton. He created the National Economic Council and made the Secretary of the Treasury a non-statutory member of the National Security Council. The administration's belief in the importance of international economic engagement as a means of embedding liberal order was manifested in its staunch and lasting commitment to free trade. This began with the investment of political capital required to pass through Congress and then sign into law the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993, and ended with the highly significant passage of the bill establishing permanent normal trading relations with China and support for its ultimate membership of the WTO – the latter two justified by the argument that this would maximize the chances of integrating China peacefully into the liberal order. Neither

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<sup>40</sup> Rice, *No Higher Honor*, pp. 152–53.

<sup>41</sup> 1990, p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> 1987, pp. 4–5.

<sup>43</sup> 1990, p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> 1998, pp. 1, 2, 7, quotation p. iii.

<sup>45</sup> 1994, pp. 15–18.

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achievement was politically easy.<sup>46</sup> Moves such as these underscored the Clinton administration's pursuit of a strategy of 'geo-economics', to the extent that some termed this 'the Clinton Doctrine'.<sup>47</sup>

More directly in the security realm, Clinton's policy of NATO 'enlargement', the first wave of which took place in 1999, was affirmed in his administration's reports. It represented a primary example of the implementation of the broader strategy of 'democratic enlargement', prioritizing as it did facilitating the consolidation of 'market democracies' in circumstances where the chances for success were most auspicious.

The George W. Bush administration deliberately constructed its 2002 NSS as a contrast to those of its predecessor.<sup>48</sup> Some of this change was presentational: at 31 pages (not including foreword), the 2002 version was just over half the length of the 59-page 1998 edition. There was also a contrast in the substantive analysis presented within the strategy. Published a year after the 9/11 attacks, the 2002 NSS understandably gave greater priority to the threat of direct violence against the United States and its citizens. It also framed its analysis of the world in much more assertively moralistic terms.

To be sure, the Clinton reports paid tribute to the universality of liberal values and favoured wider respect for human rights. Bush's 2002 NSS, however, began with a lengthier and harder-edged assertion of American national strength and of the non-negotiable supremacy of liberal values in its foreword and its first substantive chapter. This was headlined by a quotation from the president's 2002 West Point speech in which he declared his intention to speak 'the language of right and wrong' without fear of being considered 'undiplomatic'.<sup>49</sup> It then proceeded to set out the view that a specific charter of liberal ideals (limits on the state; private property; freedom of religion; equal individual rights, etc.) possessed exclusive legitimacy globally, and that the United States should 'stand firmly' for the 'non-negotiable demands' made by these values, from which 'no nation is exempt'.<sup>50</sup>

Terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction were each accorded their own section in the 2002 NSS.<sup>51</sup> The strategy of response to these threats had a short-term and long-term dimension. The short-term dimension consisted of aggressive countermeasures against perceived major threats; it was in this context that the idea was articulated that the United States would be acting legitimately in 'pre-emptively' attacking such threats.<sup>52</sup> As has been argued elsewhere, this represented a radical departure, at least in relation to how the United States' interpretation of its prerogatives had been publicly articulated in the past.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> For a sample analysis from the time, see David E. Sanger, 'The China Trade Vote; Rounding Out a Clear Clinton Legacy', *New York Times*, 25 May 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/05/25/world/the-china-trade-vote-rounding-out-a-clear-clinton-legacy.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Walker, the *New Yorker*, 7 October 1996, p. 6, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1996/10/07/the-clinton-doctrine>.

<sup>48</sup> I have analysed the ideological dimension of the grand strategy presented in the 2002 NSS elsewhere. See Adam Quinn, *US Foreign Policy in Context: National Ideology from the Founders to the Bush Doctrine* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp.139–175; and Adam Quinn, "'The Deal': The balance of power, military strength and liberal internationalism in the Bush National Security Strategy', *International Studies Perspectives*, 9(1), February 2008, pp. 40–56.

<sup>49</sup> 2002, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> 2002, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> 2002, pp. 5–7, 13–16.

<sup>52</sup> 2002, pp. 6, 15–16.

<sup>53</sup> See Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

The long-term dimension of the strategy lay in an aggressive push for the spread of democratic government, thus in theory eliminating what the administration believed to be a root motive for hostility and violence directed against the United States. This latter point was communicated especially forcefully in the updated 2006 NSS. This version of the strategy followed the lead of President Bush's second inaugural address by articulating 'the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world'.<sup>54</sup> The 2002 and 2006 reports used the word 'freedom' 46 and 80 times respectively, far more than any preceding ones. This was married to the stated strategic objective of maintaining America's 'military strength' such that its defences were 'beyond challenge'.<sup>55</sup>

How closely did the Bush administration's reports reflect reality? The 2002 NSS indicated that it would pursue an aggressive counterterrorism policy, invest in defence and security to maintain unassailable primacy, contemplate pre-emptive attacks against hostile actors, and frame policies in uncompromisingly ideological terms as a struggle to spread freedom and democracy, which would resolve underlying tensions that led to antagonism between some peoples and the United States. And, on the whole, all of these priorities were pursued during the Bush presidency.

The Bush administration also vastly increased government spending on defence and security, on top of the direct costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, its reports made no reference to budget or resource constraints. The fact that large budget deficits opened up over the course of its term in office, even before the onset of the financial crisis of 2008, therefore comes as no surprise.<sup>57</sup>

The 2002 and 2006 reports did provide a reliable guide to the Bush administration's priorities and actions. Several of those actions – pushing for elections in the Palestinian territories and regime change in Iraq jump out as leading examples – did not produce the desired results, and therefore failed to deliver on the goals of the strategy into which they were intended to fit. This is a reflection less of the accuracy of NSS reports as a guide to understanding the administration's strategy than of the feasibility of the strategy itself.

The 2006 NSS – a longer document that in part took stock of progress during the four years since the first Bush one – sought to put the most favourable possible gloss on the problems encountered (or indeed generated) by some of the administration's major policies. It also sought to affirm belief in the viability of the ultimate objective of established democracy in troubled places such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon.<sup>58</sup> Relatively minor adjustments notwithstanding, it reaffirmed the core commitments of the 2002 report as an accurate macro-level expression of the administration's actual strategy in practice.

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<sup>54</sup> 2006, p. 1. For discussion of the role of democratization in US strategy, see 2002, pp. 3–4, 21–23.

<sup>55</sup> 2002, p. 29.

<sup>56</sup> For a comparison of defence spending under the presidents covered in this paper, see Lawrence J. Korb, Laura Conley and Alex Rothman, 'A Historical Perspective on Defense Budgets', Center for American Progress, 6 July 2011, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/budget/news/2011/07/06/10041/a-historical-perspective-on-defense-budgets/>.

<sup>57</sup> See Teresa Tritch, 'How the Deficit Got This Big', *New York Times*, 23 July 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/24/opinion/sunday/24sun4.html>.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, 2006, p. 3.

## The NSS under the Obama administration

### The 2010 NSS

The Obama administration came into office acutely aware of, and sympathetic to, the major criticisms directed at its predecessor's approach to the world. One of its first and foremost priorities was therefore to signal a change. This was evident in the president's Cairo speech of 2009, which sought to soothe relations with the Arab world with its appeal for 'mutual respect' and declaration that 'no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other'.<sup>59</sup> The choice of the same city where Condoleezza Rice had made her major speech on democracy as Secretary of State in 2005 was resonant.

The administration's first NSS, published in May 2010<sup>60</sup>, was similarly a product of this desire to signal a more restrained and nuanced approach to the world. It did not quite overtly disavow the priorities of the Bush era, however. The administration committed itself to 'maintain our military's conventional superiority', 'disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al-Qa'ida and its violent extremist affiliates', and affirmed that 'the United States supports the expansion of democracy and human rights abroad'.<sup>61</sup> On the basis of these reaffirmations of prior commitments in isolation, one might suppose that not much had changed between administrations.<sup>62</sup> This would be to neglect a marked shift in emphasis and tone, however. And since, as discussed above, emphasis and tone are the coin of the realm in the crafting of the NSS, such shifts should not be ignored.

The signature theme of the 2010 NSS was a move away from framing the United States as an unabashedly proactive agent of transformative change abroad, placing emphasis instead on domestic renewal – economic and political – and the power of virtuous example.<sup>63</sup> The NSS also placed renewed emphasis on preserving the norms and institutions of the established liberal order in light of the rise of new powers, even if that meant subjecting the United States to a degree of constraint.<sup>64</sup> By marking in its structure at the outset a distinction between 'the world as it is' and 'the world we seek', the administration signalled itself as self-consciously aspiring to realism, in counterpoint to the image acquired by its predecessor with its talk of 'ending tyranny'.

Although the objective of promoting democracy was still mentioned, its prominence was markedly diminished. It was merely one subcomponent within the broader category of 'values', and within that was sandwiched between the desires to 'strengthen the power of our example' and 'promote dignity by meeting basic needs'.<sup>65</sup> This signalled an end to democracy promotion through the use of

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<sup>59</sup> 'Text: Obama's speech in Cairo', *New York Times*, 4 June 2009,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>60</sup> White House, 'National Security Strategy', May 2010,

[http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf).

<sup>61</sup> 2010, pp.5, 19, 37.

<sup>62</sup> This continuity was pointed out by some at the time. Peter Feaver, for example, argued that the Obama strategy was 'best characterized as "Bush Lite"'. Peter Feaver, 'Obama's National Security Strategy: real change or just "Bush Lite?"', *Foreign Policy*, 27 May 2010,

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/27/obamas-national-security-strategy-real-change-or-just-bush-lite/>.

<sup>63</sup> Alternation between these two approaches has been a persistent theme of American foreign policy. See H.W. Brands, *What America Owes the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>64</sup> 2010, on the first point: pp.1–2, 10, 36; on the second: pp.3, 46–47.

<sup>65</sup> 2010, pp. 35–40.

force, and the advent of a less rhetorically aggressive, more development-oriented take on how the United States might further its goal of spreading democratic forms of governance.

The NSS made tens of references to US 'leadership', but did so in the context of the need to 'renew' it, rather than assuming its untarnished existence. This renewal, it argued, required a focus on restoring the United States to economic health and investing in its domestic capacities and infrastructure.<sup>66</sup> It also required a restoration of American moral leadership, which meant turning away from some previous practices: 'some methods employed in pursuit of security have compromised our fidelity to the values that we promote, and our leadership on their behalf'.<sup>67</sup> The precise target of this criticism – some of the Bush administration's counterterrorism policies – was not hard to discern.

In a dedicated subsection on the use of force, the Obama NSS spoke directly to the international concern regarding American unilateralism generated by the Bush administration's decision to go ahead with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 despite being unable to obtain UN Security Council endorsement. It still contained statements to the effect that military force is sometimes necessary, and that the United States reserves the right to take unilateral action when it perceives its national security to be threatened, but the central point was clear:

While the use of force is sometimes necessary, we will exhaust other options before war whenever we can, and carefully weigh the costs and risks of action against the costs and risks of inaction. When force is necessary, we will continue to do so in a way that reflects our values and strengthens our legitimacy, and we will seek broad international support, working with such institutions as NATO and the UN Security Council.<sup>68</sup>

To be sure, this statement allowed wiggle-room for contingencies. But it could not be read as anything other than a deliberate statement that the administration would set the bar for military force higher than its predecessor had. Combined with the sidelining of aggressive democracy promotion and associated rhetoric, this signalled that nothing comparable to the invasion of Iraq would be contemplated. That was a point made still more explicit by the president when the limited intervention in Libya in 2011 stirred memories of Iraq and Afghanistan: what was to be undertaken in Libya, or anywhere else for that matter, the president said, was to be far more limited than what was attempted in Iraq or Afghanistan.<sup>69</sup> The importance attached by the administration to UN Security Council approval of any action in Libya was also significant, standing in contrast to the Bush administration's position in 2003.

A complementary tilt away from confrontational policy was also discernible in the approach to dealing with hostile regimes such as Iran. In his first post-inauguration interview in 2009, President Obama made clear the intention to seek engagement to the extent that Iranian actions should permit it.<sup>70</sup> Although the NSS signalled that non-proliferation of nuclear weapons was a 'top priority', it steered clear of the Bush-era mentions of 'pre-emptive' use of force against nations

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<sup>66</sup> 2010, pp. 2, 28–34.

<sup>67</sup> 2010, p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> 2010, p. 22.

<sup>69</sup> White House, 'Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya', National Defense University, 28 March 2011,

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>.

<sup>70</sup> Al Arabiya News, 'Obama tells Al Arabiya peace talks should resume', 29 January 2009,

<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/01/27/65087.html>.

associated with that threat, undertaking instead only to pursue 'multiple means to increase their isolation and bring them into compliance' when they continued to pursue such programmes.<sup>71</sup>

The 2010 NSS also reintroduced concern regarding the constraints inhibiting US action. One part of this was budgetary: the need to 'live within our means' and 'reduce the deficit' – considerations signally absent from the Bush versions – was noted explicitly in 2010. The other related to the rise of new powers in the world order. The United States operates in a 'dynamic international environment', the report pointed out, 'in which different nations are exerting greater influence' and 'increasingly asserting themselves'. This obliged the United States to cultivate 'cooperation on areas of mutual interest' with these '21st century centers of influence', especially in Asia.<sup>72</sup>

Has the content of the 2010 NSS been matched by reality? The major points are considered below.

### *Military intervention*

The NSS suggested an administration reluctant to launch major military operations, especially if substantial international backing were unavailable, and entirely unwilling to initiate new multi-year nation-building operations in the mode of those attempted in Iraq and Afghanistan. Prior to 2014, the Obama administration engaged in only one major new direct military intervention, in Libya in 2011. It did so reluctantly, only after receiving legal and diplomatic cover from the UN Security Council, and after building a reasonably broad international coalition. Only with the fall of large parts of Iraqi and Syrian territory to the fundamentalist group Islamic State (IS), which declared the establishment of a sovereign caliphate, has the administration reconsidered its position and commenced a limited aerial intervention there. This comes after years of criticism for its minimalist approach to Iraq and the conflict in Syria, and its commitment at this stage remains strictly limited to air strikes against IS and training and equipment support for local security forces, with the deployment of combat ground troops ruled out (at least for the time being).

### *Iraq*

The Obama NSS – in addition to many other statements from the administration – made it clear that the United States was leaving Iraq. In the event it did so, without even agreeing the residual force that many thought wise. Events have subsequently compelled the United States to resume a direct military role in Iraq, but the resumption of a major ground combat presence has been ruled out.

### *Iran/nuclear proliferation*

The protests that followed the 2009 election in Iran somewhat disrupted the US president's hopes for a diplomatic rapprochement with that country. But since then the Obama administration has pursued a policy of economic sanctions coupled with diplomacy aimed at reaching a settlement on Iran's development of nuclear technology. Combined with more receptive presidential leadership in Iran since 2013, this allowed for the striking of an interim deal that pairs conditional loosening of sanctions with intensified negotiations to seek a permanent resolution of the nuclear issue. The administration has also refrained from encouraging speculation that it might pursue a military

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<sup>71</sup> 2010, p. 24.

<sup>72</sup> 2010, pp. 43–44.

solution, in contrast to the manner in which the Bush administration managed its Iranian diplomacy. All this is in keeping with the Obama NSS.

### *Counterterrorism*

The Obama NSS presented an administration still committed to the fundamentals of a proactive and global effort to strike at designated terrorists and at the same time determined to rein in those aspects of the 'war on terror' that had damaged American moral standing. In practice, the administration has greatly increased the scale of US unmanned aerial vehicle ('drone') strikes against terrorist targets in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, and succeeded in locating and killing Al-Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, in a special forces raid within Pakistan. At the same time, it has ended interrogation practices, such as 'waterboarding', that it considered to breach laws against torture, and it has also apparently moved away from the practices of extraordinary rendition and seizure of terrorist suspects for detention without trial. All this reflects what its statements in the NSS would have led one to expect. (It might be noted, however, that the Obama administration – though it has invested a good deal of effort in trying – has not solved the problem of what to do with those detainees inherited from the Bush administration whom it judges can neither be tried nor released.)

### *Budgetary constraint*

In its budget proposals, the Obama administration has injected new levels of restraint into the standing defence budget, including reductions in the size of the military.<sup>73</sup> While seeking to do so in a way that still leaves the United States capable in those areas seen as rising future priorities, the Obama administration is overseeing the first real-terms reductions in defence spending in the 21st century.<sup>74</sup> This period has also seen a great deal of Congressional focus on spending reduction, culminating in the 'sequestration' of 2013, which mandated substantial cuts, including in the defence budget, year on year over a 10-year period. The size and nature of these cuts were moderated somewhat by the Bipartisan Budget Act of December 2013, but only for a two-year period.

### *Rise of Asia*

Following its belief that the most important growing centres of influence in the world lie in Asia, the Obama administration declared its intention to pursue a strategic rebalancing of energies and resources towards that region. This has yet to be fully translated into reality, and events in other regions have distracted from its implementation, but the strategic direction has been signalled and its reverse seems unlikely so long as Chinese power continues to grow.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> US Department of Defense, 'DoD Releases Fiscal 2015 Budget Proposal and 2014 QDR', 4 March 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/Releases/Release.aspx?ReleaseID=16567>. These are administration proposals. Depending on the view taken by Congress with regard to overall limits and/or the implementation of the sequestration cuts, they could be reduced in scale through negotiations but left in force.

<sup>74</sup> For discussion of the strategy implications see Janine Davidson, 'Retrench or Rebalance: American's Evolving Defence Strategy', Chatham House, September 2014, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/retrench-or-rebalance>.

<sup>75</sup> Kurt Campbell and Brian Andrews, 'Explaining the US Pivot to Asia', Chatham House, August 2013, [http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Americas/0813pp\\_pivottoasia.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Americas/0813pp_pivottoasia.pdf).

## 2014: meeting the challenge of events

By the White House's own account, an updated NSS was due for publication in early 2014. That it has not yet appeared strongly suggests that its planned content was overrun by the scale and importance of unforeseen events that have unfolded in the last couple of years. In the course of 2013–14, the Obama administration had to deal with the following major developments:

- A counterrevolutionary coup in Egypt and hard crackdown on the previously governing Muslim Brotherhood;
- The deepening collapse of Syria into an extraordinarily severe civil war between the authoritarian Ba'athist government and rebel forces dominated by hard-line Islamists;
- The rise of the fundamentalist IS as an entity holding territory in the Sunni-dominated parts of Iraq and Syria, and the demonstrated inability of the expensively US-trained Iraqi national army to maintain the Baghdad government's sovereignty over its national territory;
- The illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia and further covert Russian military incursions into eastern Ukraine as part of an effort to reassert its sphere of influence over the former Soviet republics;
- An attempt to transfer power via elections in Afghanistan that came perilously close to producing a coup, resulting in a power-sharing deal the long-term stability of which is uncertain;
- Continued tensions between China and its neighbours, largely over a number of maritime territorial disputes;<sup>76</sup> and
- The outbreak and rapid spread of the Ebola virus through Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, along with the prospect of its spread farther afield.

These challenges – some partially foreseen, others entirely not – have all placed pressure on the strategy released in 2010. The administration has also attracted heavy domestic criticism during this period, some of it from the president's own party. It has been accused of having a weak and vacillating approach to foreign policy, and of lacking vision and strategic weight. The result is an imperative for the administration to adapt its strategy to reflect the reality of the decisions it now faces, and to do so in a way that convinces outsiders it possesses the requisite levels of decisiveness, foresight and leadership. In particular, it must develop its strategy in the following areas:

### *Use of force/intervention*

In Eastern Europe and, under very different circumstances, in Iraq and Syria, events have forced the Obama administration to consider more acutely at what point the use or threat of military force is justified. Its responses suggest a continuing reluctance to apply direct American force except as a last resort. Nevertheless, events have increasingly compelled it to consider in more precise terms

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<sup>76</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, 'China's Maritime Disputes', [http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/chinas-maritime-disputes/p31345#1/](http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/chinas-maritime-disputes/p31345#/) (accessed 9 September 2014).

the question of whether, when and how it may be obliged to intervene, even when it is disinclined to do so.

The next NSS the Obama administration releases will likely speak directly to this point. There has already been significant movement in this area, signalled in policy and presidential speeches. In his West Point speech of May 2014, Obama distinguished between 'core interests' and lesser ones, though – as noted earlier – this distinction has often proven difficult to sustain with clarity when subject to scrutiny.<sup>77</sup> In September 2014, the president set out a rationale for limited and targeted intervention in Syria and Iraq, while continuing to rule out large-scale use of ground forces, and drew an analogy to US counterterrorism in Somalia and Yemen. Yet to be articulated in full, however, is a principle-based account of the trigger for US action at various levels of commitment, grounded in a refined account of the national interests at stake in such cases. This would reflect at the level of strategic doctrine the revised assessment of intervention and its limits that has evidently occurred in practice during the past few years.

There is nothing necessarily dysfunctional about this sequencing: even the most strategically adept administration may need to revisit doctrine in light of event-driven shifts in policy. But when policy has changed, the general principles implied by the new course must be thought through if strategic coherence is to be maintained.

#### *Support for democracy/liberalism*

As noted above, the Obama administration at the outset downgraded proactive promotion of liberal democracy as a strategic imperative. Nevertheless, it continued to affirm the principle that support for democracy is required by American values and serves American interests. This presents a challenge in situations where illiberal, non-democratic forces appear to constitute the lesser of evils in a political or civil conflict.

Of the situations in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, none fits into the model of a binary conflict between liberal democratic and illiberal non-democratic forces, and yet in each case the administration has had to pick preferred winners in what increasingly resemble zero-sum political conflicts. In some cases (e.g. Egypt) this has led to tacit support for manifestly authoritarian political forces that have rolled back the liberalization of politics sought by the Arab revolutions.

This stance may be changing, at least on the level of American rhetoric. In his September 2014 address to the UN, President Obama delivered the most uncompromising rhetoric on the question of a fundamental conflict of values between liberals and Islamist extremists heard since his predecessor left office.<sup>78</sup> This, combined with his decision to commit the United States to direct strikes against IS, suggests that the language of 'freedom' and universal liberal rights, contrasted with religious extremism and terrorism, will again be more prominent in the administration's approach to the world. We can expect a new NSS to place greater emphasis on this conflict of ideas, while avoiding association with two ideas. First, that of framing the conflict as a clash of

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<sup>77</sup> Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony', 28 May 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony>.

<sup>78</sup> 'Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly', White House, 24 September 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

civilizations, which would accord actors such as IS wider support in the Islamic world than they possess. And second, the suggestion of a renewed embrace of the naive confidence in the capacity of rapid democratization to resolve the problems of the Middle East that (from the Obama administration's perspective) was a feature of the Bush years.

### *Tensions in East Asia*

As the scope of Chinese claims – to airspace, sea boundaries and territory – expands, and meets growing objections and resistance from its neighbours, US strategists increasingly need to plan not merely for their preferred future vision of China as a responsible stakeholder in the liberal order, but also for how the US should respond to a China that seeks to establish itself as a regional hegemon. Given the potential for blunt language on this topic to be interpreted as provocative by China, or even to contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy of Sino-US antagonism, American phrasing will likely be at least somewhat indirect and delicate. The next NSS can be expected to pick up in this regard where the 2010 report left off.<sup>79</sup>

Rising tensions between China and its neighbours since 2010, at the same time as the country's military modernization proceeds apace, make it more important than ever that the United States find the right combination of words and actions to persuade China to embrace the role of a status-quo power. This must be pursued via a blend of enticement and deterrence, aspiring to the goal of China as a responsible stakeholder in the liberal order while simultaneously hedging against the possibility of a more disruptive Chinese approach and reassuring Washington's Asian partners. In seeking a middle way that does not antagonize China or US allies, a new Obama NSS is likely to emphasize the importance of upholding the normative framework of the liberal international order, a point which the president made at the United Nations in reference to Russian 'aggression in Europe' but which is equally applicable to the coming strategic challenges of Asia.<sup>80</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Is a National Security Strategy a good predictor of an administration's policy? On balance, it is. But to approach it as a comprehensive key that can reveal the logic uniting every policy is to expect far more than the NSS can deliver. No administration is that consistent in practice, nor – happily – so impervious to the changing demands of immediate and unexpected challenges. The NSS does not stand as a lone signpost. It should be interpreted in context, as one (major) part of an administration's efforts to present a coherent rationale for its approach to the world. Its drafting process provides an intellectual space for conscious efforts to articulate core beliefs, identify dominant historical forces and chart a course to secure US interests.

The status of the NSS as a guide comes with an important caveat, moreover: the strategic visions of any administration are tested, swiftly, against reality. External actors get a vote on the efficacy of a strategy, and on a worldview. No administration can – or should – come through that interaction

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<sup>79</sup> That report declared that the US would 'monitor China's military modernization programme and prepare accordingly to ensure that its interests and allies, regionally and globally, are not negatively affected', while surrounding that cautionary note with a multitude of references to encouraging Chinese 'responsible leadership', the pursuit of a 'positive, constructive' relationship, and 'encourag[ing] China to make choices that contribute to peace, security and prosperity as its influence rises'. 2010, p. 43.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

unaltered by the experience. For this reason, an administration that survives eight years will see its strategy evolve while in office. The Obama administration's next NSS seems likely to demonstrate this. The administration's first effort was defined by its desire to signal a shift away from the perceived missteps of its predecessor. It emphasized extreme reluctance to engage in military intervention, and implicitly but clearly signalled discomfort with the forceful rhetoric of 'freedom' and democracy promotion that was the signature of the Bush strategies. It was also optimistic that the liberal international order could accommodate rising powers and socialize them into responsible membership.

Experience since 2010 has obliged reconsideration on all of these points. The next NSS will almost certainly retain the core of the Obama administration's cautious, restrained approach to the wielding of American power and its aspirations to facilitate the integration of rising powers into the liberal order. But it will also reflect the increasingly hard questions it has confronted about how to put such instincts into practice when other state and non-state actors are inclined to test US strategic resolve every step of the way.

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