

# The Looking Glass

## Biden's National Security Strategy: a busted flush?

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In this final issue of the *Looking Glass* for 2022, we cast a critical eye over the Biden administration's [National Security Strategy](#) (NSS). Much of its general thrust had already been hinted at by the administration's statements and actions. However, coming as it does at the midpoint of President Biden's term, and amidst geopolitical conflict and complexity in Europe and Asia, more is riding on this iteration of the NSS than in the recent past. Indeed, President Biden's [opening](#) letter to the document asserts the NSS:

will seize this decisive decade to advance America's vital interests, position the United States to outmaneuver our geopolitical competitors, tackle shared challenges, and set our world firmly on a path toward a brighter and more hopeful tomorrow.

That sets a high bar to judge the substance of the document. And, as we demonstrate below, it deserves praise for defining key strategic problems facing America. But ultimately, it fails to live up to its lofty expectations. Instead, the administration has delivered a document long on aspirational verbiage and short on actual strategy. More worryingly, it embodies a fundamental contradiction between its focus on 'competition' with China (and to a lesser degree Russia) and its rhetorical commitments to the liberal or 'rules-based' order.

To be fair, contradictions between rhetoric and strategy have been apparent in most – if not all – NSS documents produced since the end of the Cold War. But the dilemma for the Biden administration is that it confronts external and domestic environments much less permissive of hedging on strategic outcomes.

That judgement may seem overly harsh. Yet if we measure the administration's effort against criteria traditionally used to assess NSS documents – that is process, problem definition and the identification of objectives and their reconciliation with the means and ways to achieve them – then this iteration is severely wanting.



# The Looking Glass

Centre for Defence Research, December 2022

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## The NSS: purpose, process and personnel

The CEO of the Center for New American Security, Richard Fontaine, has [suggested](#) that the word 'strategy' in the NSS is 'something of a misnomer'. As he puts it, 'anyone looking for an articulation of objectives and how to achieve them may be disappointed'. Instead, he sees the NSS as a 'very long foreign policy speech, a snapshot of how a particular administration understands its global security and economic environment'. Its 'chief value is [as] a signaling device'.

While this may be what the NSS has [devolved](#) into over time, it is clearly, not how the document was originally envisioned. Since 1986, the executive branch has been required under the [Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act](#) to provide Congress with a NSS. Under the Goldwater-Nichols Act, presidents are meant to 'transmit to Congress each year a comprehensive report on the national security strategy of the United States'. It should 'include a comprehensive description and discussion' of:

- i. the 'worldwide interests, goals, and objectives of the United States' that are 'vital' to national security
- ii. the 'foreign policy, worldwide commitments, and national defense capabilities of the United States necessary to deter aggression and to implement' the NSS
- iii. the 'short-term and long-term uses' of the instruments of national power to 'protect or promote the interests' of the United States and 'achieve the goals and objectives' of the NSS
- iv. the 'adequacy of the capabilities of the United States to carry out the national security strategy ... including an evaluation of the balance among the capabilities of all elements of the national power of the United States to support the implementation of the national security strategy'.

To be successful, as the very first one of its kind in [1987](#) noted, the NSS:

must be firmly rooted in broad national interests and objectives, supported by an adequate commitment of resources, and integrate all relevant facets of national power to achieve our national objectives...

provide a framework within which more specific and detailed objectives can be identified by those executive branch agencies charged with stewardship over various elements of the nation's power...

and it should

guide the creation of specific plans for attainment of those more detailed objectives.

The intended [purpose](#) of the NSS is thus clear.

[It] entails the design and application of ideas for employment of means as well as the orchestration of institutions and instruments of national power (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic) to achieve viable ends that protect or advance national interests.

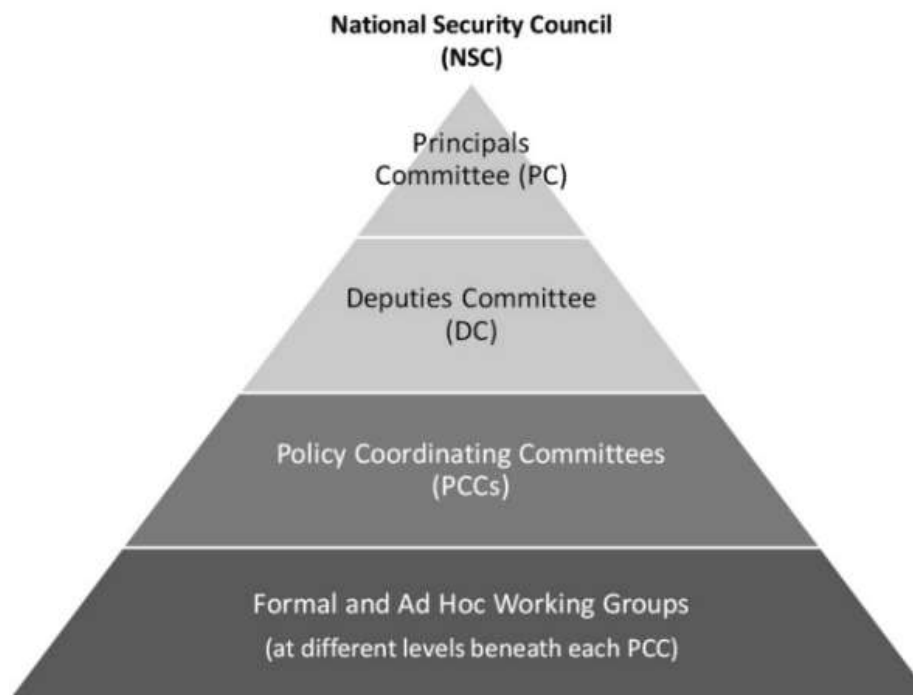
Hence, the NSS is meant to stand at the apex of the 'strategy stew' within the American system and to provide the conceptual glue that connects the planning and implementation efforts of the American national security enterprise. Documents, such as the National Defense Strategy (NDS) and the Nuclear Posture Review, should be 'logically related to if not derived from it'. The rationale, as Richard Kugler [notes](#), is that 'thinking from the top down rather than from the bottom up' is necessary for 'a sound national security strategy', as it cannot 'be crafted merely by stapling together a set of subordinate strategies in the hope of achieving coherence'.

For [some](#) critics however, the NSS mandated under the Goldwater-Nichols Act has proven to be 'a well-meaning effort' by Congress to improve the coordination of relevant departments and agencies 'around a shared agenda' on national security that has ultimately failed. The rationale and design mandated by Congress has often been held hostage to divided presidential attention and the relative influence of key advisors (such as the National Security Advisor (NSA)) and cabinet secretaries (such as the Secretary of Defense). Similarly [bureaucratic politics](#) tends to result in [satisficing](#) (that is decision makers consider limited

alternatives and choose ones that are 'good enough' rather than optimal), [producing](#) a 'lowest common denominator' NSS. which 'offends none of the important participants by saying little of significance'.

The process used to develop the NSS (in theory) is reflective of that hierarchy (see Figure 1). The President's NSA and the National Security Council (NSC) staff stand at the fulcrum of the development of the document, while the relevant departments (State, Defense, Homeland Security etc.) and agencies (CIA, Defence Intelligence Agency etc.) feed information and assessments into the process. But process alone does [not](#) necessarily make good strategy. '[S]equencing is inescapably star-crossed' through the intervention of budget cycles and events. Even so, following the customary hierarchy in the development and elucidation of strategic guidance should assist in ensuring a level of coherence.

**Figure 1:** The interagency hierarchy



**Source:** David A Cooper, Nikolas K Gvosdev, and Jessica D Blankshain, 'Deconstructing the 'deep state': subordinate bureaucratic politics in US National Security', *Orbis*, 2018, 62 (4):518–540.

Finally, the NSS is created by and reflective of key people. The NSS, Stacie Goddard [notes](#), is 'supposed to represent the president's vision' but it can become 'associated with a few key individuals'. Donald Trump's 2017 NSS, for example, is closely [associated](#) with Nadia Schadlow, a former Washington think-tanker and then Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Strategy on the NSC. In the Biden administration, the NSS arguably bears the influence of NSA Jake Sullivan and, to a lesser extent, NSC Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt M Campbell.

Considering the influence of particular individuals is important, as they can moderate, amplify or distil presidential worldviews and their weight in the NSS. Schadlow, for example, is [seen](#) as having been a moderating influence who sought (not always successfully) to reconcile Trump's views to a more traditional Republican foreign policy worldview. Sullivan [served](#) as an [aide](#) to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and then Director of Policy Planning at the State Department, and was Biden's national security adviser when he was Vice-President under Obama. This [long](#) association with the Democratic establishment and

# The Looking Glass

Centre for Defence Research, December 2022

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President Biden himself makes it reasonable to assume his influence serves to amplify and/or distil the President's views.

## The Biden NSS: clear problem definition but contradictory strategy

The Biden administration has little trouble identifying problems and challenges or articulating desired ends. But the NSS demonstrates, it has had greater difficulty identifying the necessary courses of action (and the instruments of national power) to use to attain them.

One positive of the NSS is its alignment with the core themes of the administration's national security policy to date. One reason for the consistency in administration thinking on the major problems or challenges confronting US national security is perhaps NSA Sullivan's influence. Here, arguably, there have been four core themes:

- competition with China (and also Russia)
- revitalisation of US alliances
- rebuilding the American economy and social compact
- addressing transnational challenges and threats such as climate change.

In [interviews](#) Sullivan gave during the transition between the Trump and Biden administrations and set-piece [public](#) events at prominent think tanks since, each of these themes has been consistently voiced.

More significantly these themes animated the administration's March 2021 [Interim National Security Guidance](#) (INSG), which identified five dynamics the US had to respond to:

- a fundamental shift in the 'distribution of power across the world'
- the erosion of national cohesion in liberal democracies in the face of 'anti-democratic forces' using 'misinformation, disinformation ... weaponized corruption' and rising inequalities
- the 'testing' of the 'alliances, institutions, agreements, and norms' the United States helped build after 1945
- the 'peril and promise' of emerging technologies
- the transnational challenge of climate change and Covid-19 pandemic.

The INSG [was](#) long on 'invocations of American leadership' and commitments to 'an extremely wide ranging set of foreign policy goals'. These went from 'advancing human rights and confronting autocrats and populists to ensuring that the United States military remains the strongest in the world'. But it was short on strategies to meet such goals. Nonetheless, it [served](#) a political purpose. It clearly signalled the administration's core focus on responding to the public health and economic challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and the 'external and internal threats to American democracy' while offering the 'promise of – or hope for – a grander strategic vision ahead'.

The administration's NSS is the document that should provide this 'grander strategic vision'.

The timing of the administration's NSS was – as we know – delayed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. It prompted a [re-write](#) of the document in order to [account](#) for how the war had shifted international politics and to equalise the relative weighting of Europe and Asia in the administration's attentions. In the interim, the administration's delivery of the then-classified NDS to Congress in March 2022, unsurprisingly, [identified](#) 'detering aggression' and 'strategic attacks against the United States, Allies, and partners' and prioritised 'the PRC [People's Republic of China] challenge in the Indo-Pacific' and the 'Russia challenge' in Europe, as its central objectives.

One of the key questions that has hung over the administration since is how it envisages responding to the *distinct* challenges posed by Russia and China across *distinct* geographic regions and *distinct* domains of conflict and competition. NSA Sullivan, responded to media [questioning](#) in May 2022 on this very issue.

He noted one of the administration's goals in developing the NSS was to achieve 'a certain level of integration and a symbiosis in the strategy we are pursuing in Europe and the strategy we're pursuing in the Indo-Pacific'.

The prevailing sense the NSS provides, however, is outlined in President Biden's [introductory](#) letter to the document. It asserts that as long as the United States provides 'leadership', reinvigorates 'America's unmatched network of alliances and partnerships', invests in American innovation and 'competitiveness', and works to build democratic 'resilience' at home then: 'There is nothing beyond our capacity'. But, solemn invocations like this do not in themselves make a strategy. Rather, prioritisation and trade-offs between not only ends, means and ways but also core security threats, issue areas, and/or regions of geographic focus – are necessary for a realistic strategy.

So despite the NSS itemisation of the challenges facing the US being consistent with those voiced by the administration since it came to office, there remains a significant contradiction in *how* the administration envisages it can respond to them.

This contradiction is shown in the NSS on the question of the challenges posed by China and Russia. The [NSS](#) 'recognizes that the PRC presents America's most consequential geopolitical challenge', as it is 'the only competitor' with both the intent and capacity to 'reshape the international order'. In contrast, it notes that Russia 'poses an immediate and ongoing threat to the regional security order in Europe and it is a source of disruption and instability globally but it lacks the across the spectrum capabilities of the PRC'. This distinction, one would reasonably expect, should translate into a clear prioritisation of China over Russia. But this is not immediately apparent in the specific sections on each actor in the document.

### Integrated deterrence

The strategic concept at the heart of the administration's efforts is 'integrated deterrence'. The NSS [defines](#) the concept as 'the seamless combination of capabilities to convince potential adversaries that the costs of their hostile activities outweigh their benefits'. It entails integration:

- 'across domains, recognizing that our competitors' strategies operate across military (land, air, maritime, cyber, and space) and non-military (economic, technological, and information) domains—and we must too'
- 'across regions, understanding that our competitors combine expansive ambitions with growing capabilities to threaten US interests in key regions and in the homeland'
- 'across the spectrum of conflict to prevent competitors from altering the status quo in ways that harm our vital interests while hovering below the threshold of armed conflict'
- across the US Government to leverage the full array of America's advantages, from diplomacy, intelligence, and economic tools to security assistance and force posture decisions
- 'with allies and partners through investments in interoperability and joint capability development, cooperative posture planning, and coordinated diplomatic and economic approaches'.

Similarly, the administration's NDS [defines](#) 'integrated deterrence' as:

developing and combining our strengths to maximum effect, by working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, other instruments of US national power, and our unmatched network of Alliances and partnerships. Integrated deterrence is enabled by combat-credible forces, backstopped by a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent.

Some Republican [critics](#) have lambasted the concept as simply cover for the administration to justify spending less on defence and passing the buck to allies and partners. According to one Beltway [advocate](#) of the concept, however, it is 'more about being sure we have the option of carrying out a multi-dimensional campaign against Russia or China for scenarios that fall short of all-out war but nonetheless necessitate a



## The Looking Glass

Centre for Defence Research, December 2022

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resolute response'. As such it 'requires the nation to build up stockpiles of key commodities, to diversify supply chains for crucial technologies, and otherwise to prepare for the possibility of a prolonged period of economic disengagement from China or Russia should conflict begin'.

Yet this passes over a central question: is this actually a strategy of deterrence in the first place?

Given previous administration talking points and the treatment of the concept in the NSS and NDS, 'integrated deterrence' appears more concerned with dissuading than deterring adversaries. Deterrence, in its defence and strategic usage, is 'the logic of direct military coercion applied against a hostile, well-armed enemy ... when an adversary already possesses both the political intention and military capability to commit aggression'. The objective 'is to deter the adversary from committing aggression by threatening to respond in ways that will not only rebuff him but also inflict unacceptable losses on him'. Thus, it is the 'practice of discouraging or restraining someone' from 'taking unwanted actions, such as an armed attack'. As such, it is designed 'to stop or prevent' military action from taking place.

Dissuasion is a broader concept that seeks to shape a (potential) adversary's long-term behaviour by 'discouraging that country from embracing policies and building forces that could produce political confrontation, military competition, and war'. In contrast to deterrence, dissuasion 'arises in a different, less confrontational place along the spectrum from peace to war'. It applies to situations where the relationship between two states 'has not yet descended into intense political-military rivalry but has the potential to do so if events take a wrong turn'. Dissuasion acts 'not by threatening direct military retaliation as an ever-present reality, but by making clear that it will thwart and frustrate hostile steps through countervailing measures of its own'. The key to successful dissuasion is reassurance: the dissuader must be able to assure the adversary that if they avoid 'embracing policies and building forces' that could produce conflict, the dissuader will not proceed with countervailing measures. Dissuasion can thus 'be viewed as a kind of 'pre-deterrence'.

This distinction is significant because dissuasion is designed to address less immediate challenges. It leverages instruments such as diplomatic and economic national power to convince a potential adversary to not pursue certain military and strategic actions that may make conflict more likely. Such an approach may be required when 'dealing not with a full-fledged adversary' but with a country with which one may have 'a mixed relationship of cool peace, mutual suspicions, and common incentives to avoid violence'.

The administration's approach to China, as detailed in the NSS, is aligned with dissuasion more than it is with a conventional understanding of deterrence. The NSS states that US strategy towards China is threefold:

- to invest in the foundations of our strength at home – our competitiveness, our innovation, our resilience, our democracy
- to align our efforts with our network of allies and partners, acting with common purpose and in common cause
- to compete responsibly with the PRC to defend our interests and build our vision for the future.

The NSS goes on to note the administration's desire for 'greater strategic stability' in Sino-US relations by reducing the risk of unintended military escalation'. This includes 'more formal arms control efforts' and the broad statement that the administration will 'always be willing to work with the PRC where our interests align' on questions of transnational significance, such as 'climate, pandemic threats, nonproliferation, countering illicit and illegal narcotics, the global food crisis, and macroeconomic issues'.

This stands in contrast to the administration's rhetoric on China. Since the administration came into office, it has been defined by assertions of the immediacy of Beijing's threat to American national security interests. This suggests that either the administration's assessment of the nature of the threat posed by China is exaggerated, or its proposed strategy (i.e. 'integrated deterrence') is misaligned to the threat it is designed to counter.

A further contradiction is how the document conceives the United States will out-compete China. As noted above, a key plank of the administration's approach to China is to emphasise investment in what it calls 'the foundations of our strength at home'. What this amounts to in [practice](#) is not only an 'implicitly anti-neoliberal stance on economic policy', but also one that seeks to undercut China's economy. On the first score (i.e. investing in domestic capacity) the administration's executive branch interventions into the US economy (like its [Supply Chain Resilience](#) plan) are [designed](#) to use 'existing statutory authorities to encourage and expand the domestic advanced manufacturing base, especially for critical supply chains' necessary for the emerging technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. On the second (i.e. undercutting China's economy) the [more](#) recent [CHIPS Act seeks](#) to 'severely complicate efforts by any Chinese companies to develop cutting-edge technologies from semiconductors and supercomputers to surveillance systems and advanced weapons'.

Such direct efforts at (re-)establishing a national industrial policy – while contributing towards the objective of competing with Beijing – also speak to the administration's commitment to develop what it has [termed](#) a 'foreign policy for the middle class'. That is, a foreign policy that takes as its 'North Star' (in NSA Sullivan's [words](#)) 'replenishing our own reservoir of strength here at home'. This, as one observer [notes](#), 'suggests that trends like "friend-shoring" sensitive supply chains and mobilising large government-directed investments in strategically important industries (e.g. semiconductors, artificial intelligence, critical infrastructure) will likely continue'.

One result of this effort to mediate the '[economy-security conundrum](#)' of Sino-US relations is that, as [Susan Shirk](#) argues, the US 'is competing with China by becoming more like China—nationalist, fixated on security, and politicizing the market economy—instead of becoming a better version of itself'.

Such domestically oriented economic interventionism stands in stark contrast to the NSS's [assertions](#) of continued American commitment to, and reliance on, 'fair and open trade' and a liberal 'international economic system' for its prosperity. It remains unclear how the administration will seek to mediate this contradiction. This is especially important in Asia, where, for at least the past decade, many [observers](#) have noted the [shortcomings](#) of US economic and trade policy: especially around the failure to match the Belt and Road Initiative, as well the lack of US participation in the [CPTPP](#). US schemes around investment in the region have also been long on aspiration and short on delivery, including both the Trump administration's 'Blue Dot Network' and Biden's 'Build Back Better World'.

Aside from the lack of persuasive foreign economic leadership, this also raises concerns among US friends and partners that Washington will affect regional stability by further bifurcating it. A major dilemma for the US is that potentially increasing pressure on allies and partners in East and Southeast Asia to undertake economic '[decoupling](#)' from China places them in a zero-sum scenario in which their choices will be ultimately restricted to either alienating their major economic partner (China) or their primary security partner (the US). Unsurprisingly, this is a scenario that [many](#) in the [region](#) would prefer not to encounter.

### Further reading

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## The Looking Glass

Centre for Defence Research, December 2022

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