

**US National Security
Strategy 2017: A Critical
Analysis**

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US NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY 2017: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

“The American people elected me to make America great again. We will promote a balance of power that favors the United States, our allies and our partners. We will never lose sight of our values and their capacity to inspire, uplift and renew. This National Security Strategy puts America First.”¹

–President Donald J. Trump

Introduction

In international relations, *there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies, only permanent interests*. Germany and Japan, who were once enemies of the United States, today are close allies. This pragmatism leads nations to promote national interests by broadening cooperation and friendship even with non-traditional partners². It is due to this reason that national strategies formulated are based on the contemporary global geo-political realities with the aim to further the nation’s core interests and values. The US National Security Strategy (NSS) enumerated at different times, therefore, reflect the geo-political realities of that time and the political compulsions of the ideologies propagated by the Executive.

The National Security Strategy (NSS) is a document prepared by the Executive branch of the US government, which *outlines the key American national security concerns*. The legal foundation of this document originates from the **Gold Water Nichols Act**. Though generic, the implementation aspects are detailed in the supporting documents that are to

be prepared by the different organs of the State. The intent of the NSS is to communicate the Executive's strategic vision to the US Congress, US departments, domestic audience, foreign governments and international community at large.

First NSS by President Ronald Reagan. The current NSS is 17th in the series published since 1987. The first NSS was enunciated in 1987 during President Reagan's tenure. The NSS reflects the varying perceptions of the different Presidents; Ronald Reagan, George HW Bush, Bill Clinton, George W Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump. The first document being a maiden effort remained constrained in describing the means of integrating various tools of statecraft and was inclined towards employing military instruments of power. Additionally, it did not integrate strategy across geographic regions.³

President George HW Bush's 1991 NSS. NSS 1991 was influenced by the events in Iraq and Kuwait and other influencers including relationship between the US and newly formed Russia, strategic and conventional weapons treaties and demise of the Eastern Bloc. The report broadened the meaning of national security, to include economic health and also shifted the focus of military preparedness from direct confrontation with the Soviet Union to regional conflicts. It espoused four pillars of national security; deterrence and defense, forward presence, crisis response and the ability to quickly return to a threat-based system, if necessary.⁴

President Bill Clinton's 1994 NSS. President Clinton's NSS created a structure that incorporated inputs from different departments of the State as also catered for competing and complementary views. Clinton Administration's vision was remarkably "*globalist*" with "*selective engagement*" in areas where US had particular interest.⁵

President George W Bush's NSS. The *2002 NSS advocated Bush Doctrine (foreign policy initiatives followed by George W Bush, including unilateralism and use of preventive war) that originated from the context of moving away from the classic 'Cold War' 'Deterrence Doctrine' to a pro-active approach* that catered to the contemporary geopolitical realities, wherein, it posited that threats could emerge from international terrorist organizations, such as Al Qaeda and / or hostile states like Iraq and Iran.⁶ The 2002 NSS also propagated the concept of proactive employment of military, and to build capacities of nation states that were inclined towards Western-style democracy.⁷

President Barack Obama's NSS 2010. President Obama's Administration premised that American image had suffered significantly due to Bush doctrine's policy of pre-emption and that the U.S. influence and power were undermined by wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Obama Administration, therefore, pursued a foreign policy that was framed on the basis of international cooperation and collaboration.⁸ Hence, the 2010 NSS advocated increased engagement with Russia, China and India. He identified nuclear non-proliferation and climate change as key priorities. In addition, the NSS noted that American security depended on reviving its economy. The 2010 Strategy also made a conscious decision to remove terms such as "Islamic radicalism" and referred to terrorism in generic terms.⁹

President Obama's NSS 2015. His second NSS unveiled in Feb 2015 was generic in content and shrouded in diplomatic largesse whilst identifying and stating emerging threats, strategic challenges and American interests. The NSS enumerated that America would lead with purpose in rules based international order that promoted peace, security and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges.¹⁰ It was also in

2015 that Iran Nuclear Agreement was signed. NSS 2015 was a continuation of NSS 2010 in following a similar strategic concept i.e. collaboration and cooperation.

Global Events of 21st Century. The beginning of the 21st century witnessed the extraordinary rise of China and its assertive defence, economic and trade policies that impinged on America's influence and geo-strategic space. In addition, North Korea continued to enhance its nuclear and missile capability leading to heightened global security concerns. Another area of concern to the US was consolidation of the Russian influence in its neighborhood and its outreach in West Asia. The Trump Administration, therefore, called for a revival of American power, economically and militarily, under a mantra of "*America First*" and tackling of global threats. The approach though different was not poles apart from similar concerns echoed by the previous Administrations.¹¹

President Trump's NSS 2017. The NSS articulated on 18 Dec 2017 is structured under *four key pillars*; *first*, protect the American people, the American way of life, and the homeland; *second*, promote American prosperity; *third*, preserve peace through strength and; *fourth*, advance American influence globally.¹² President Trump's Administration stands out for formulating the NSS quite early in its tenure. Some analysts believe that it is the first serious top-down, government-wide strategy produced since the Pentagon enunciated Defense Policy Guidance in 1992, after the end of the Cold War.¹³ The NSS 2017 also incorporates recommendations made by David Ochmanek (Rand Corporation) in a testimony for a future National Defence Strategy presented on 30 Nov 2017 to the US Senate Committee on Armed Services.¹⁴

Promoting itself as "*America First NSS*", it is a strategy advocated on "*principled realism*"; that is a combination of

perceived American values and principles stirred with concepts of classical realism that are based on centrality of power and the role of state in international relations. It is a departure from NSS 2015's principles of "*internationalism*"¹⁵ that incorporated America's leadership role in rules based international order, which worked through empowered citizens, responsible states and regional and international organizations.¹⁶ NSS 2017 reflects the unique transactional nature of President Trump's world-view and is much more explicit in describing American concerns and interests. It seeks to enhance American power and influence vis-à-vis China and Russia.

After President Trump came to power, there has been an increased focus towards transactional interactions and keeping American interests paramount, even at the cost of long-term strategic ties with key regions. It is for this reason that whilst promoting American values, democratic ideals and human dignity, the NSS looks at propelling American strategic pre-eminence and economic security; hence the focus on principled realism that concentrates on outcomes rather than on idealist philosophies.

When America does not lead, malign actors fill the void to the disadvantage of the United States.¹⁷ –NSS 2017

The current document has centralized President Trump's vision that the world is a better place when American leadership and power is strong. The focus in the document is on sovereign states, their strategic competition and the resultant contest of power in attaining geo-strategic interests. In addition, it leverages allies and partners to achieve balance of power internationally.

It is a vision document projecting Trump's global view of emerging threats and challenges whilst charting a path that is

deeply rooted in the exploitive use of classical and neo-realism ideologies. It therefore gives an impression of promoting centrality of “*American exceptionalism*” with a subtle intent of *calibrated pre-emption and by pursuing threats to their source.*

China and Russia challenge American Power, influence and interests attempting to erode American Security and Prosperity.¹⁸ –NSS 2017

NSS 2017 may give an impression of return to big powers competition, as it explicitly identifies *China and Russia as strategic rivals, Iran and North Korea as rogue states and Jihadist terrorists as global menace.* These threats, however, are in line with the summary assessment carried out by the Department of Defence to assess US military capabilities.¹⁹ At the same time, the NSS visualizes China and Russia not necessarily as enemies to be defeated, which seemed to be the focus in the ‘Cold War’ period, but more as “*strategic competitors*” in a world in transition. A deliberate approach towards making “*America great again*” is the core theme in the NSS with *economics being a key driver.*

“Economic Security is National Security”²⁰. –NSS 2017

The 2017 NSS premises that, President Obama’s policies may actually have resulted in key states and actors filling the vacuum left by the US in different parts of the world. There is thus a focus in the 2017 NSS in creating an international balance of power with the help of allies and partners to mitigate strategic challenges and emerging threats.

The key role played by any NSS is to provide strategic guidance on which different agencies and organs of the state would base their strategic policies. It needs to be pointed out that the NSS that were enunciated earlier were rarely implemented in totality. The different documents, however, provide an

insight into the ruling dispensation's contemporary thinking, worldview and the policies that it is likely to follow in future. It is in this backdrop, that NSS 2017 needs a critical examination in reference to the alignment of intent, contradictions and plausible deliverables.

Aim

The aim of this analysis is to critically examine the tone and tenor of the document and reflect on its wider implications.

Key Take-away of NSS 2017

*A strong America is in the vital interests of not only the American people, but also those around the world.*²¹ –NSS 2017

America First Strategy. The NSS starts by questioning the traditional philosophy on which the past administrations, both Republicans and Democrats, fashioned their strategies, and termed it as “*complacency of thought*”. Their strategies were based on a belief that American power will remain unchallenged and self-sustaining and hence over a period of time, going by this belief, America, gradually surrendered its core advantages in key areas of conventional and nuclear forces, technological and digital edge, economic strength and space and cyber superiority. There was a need therefore felt by the current administration to put “*America First*” to rebuild its strength & power.

*We stood by while countries exploited international organizations we helped to build. They subsidized their industries, forced technology transfers and distorted markets. These actions challenged America's economic security.*²² –NSS 2017

America First Strategy though articulates measures to enhance vetting of immigrants, enforce immigration laws, tighten visa procedures and bolster transportation security, is not an isolationist strategy, but *engages all regions of the world in the perspective of fair and reciprocal trade and based on the rule of law*. The substance may not be very different from the policies being followed practically on ground by the earlier Administrations, but the document highlights American concerns quite candidly.

The *America First Strategy* promotes the employment of the US developmental efforts to support America's national interests and envisages the utilization of American investment and project finance to extend US influence. It intends to strive for outcomes in political and security forums (read UN) that are consistent with US interests and values shared by their allies and partners.

If America provides disproportionate support to the international organizations such as the UN, it expects that a commensurate degree of US influence must prevail in the direction and efforts of the institution. The document, therefore, indicates that America would influence the UN and other international organizations and will pursue bilateral trade agreements on "*fair and reciprocal basis*" and seek equal and reliable access for American exports.

*We are a nation of laws, because the rule of the law is the shield that protects the individual from government corruption and abuse of power, allows families to live without fear and permits markets to thrive.*²³ –NSS 2017

Rule of Law Must Prevail. The central theme throughout the NSS, besides enumerating various American concerns and interests, is upholding the rule of law internationally. The document stresses that it is vital to the US that international

institutions uphold the rules that help keep land, sea, outer space and digital domains open and free. This is primarily due to the belligerent actions taken by China in South China Sea and in the Indo-Pacific region, defying international conventions and norms. A case in point is China's utter disregard of a verdict given by the International Tribunal in a dispute with Philippines in South China Sea.

The document also proposes to make WTO a more effective forum to adjudicate unfair trade practices and articulates that the US would deepen relationships with new partners that share respect for sovereignty, fair and reciprocal trade and rule of law. It also promotes freedom of seas and peaceful resolution of territorial and maritime disputes in accordance with international law.

Together with our allies, partners and aspiring partners, the United States will pursue cooperation with reciprocity. Cooperation means sharing responsibilities and burdens.²⁴
–NSS 2017

Sharing of Burden by Allies and Partners. A distinctive feature of this document is the emphasis it puts on encouraging the allies and partners to contribute meaningfully and share the burden towards common economic and security challenges. Whether it is the Indo-Pacific region, the Middle East or the African continent, focus is on forging efforts of different nations towards resolving different challenges. The document highlights that NATO is stronger when all members assume greater responsibility and pay their fair share to protect mutual interests, sovereignty and values and encourages European allies to increase defense spending to 2% of GDP by 2024. Japan, meanwhile, has significantly increased its defense budget to \$46 bn.

It mentions the role of its strategic allies Japan, South Korea, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Philippines and Thailand and seeks to increase quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia and India, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, the document highlights that the American emphasis would be to work with different allies and partners so as to bring about resolution of complex economic-security challenges along with denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

*The competitions and rivalries facing the United States are intertwined; long-term challenges that demand sustained national attention and commitment.*²⁵ –NSS 2017

Key Threats to American Strategic Interests

*The United States faces an extraordinarily dangerous world, filled with a wide range of threats that have intensified in recent years.*²⁶ –NSS 2017

Unlike the 2015 and 2010 NSS, the current document is extremely candid in stating America's three sets of key strategic challenges and highlights that contemporary threats have emerged; *first* from revisionist powers of China and Russia, terming these countries as rival powers; *second* from rogue states, Iran and North Korea and; *third* from transnational threat organizations, particularly Jihadists. It visualizes that China is displacing US as a super power, undermining its strategic interests and developing military capabilities to deny American access in crisis to key regions and contests their ability to operate freely in critical commercial zones during peacetime.

*After being dismissed as a phenomenon of earlier century, great power competition returned. China and Russia began to reassert their influence regionally and globally. They are contesting our geo-political advantages and trying to change the international order in their favor.*²⁷ –NSS 2017

Russia, the document appreciates, is intending to restore its great power status and establishes spheres of influence near its borders. Iranian regime is identified as sponsoring terrorism in the world, while having the potential to resume nuclear weapons program and North Korea is seen as being ruled by ruthless dictatorship without regard for human dignity. The NSS also articulates that a number of contemporary actors have become skilled in operating in the “*gray zone*” where their actions though being hostile, do not cross the threshold of military conflict and are cloaked in deniability.

China as Strategic Rival to American Influence and Power.

The key takeaway of NSS 2017 is the repeated reference to China throughout the document. China’s growing influence in different parts of the world and the deep imprint it has created on the US psyche, as a strategic and hegemonic challenger, is perceived as displacing US interests and influence globally. The document clearly highlights China’s successful leverage of advanced technologies, which may have been acquired through cyber and economic theft, not only to strengthen their military, but also to maintain control over their people.

The document also indicates that China is building a formidable military force. Part of this military modernization and economic expansion could be due to China’s access to the US innovation economy. China’s modernization campaign is appreciated as being designed to limit US access to the Indo-Pacific region and provide China a freer hand there. America, therefore, needed to work with its partners to contest China’s unfair trade and economic practices and restrict its acquisition of sensitive technologies.

This in fact is the central theme of the document, as to how to contain and balance China’s growing geo-strategic influence and power? This power is further compounded with strong

Chinese leadership and also in implementing a grand strategy over a long period of time.

China's Belligerent Stance in South and East China Sea. Since 2010, China has been taking belligerent stance in South China Sea and in the Indo-Pacific region, even at the cost of going against the international system and norms. This it has done in the case of the International Tribunal decision that concluded that there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to the resources in the sea areas falling within the '*nine-dash line*' and that it could, without delimiting a boundary, declare that certain sea areas are within EEZ of Philippines, because they do not overlap any possible Chinese entitlement.²⁸

Russian Challenge. The NSS believes that Russia is aiming to weaken American influence and divide them from their allies and partners. Furthermore, Russia views NATO and EU as threats and its nuclear systems remain the most significant existential threat to the US. In addition, Russia is using subversive measures to weaken the credibility of America's commitment to Europe as well as European institutions and governments. It also espouses that Russia interferes in the domestic political affairs of other countries and uses cyber operations to influence public opinion. Its ambitions are therefore creating an unstable Eurasian frontier. There is an inherent dichotomy and contradiction here.

On one hand, the NSS calls Russia a revisionist power, on the other hand, the US is cooperating with Russia on providing intelligence inputs, especially with regard to terror attacks. A recent American input prevented an attack on a cathedral located at St. Petersburg. In fact, President Putin called President Donald Trump on 17 Dec 2017 and thanked him for the same.²⁹ On the flip side, a DIA report has indicated that Kremlin is convinced that United States is laying the

groundwork for regime change in Russia; their conviction was further reinforced by the events in Ukraine.³⁰ Trump Administration's decision to supply military hardware to Ukraine is bound to touch Russia's raw nerves and exacerbate tensions.

The Iranian regime sponsors terrorism around the world.³¹
–NSS 2017

Strong Iranian Distrust. The NSS advocates that Iran is the hub of promoting terrorism and is developing more capable ballistic missiles whilst taking advantage of instabilities to expand its influence through partners, weapons proliferation and funding. The document articulates that US would work with allies to deny Iranian regime all paths to a nuclear weapon and neutralize its malign influence.

There seems to be a strong personal distrust of the US President towards Iran, as was evident in Oct 2017, when he refused to certify that Iran was complying with the provisions of 2015 nuclear agreement, despite Iran actually doing so. The moot point is, when one calls an entity enemy and professes action against that country, then, it is but natural that the prescribed country would behave like an enemy and take appropriate actions to protect itself.

If Iran is treated like a pariah state, then it would gravitate strongly towards Russia and China and may even develop a nuclear weapon to defend itself. This would create more hostility towards America in West Asia, which would be detrimental to their long-term interests i.e. containing China. It may be more prudent to constructively engage Iran in a geo-strategic economic partnership to pursue American interests in West Asia and Eurasia. However, recent protests in Iran against the reformist regime are adding new complexity to an already charged geopolitical environment.

*North Korea is ruled as a ruthless dictatorship without regard for human dignity*³². –NSS 2017

North Korean Threat. The NSS stresses that North Korea's pursuit of cyber, nuclear and ballistic missile programs poses a global threat and therefore it requires an international response to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. To make this happen, the involvement of China and Russia is considered necessary to moderate the behavior of North Korea and prevent a major crisis from occurring that is fraught with nuclear consequences. The US has cajoled the UN Security Council to unanimously approve new tough sanctions against North Korea and has compelled nations to sharply reduce their sales of oil to them and return North Korean expatriate workers. Economic sanctions are beginning to tell on North Korea, compelling it to resort to other illegal means to import oil and other essentials.

In the meanwhile, the US has shown willingness to open dialogue with the North Korean regime either directly or through China and Russia. In view of the security concerns of Japan and South Korea, the rhetoric of hard option is somewhat toned down. However, the level and scale of joint military exercises has seen an upward trend besides deployment of THAAD, disregarding China's proposal of "Suspension for Suspension" (cease joint military drills and proliferation of nuclear tests). It is therefore uncertain how the scenario in the Korean Peninsula will pan out? But to defuse tension in the Korean Peninsula, calling Russia and China, as rivals may not help.

In addition, for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, it is imperative that North Korea must have faith in the international agreements signed by the US and other signatories. The Trump Administration's stand on certification of nuclear deal with Iran and the US treatment meted out to Gaddafi, after he abandoned the nuclear program, causes consternation in

the mind of North Korean regime whether to forgo nuclear weapons. How Trump Administration deals with its North Korean dilemma, and whether it elicits support from Russia and China or not merits a keen watch.

Jihadist a Global Menace. One of the key threats identified by the NSS is from Jihadist groups such as the ISIS and Al Qaeda and others that are linked by a common radical Islamist ideology. Though such groups have been defeated in Iraq and Syria, they continue to wage ideological information campaigns to legitimize their narrative of hate and by using sophisticated communication tools attract recruits and organize attacks against America, its interests and its allies. Yet, there is a contradiction here too, *it does not name LeT, JeM or other such terror groups and does not clearly specify the countries that are known to be the source of funding and radical ideology.*

The NSS also uses terms like Jihadist, Sharia and Islamist a number of times in the document in relation to global terrorism. These terms though highlight the problem that the world is facing, could still be related with Islam as a religion being targeted by the US and may not seem to be appropriate diplomatic language. It, however, is in line with the US President's characteristic style of expressing his views and opinions. At the same time, terrorism is a global menace and needs to be tackled in an integrated manner by all the nations. This is where the NSS rightly articulates integrating all elements including allies to tackle this menace.

*To prevail, we must integrate all elements of America's national power... Our allies and partners must contribute their capabilities, and demonstrate the will to confront shared threats (in relation to tackling terror menace)³³.
–NSS 2017*

The document also highlights that Israel is not the root-cause of the region's problems and blames the instability to have originated from Iran and Jihadist organizations. This philosophy, however, has come to be shrouded in controversy, with the decision of shifting the US embassy to Jerusalem. A large numbers of countries, including the US allies, have not supported the US decision with the result the policy suffered 128 to 9 votes defeat in the UN General Assembly. *The vote on Jerusalem galvanized the unity of Islamic nations and brought to fore differences between the US and its allies.*

Primary Focus on Indo-Pacific Region

China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state driven economic model and reorder the region in its favor³⁴.

The NSS articulates the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region primarily due to belligerent display of Chinese hegemony intentions and also due to the expanding instability in the Korean peninsula. Unlike earlier NSS, it places the region ahead of the Middle East in importance and indicates that *geo-political competition between free and repressive visions of the world order is taking place here*. For the first time, the Indo-Pacific region has been *geographically defined as extending from the west coast of India to the western shores of the US*.

The document highlights that *China was using economic inducements and penalties, influence operations and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda*, thereby implying that China was increasingly using economic and diplomatic leverages to modify the behavior of the nations. The NSS also mentions that efforts to build and militarize outposts in the South China Sea endangered free flow of trade, threatened sovereignty of nations and undermined regional stability.

President Trump's continued reference to this region as "*Indo-Pacific region*" in place of "Asia-Pacific region" is also a departure from NSS 2015. It clearly advocates his primacy of promoting India as a key regional player in stabilizing the Indo-Pacific region and his aim towards building strategic partnership with India to counter balance a belligerent China. One connotation of using Indo-Pacific term is building cooperative economic-security mechanisms as well as carrying out increased integration in the Indo-Pacific region with various existing and potential partners and allies of the US. The emphasis in the NSS is also on upholding rule-based order in this region and in following the concept of freedom of seas. There is an increased US emphasis to build allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific so as to present an alternative vision to a China dominated region.

The NSS identifies the extent of the boundaries of the region's geo-political area and by projecting *India as a vital defence and strategic partner in this region, diminishes China's geographic centrality, its "Middle Kingdom" approach and its apparent geo-strategic space*. At the same time, the US capacity to resolutely act against China is inhibited by the significant economic interdependence between the two countries and the need for China's involvement in resolving issues³⁵, including North Korea. This is another key dichotomy and an inherent contradiction within.

Unlike 2015 NSS, the 2017 document discusses Taiwan and enumerates that US would maintain strong ties with Taiwan in accordance with "One China Policy" and yet fulfill commitments made under "Taiwan Relations Act" to provide for Taiwan's legitimate defense needs and to deter coercion. Taiwan is the darkest redline in China's security calculus and China's threshold for tolerance on Taiwan is extremely low. How China responds to the evolving scenario and whether US succeeds in building an international consensus to deter China

from taking over Taiwan would determine whether unification of China and Taiwan takes place.

NSS 2017 mentions the need to *re-energize alliance with Philippines and Thailand and the need to strengthen partnerships with other ASEAN nations to help become cooperative maritime partners in the Indo-Pacific*. However, China has been able to drive a wedge in the ASEAN and wean away some of the 10 member states such as Cambodia to its orbit. Preserving the sanctity of ASEAN, as a regional bloc will remain a key US challenge.

American South Asian Narrative

*With over a quarter of world's population, a fifth of all US designated terrorist groups, several fast growing economies, and two nuclear armed states, South and Central Asia present some of the most complicated security challenges and opportunities*³⁶. –NSS 2017

India as a Strategic Partner. The document highlights the US intention to expand defence and security cooperation with India, which it considers as a “*major defence partner*” and to support India’s growing relationship throughout the region. In addition, NSS intends to deepen America’s strategic partnership with India and support India’s leadership role in the Indian Ocean security and throughout the broader region. This also indicates a policy departure in American diplomacy in hyphenating India and Pakistan together and the contemporary US vision, which is based more on pragmatism and shared interests.

Help South Asian Nations. The NSS enumerates that the *US would help South Asian nations to maintain their sovereignty as China increases its influence in the region*. This could be in reference to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as well as to the different South Asian nations falling into debt

trap with China. Economic integration of Central and South Asia is also recommended to promote prosperity and economic linkages that bolster connectivity and regional trade. The NSS encourages India to increase its economic assistance in the region.

Key Challenges in South Asia. The key challenges facing the US in South Asia are to curb cross border terrorism by Pakistan and leave behind a stable Afghanistan. The 2017 NSS is in line with President Trump's South Asia strategy unveiled in Aug 2017, which is based on aggressively engaging Pakistan, Afghanistan and India so as to create conditions of stability in the South Asian region. The South Asia strategy aims at defeating Taliban and terror elements at their source, before forcing them to reconcile with the Afghan Government. President Trump's approach incorporates India to be a key partner in this region and encourages India to support Afghanistan's political and economic modernization.

***The United States continues to face threats from transnational terrorists and militants operating from within Pakistan*³⁷.
–NSS 2017**

Pakistan Needs to Do More. As regards Pakistan is concerned, the document urges Pakistan to intensify its counter terrorism efforts as it indicates that *no partnership could survive when a partner supports militants who target the other partner's service members and officials*. The document also encourages Pakistan to demonstrate its responsible stewardship of nuclear assets and take decisive action against militants and terrorist groups operating from their soil. There is, however, a carrot too that the US would build trade and investment ties with Pakistan, if regional security improves and if Pakistan assists in achieving counter terrorism goals.

Given the vexed nature of US relations with Iran and Russia, the US / NATO troops continue to rely heavily on using Pakistani territory for logistics sustainment in Afghanistan. In addition, Pakistan is required to play a key role in bringing Haqqani network to the negotiation table or in neutralizing it. Pakistan also continues to enjoy the status of Most Favored Non-NATO Ally (MFNA) and is a key member of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG). Simultaneously, US has increasingly been vocal in highlighting Pakistan's bluff. In a New Year tweet, President Trump wrote that "The US has given Pakistan more than \$33 billion in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies and deceit, thinking our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to terrorists; we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!" Such dichotomy in US-Pakistan relations is not helping to resolve the Afghanistan issue. It is imperative that US takes visible action against Pakistan and recent announcement of withholding \$255m assistance is a step in the right direction. Otherwise, US would have to continue increasing troops in Afghanistan.

*We will bolster the fighting strength of the Afghan Security forces to convince Taliban that they cannot win in the battlefield and to set conditions for diplomatic efforts to achieve enduring peace*³⁸. –NSS 2017

Africa, Central American States, and Western Hemisphere

*China is expanding its economic and military presence in Africa, becoming Africa's largest trading partner today and seeking to pull the Western Hemisphere region into its orbit through state led investments and loans*³⁹. –NSS 2017

The document identifies that many African states have become battlegrounds for violent extremism and Jihadist terrorists. In addition, prevalence of corruption and weak governments

undermine the political benefits that could accrue due to the availability of extensive economic opportunities here. Meanwhile, China is expanding its geo-economic presence in Africa, Central American states and generally in the Western Hemisphere and is the largest trading partner in Africa today.

The NSS indicates that the *Chinese practices include corrupting elites, dominating extractive industries and locking countries into opaque debts*. NSS proposes to work with reform oriented governments to establish conditions to transform them into trading partners and improve information sharing to target corrupt leaders as well as disrupt illicit trafficking. This, however, seems to be a difficult task as nothing specific is mentioned as to how they would actually implement this vision on ground and it would take significant time and effort to implement such a vision and reap its benefits.

Emphasis on Cyber Security and Cyber Space Management

Cyber attacks offer adversaries low cost and deniable opportunities to seriously damage or disrupt critical infrastructure⁴⁰. –NSS 2017

There is significant emphasis on cyber space and cyber security throughout the NSS. The document expresses concern on the increased opportunities available with the state and non-state actors currently to wage campaigns against American political, economic and security interests without crossing the border. These actors could disrupt the American critical infrastructure by cyber, physical and electro-magnetic attacks. The NSS proposes to build capabilities to impose swift and costly consequences on foreign governments, criminals and other actors who undertake cyber attacks as well as improve cyber tools to protect the integrity of data and information. A precise and integrated plan of action, however, would still need

to be evolved to coordinate the activities of different agencies to practically implement this vision on ground.

Diplomacy and Statecraft: NSS 2017

Forward Military and Diplomatic Presence. To counter the explicitly articulated strategic challenges to the US sovereignty and interests, the document proposes that the US would maintain a forward diplomatic and a forward military presence capable of determining and if necessary defeating any adversary. The focus would be to *enable forward deployed fieldwork including partnering with military colleagues, allies and partners in conflict-affected areas.*

The strategy intends to retain American supremacy by focusing on *significantly developing its military capability to retain dominance in all spectrums and domains, demand reciprocity in trading practices and insist on alliances to share their burden of responsibility whilst tackling common threats.* There is an attempt here to outsource its regional challenges and threats to allies, coalitions and partners both to reduce its financial commitment as well as to reduce US casualties and losses.

At the same time, the document reveals that US intends to lead coalitions that advance shared interests, galvanize allies for action and marshal the resources of likeminded nations and organizations to address shared problems. Furthermore, the US intention is to cooperate with Japan and South Korea on missile defence by following a strategy of Area Defence in the Korean Peninsula.

Economic Disconnect. There is a disconnect in the NSS that whilst enumerating increase in cooperative economic partnerships, Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP) policies that were enumerated in 2015 NSS have not been given importance in

NSS 2017, thereby indicating unwillingness to meaningfully take forward President Obama's initiatives whether economic or those that relate to nuclear agreements.

Reactions by Affected Nations: From Outrage to Cooperation

NSS 2017 has drawn sharp reactions from China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan. On the other hand, India and some western analysts have welcomed the NSS.

Chinese Condemnation. China's foreign ministry spokesperson made an extremely lengthy response and indicated strongly that it was futile for any country or report to distort facts or hurl malicious slander⁴¹. The spokesperson urged United States to stop deliberately distorting China's strategic intentions, and abandon outdated concepts such as Cold War mentality and zero-sum game⁴². She also defended China's "*Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*," claiming that history and reality has shown that it is a successful course that suits China's national conditions and can enable the Chinese to live a happy life whilst achieving national prosperity.⁴³ Further, that China would not let its national interests be jeopardized.

*NSS 2017 highlights the rivalry between Beijing and Washington, which might be due to changes in the balance of power. It also indicates that White House has now adopted a different view towards US-China relations. The Trump Administration may input more resources to rival and pressure China, in the hope that Beijing will seek cooperation on Washington's terms. It show-cases Washington's indisputable insistence on its global hegemony.*⁴⁴ –Global Times

The Chinese embassy in Washington too blamed the US government and indicated that attempts to put one country's national interests above others' and international community's

interests, only reflected self-centeredness that would lead to self-isolation⁴⁵. Chinese media strongly attacked the Trump Administration and accused America of being blinded with arrogance and false beliefs⁴⁶. Yet, there were some sane voices too, which indicated that China and United States could work together to uphold world peace and stability and urged America to consider China as a partner.

Russian Skepticism. Russia also criticized America's NSS 2017. The Russian Chief Spokesperson indicated that President Trump's emphasis on "*strategic competition*" and developing a dominant US military, revealed an "*imperialist nature*" in the US administration's approach to world affairs⁴⁷. He also highlighted that the US was unwilling to give up the idea of a unipolar world, and there was an insistent unwillingness and disregard for a multipolar world⁴⁸. The Russian President termed the NSS aggressive and revealed that NATO was engaged in major military buildup near Russia's borders. Russia, however, welcomed American willingness to cooperate in areas of mutual interest.

Iranian Rejoinder. Iran on its part indicated that the NSS was "devoid of any wisdom and realism" and advised that the real task for US lay ahead in sorting out its "self-made problems, mishaps and challenges, as the realities of the past one year alone testified⁴⁹". This was an apparent remark on the American volte-face on different issues including nuclear agreement.

Pakistan's Outrage. NSS 2017 has been vehemently criticized in Pakistan. Their officials have refuted the allegation that trans-national terrorists and militants operated from Pakistani soil. Their spokesman exhorted that Pakistan could not work under pressure and that US should not dictate terms, but should work under a cooperative mechanism⁵⁰. His statement also indicated that they rejected unfounded accusations that

belie facts on ground and trivialize Pakistan's efforts of fighting terrorism and overlook their unmatched sacrifices to promote peace and stability in the region⁵¹.

As regards nuclear arsenal of Pakistan is concerned, though Pakistan has an offensive "First Use" nuclear doctrine and has also indicated the use of "Tactical Nuclear Weapons", Pakistani officials stated that it has put in place, a highly efficient, robust and centralized command and control mechanism to secure its nuclear assets. At the same time, Pakistani nuclear weapons landing in Jihadist hands cannot be ruled out as the Pakistani fundamentalist elements are mainstreaming themselves in Pakistan politics.

*Trump's new National Security Strategy isolationist, not cooperative, but it is better than unchecked interventionism.*⁵²

Ambivalent Response in the Western Media. The response to NSS 2017 in western media has been mixed. These range from Guardian's response of "It is not a strategy, nor will it safeguard America's national security, it is an attempt to patch together a world view and a corresponding plan of action.... It creates a veneer of credibility for this erratic and dangerous administration⁵³" to Foreign Policy's statement that "It appropriately reflects the heightened challenge to the United States posed by China's singular rise, Russian Interventionism, the pretention of Rogue States, Iran and North Korea, and global terrorism⁵⁴".

India Welcomes US NSS 2017. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs has welcomed NSS 2017 and in a statement by their spokesperson have appreciated the strategic importance given by the NSS to India-US relationship and indicated that a closer partnership between the two responsible democracies contributes to peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific

region as well as is important for economic progress of the two nations.⁵⁵ The recognition of India as a global player has been taken well by the Indian intellectual community and media.

Implications for India

Trump's NSS 2017 and South Asia strategy pronounced in Aug 2017 alluded to India as a leading power and a strategic US partner. It is pertinent to add that India's foreign policy is strongly anchored in "Neighborhood First" policy, followed by multi vector engagement with major partners. India has adopted a balanced approach towards its politico-diplomatic forays; be it US-India global strategic partnership, privileged strategic partnership with Russia or being a member of competing security and economic architectures (such as ASEAN, BRIC, SCO, AIIB and RCEP). Prime Minister Modi's motto of "Chalein Saath Saath, Sanjha Prayas, Sab Ka Vikas", (Forward together we go with shared efforts for progress of all), illustrates India's strategic direction. Whilst the evolving geopolitical milieu opens a window of opportunity for India, at the same time, it poses a decision dilemma of balancing between the contesting players and leverage India's position to build strategic trust in the region. Notwithstanding the above, one of the major formidable challenges India faces is how to balance Pak-China nexus and emerge as a pre-eminent power in the Indian Ocean region. The NSS offers hosts of opportunities and at the same time poses some challenges for India.

Opportunities

Balancing China. Balancing an assertive China is the 'Sine Qua Non' of Indo-US strategic partnership. China's strategic forays in the Indo-Pacific region in terms of creating alternative economic structures and its quest for promoting alternate security architecture sans the US are inimical to the

US strategic interests. China follows a policy of “*Creeping Expansion*”. It has created ‘New Facts’ within the “Nine Dash Line” by encroaching upon uninhabited islands, reefs, atolls or undefended or lightly defended and less frequently patrolled areas. Its decision to enforce ADIZ in the East China Sea has heightened the risks of conflict in the Western Pacific. China also leverages North Korea card to keep the US security alliance with South Korea and Japan on the horns of dilemma.

China’s strategic forays under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of creating Maritime Silk Road as well as creation of CPEC and possible CMEC (China-Myanmar Economic Corridor) and investing heavily in the critical infrastructure of South Asian states are shrinking India’s geo-strategic space in the region. China’s bases in Kyakhphu, Gwadar, Hambantotoa, Colombo, Djibouti are the harbingers of larger maritime ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region. The inroads in South Asia are not just creating concerns of “*strategic encirclement*” and real execution of “*string of pearls strategy*”, but are also causing the smaller nations to remain in debt to China for extended period of time. There is a palpable risk of debit-ridden countries compromising their sovereignty and making strategic choices, which are in congruence with China’s long-term strategic interests at the cost of US and India’s geo-strategic interests.

The Chinese actions do not behave of a neo-liberalist philosophy, but give a sense of an evolving imperial power that is gradually working towards significantly enhancing its Comprehensive National Power to achieve global domination and once again become the centre of the world, the “*Middle Kingdom*”. It is in the larger US and Indian interest to craft an enduring partnership in the Indo-Pacific region along with other key nations. The NSS 2017, however, lacks in articulation of guidelines for the Indo-Pacific “Push Back Strategy”.

That notwithstanding, there is also a need to assiduously build on the well articulated concepts of QUAD and alternate economic corridors such as Asia-Africa Economic Corridor and Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor. To counter balance 'One Belt One Road Initiative', in Southeast Asia, ASEAN-India Connectivity Summit (AICS) suggested to accelerate existing connectivity prospects, identify issues of concern, evolve suitable policy recommendations and develop strategies to enhance economic, industrial and trade relations. Its focus areas are infrastructure, roadways, shipping, digital, finance, energy, and aviation.⁵⁶ This initiative needs to be progressed rapidly as part of India's Act East Policy.

Another area of deliberation should be how to expand the concept of QUAD to incorporate other strategic partners and make it as a mechanism of 'Net Security Provider' in a collaborative framework. Militarily, going beyond the ambit of multilateral military exercises, there is a case for the US to rebalance in the Indian Ocean Region and for India to revamp its maritime strategy to achieve a favorable strategic balance vis-à-vis China. The US must recognize that enhanced FDI and high tech injection will boost India's Comprehensive National Power and transform India as a natural balancer and a strategic vector in the Indian Ocean Region.

Targeting Jihadists and Pressure on Pakistan. The other key area of convergence includes targeting of Jihadists. Uniting countries and leading coalitions to target them at source may help India in the long run, as it has suffered from the scourge of terrorism for the last few decades. In addition, the US pressure on Pakistan to do more and not to provide safe havens to the terror elements can bring in increased stability in South Asia.

It would also help India to reduce committing a large portion of its resources in countering proxy war and cross border

terrorism and focus towards undertaking development activities in the affected regions. America's engagement in Afghanistan and encouraging India to partner it in bringing economic development there as well as to bring stability in the region, augurs well for achieving India's strategic interests. However, India will need to be mindful of growing Pakistan-China-Iran-Russia strategic alignment on Afghanistan. China has embarked upon a major initiative of brokering peace between Pakistan and Afghanistan under a trilateral mechanism. China is wooing Kabul by offer to extend CPEC to Afghanistan.

There is a need not only to strengthen Indo-US-Afghanistan Security Dialogue, but India should also deftly use the aegis of SCO to garner support from other member countries, including Russia, to combat Jihadi terrorism. In fact, India has the potential of nurturing US-Russia cooperation on the issue of combating Jihadi terrorism in the region.

India-US Cooperation in Central Asia. It is in long-term strategic interest of the US to take forward '*Connect Central Asia-South Asia Strategy*', which implies construction of a multi-modal energy and trade corridors between the two regions. This policy is in sync with India's well-articulated '*Connect Central Asia*' policy announced in 2012.⁵⁷ However, for the policy to be translated into action in the light of an intransigent Pakistan, an unstable Afghanistan and an estranged Iran, a roadmap needs to be evolved. Central to the success of Central Asia cooperation would be synchronization of peace building efforts in Afghanistan and respecting India's core interest of stable relations with Iran. Chahbahr-Zaranj-Delaram Axis and International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC) project are critical for India's outreach to Central Asia. India has recently signed 'Ashgabat Agreement' thus making it a key stakeholder in trade with Central Asia and the Persian

Gulf.⁵⁸ There is a need to build strategic trust between US, Iran and Russia. In the long term, the three countries together with India and Central Asian States could cooperate to balance the overwhelming Chinese influence. More significantly, Chabahar Axis will provide Afghanistan and Central Asian States a viable access to the Arabian Sea, and to India and US an access to the region, bypassing Pakistan.

Cooperation in the Gray Zone. Trump Administration deserves credit for articulating how rogue states and their proxies use gray zone to damage interests of the US, its allies and its partners by using asymmetric means such as terrorism, narco-terrorism, nuclear terrorism, cyber terrorism, terror funding and use of disruptive technologies. We have seen that even otherwise technologically deprived states and Jihadists have used these means to unleash espionage, subversion and sabotage. India and the US should closely cooperate in developing a “*Gray Zone Strategy*” and hone skills and capacities to deter and defeat rogue players who operate in this zone.

India is home to the second-highest number of Internet users in the world. The Indian government also seeks to expand India’s digital access through Digital India initiative⁵⁹. Cyber security is an area where both nations need to develop a close cooperative partnership. In this regard, The US and India signed a MoU on July 19, 2011 to promote closer cooperation and timely exchange of information between the respective governments. In Jan 2017, the US and India have also signed a MoU between the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) and the Department of Homeland Security on cooperation in the field of cyber-security⁶⁰. The progress, however, has been extremely slow. An implementation mechanism needs to be formed that holds regular meetings on cyber security to take the initiative forward.

Another area of concern is the proliferation of fissile material and nuclear technology. China-Pakistan-North Korea proliferation triangle is the key driver of nuclear brinkmanship and is fraught with the risks of nuclear terrorism. A viable counter proliferation collaboration effort must be energized.

Challenges

Relations with Russia. The NSS 2017 considers Russia as a strategic rival. It is here that India needs to follow a multi-vector foreign policy that caters to our national interests and balances our strategic relationship with US with that of Russia and our other strategic partners. To build strategic partnership with the US, India cannot construct it at the cost of time-tested privileged partnership with Moscow. Russia will continue to be a major defense supplier and strategic partner in our nuclear program. India's forays into Eurasia and contribution at the SCO would need Russian support.

Relations with Iran .The NSS considers Iran as a proponent of global terrorism with ambitions of developing nuclear power. Iran is vital partner for India to operationalize Chabahar port, develop Zaranj-Delaram and INSTC axes and crucial energy imports. Adversarial relations between US and Iran have the potential to dent India-Iran strategic cooperation and provide increased geo-strategic space to China and Pakistan to intercede there. It is pertinent to mention here that a trilateral meeting between Afghanistan, China and Pakistan has taken place in Dec 2017 and an agreement was reached to extend CPEC to Afghanistan. Due to the slow pace in development of Chabahar Port, primarily due to US-Iran hostile relationship, China would have an opportunity to edge India out of this region. India can ill afford to see its strategic interest being held hostage to US-Iran relations. India needs to painstakingly work with the US to overcome its Iran obsession to achieve larger

strategic gains for achieving stability in West Asia and Central Asia.

Way Ahead for India

Articulation of India's NSS. *The need for India to have a comprehensive NSS needs no emphasis. To begin with the NSS could be a classified document with limited circulation to key stake holders.* However, its relevance and efficacy to synergize and steer different instruments of national power to achieve national objectives is imperative. There is also a need to clearly articulate India's core national interests to the US and other strategic partners. The strategic alignment of core interests within partners is paramount to create an enduring strategic partnership.

Jointness. The NSS 2017 highlights development of the US Joint Force capability and integrated operations being undertaken to achieve a joint purpose. India's major competitor, China too has undertaken major reforms by creating integrated theatre commands and restructured CMC for effective oversight and civil-military synergy. China's doctrinal precepts (Active Defence under Conditions of Informationalisation), concept of War Zone Campaign and conduct of joint military exercises have fostered integration, synergy in thought, practice and prosecution of military campaigns. India, on the other hand, is lacking in these endeavours. Reforms in higher defence organization and defence planning process must be taken with a missionary zeal to enhance our deterrence and war winning capabilities. Jointness in our military will enable armed forces to gain from interoperability under QUAD or any other collaborative dispensation.

Increase in Defence Budget. For India to play its role effectively in the Indo-Pacific region, necessary military capabilities need to be built. A leaf could be taken by India from NSS 2017.

India's defence budget of Rs. 2.74 lakh crores, which is just 1.56% of GDP, needs to be increased to 2% of GDP by 2020; if China and Pakistan's collusive threat is to be contained effectively.

Conclusion

The NSS 2017 based on "*America First*" policy with the principled realist intent of making America great again, covers different engagement principles with different regions of the world. The NSS clearly articulates the strategic concerns of the US and provides a vision statement to address the same. At the same time, there seems to be less emphasis on promoting democracy and in bringing about regime changes or focusing on human rights issues⁶¹. The 2017 NSS is quite candid in explicitly identifying threats, concerns and challenges to America's strategic interests that invoke strong reaction in the targeted countries. Yet, the context and substance from the earlier policies that have been practically followed on ground, not necessarily enunciated in NSS, may not have been very different. At the same time, the document displays a steady convergence of American interests with those of India.⁶² The elements of NSS 2017 would therefore need to be relevant beyond three years of current Trump Administration, if Trump is not re-elected..

The NSS 2017 categorizes some countries as rivals and strategic competitors and wants other countries to cooperate with the US under its terms of reference that promotes the US model of balance of power. However, if US genuinely intends to promote peace in Eurasia, Af-Pak region, West Asia and the Korean Peninsula, it would need to elicit support of China, Russia and Iran. The NSS is somewhat ambiguous in addressing this dilemma. For any strategic partnership to endure, Trump Administration will have to accommodate core interests of allies and partners through a concerted dialogue.

The building of such partnerships and alliances has been mired by the stance taken by the US Administration on a few key issues such as 'Paris Agreement' on 'Climate Change', Jerusalem Vote at the UN, WTO issues, UN funding and Iran nuclear deal; these divergences ought to be ironed out in the interest of enduring partnership.

It is noteworthy that since assuming power, President Xi Jinping has envisioned an appealing 'China Dream', enunciated sound policies and programs and displayed resolute leadership to implement the same. Consolidation of power and Post 19th Party Congress implementation of concrete policies, the Chinese President has been able to enhance his image, both within the Party and in the international arena. Belt and Road Initiative, despite some misgivings is increasing China's geo-strategic influence and economic clout. Being an autocratic regime, with strong leadership, China is able to work towards implementing its strategy effectively over a long period of time. In contrast, Trump Administration, amid the reshuffle in his team and dissonance on a few policy matters with his allies, has had limited tangible success to display his capacity to implement the enunciated strategy, especially when America is seen to back out from International agreements that could significantly improve relations between countries.

India, on its part, needs to navigate through an evolving complex strategic geo-political milieu with deftness to balance Pak-China strategic nexus and maximize our options to engage with other players, irrespective of their inter-se relationship. It is, therefore, time that India formulates a comprehensive NSS of its own to steer its strategic destiny and establish itself as a leading power in the 21st century.

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