



A National Security Strategy for the NEXT ADMINISTRATION

Amitai Etzioni

A JULY 2008 REPORT laying out a “Framework for a 21st Century National Security Strategy,” composed by a group of highly regarded foreign policy mavens, lifts the dialogue about post-Bush foreign policy to a new level. Instead of focusing on what must next be done on one or another specific front such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, or China, the report lays out a set of broad principles to guide U.S. military and diplomatic policy. Better yet, the report fully realizes that no state has unlimited resources and leverage, and accordingly, it sets clear priorities. Most significantly, the report recognizes that security can and must be promoted in failing states and in dealing with rogue states *without first democratizing the regimes involved*.

Some of the report’s authors (mainly Democrats) have served in key positions in previous administrations and some have been identified as advisers to the Obama campaign. I list them here in the same non-alphabetical order as the document: Anne-Marie Slaughter, Bruce W. Jentleson, Ivo H. Daalder, Antony J. Blinken (Majority Staff Director of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations), Lael Brainard, Kurt M. Campbell, Michael A. McFaul, James C. O’Brien, Gayle E. Smith, and James B. Steinberg. The report also includes a brief foreword by Susan Rice, senior foreign policy advisor to the Obama campaign.

I cannot stress enough, that although a good part of what follows spells out different ways we may march forward, there is no doubt in my mind that the report points us very much in the right direction.

The Ending of U.S. Supremacy

An important underlying theme of the report is that the days of the United States as *the* leading global power are numbered. While the United States held a virtual monopoly on power at the end of World War II and then in a bi-polar world, in recent years it has faced a world marked by what the report refers to as a “diffusion of power,” and what others have referred to as a “multi-polar” or even a “non-polar” world. The United States, the report argues, must now function in a world also marked by high and increasing levels of “interconnectedness,” where no one is entitled to leadership; it must be earned.

To put it differently, because power is sectoral, the decline of American supremacy is uneven but fairly comprehensive. In some areas, and in nuclear capabilities in particular, U.S. capabilities remain unmatched. Yet for most exercises of power, nuclear weapons are not useful. Similarly, U.S. conventional forces remain the best and strongest in the world, but their relative

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PHOTO: View of the Statue of Liberty as seen from the water on the morning of 11 September 2001 with the World Trade Center towers in the New York skyline. (National Park Service)

strength is not as obvious as it was at the end of World War II, especially in dealing with so-called non-state actors. U.S. economic and ideological power is much diminished. Moreover, there is no reason to expect these trends to reverse. On the contrary, as China's and, arguably, the EU's economic power increases, as still other nations accrue more economic and military power, and as non-state actors continue to threaten and wage asymmetrical warfare, the diffusion of power in several sectors is likely to further unfold.

We can draw two different conclusions from this observation: one, the U.S. will have to work more closely with existing and new potential allies and let others take the lead on some fronts. The other: it will have to rely more on international laws and international institutions such as the UN and even the International Criminal Court (ICC). (As has long been noted, playing by the rules is of greater interest to weak or weakening parties.) While urging that both approaches be followed, the report wisely leans towards pursuing a division of labor among allies (say, let the allies deal with the next Kosovo) and multilateralism than towards internationalism. Recent developments with North Korea, if they continue on course, support favoring this multi-national approach, although it has not worked so far in dealing with Iran. It is hence important to note that the report, though written by people considered progressive, explicitly recognizes that there are circumstances in which the U.S. will have to act unilaterally.

In reaction to the global criticism the United States has faced in recent years, amounting to what the report describes as “an historic nadir” of “America's international standing,” much attention has been paid to the importance of regaining legitimacy. Some starry-eyed liberals believe that nations could gain security by being on the side of what people across the world consider just; by abiding by what international law, especially the Geneva Conventions, dictates; and by adhering to what the Security Council rules—a particularly odd notion given the very unrepresentative nature of the UN. (India and Lichtenstein, Germany and Grenada

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each have one vote in the General Assembly; Cuba, Saudi Arabia, and China are among those in charge of human rights; the composition of the Security Council is antiquated at best, and so on.) Most advocates of soft power—including the authors of this report—realize that it must be combined with hard power; a combination often referred to by the infelicitous, yet fashionable term, “smart power.” While the report favors paying much more mind to legitimacy than the current administration has, the authors are clear that the U.S. will have to rely on its economic power, and, when push comes to shove, on military force. Soft power is good, but not good enough.

The report centers on the promotion of security, liberty, and prosperity. One might breeze past such a statement as merely rhetoric, echoing the Declaration of Independence. But, neither the founding fathers nor the authors of this report assembled these key goals in random order. Security is listed first—before liberty. This reflects a direct reversal of the key neocon precept that only democracies (best if prosperous, based on free markets) make reliable partners in peace. This precept provided the justification for forced regime change as an essential step toward security. Indeed, when it comes to the five top priorities set by this report, democracy building is not among them.

I may as well disclose my “bias.” I tried to show elsewhere in some detail (*Security First*, Yale, 2007) that (a) the right to live is more basic than all others, as all others are contingent on security; in plain English, dead people have few rights; and (b) when people lack basic security, whether in Baghdad

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(2004–7), in Moscow (early 1990s), or in the U.S. (when violent crime was high, and in the months following 9/11), most people are all too willing to trade liberty for security. Only once security is reasonably secured do people become keen to have their legal and political rights respected. (Note that in the most often cited cases of successful democracy building, Germany and Japan after World War II, democracy building took place after hostilities ceased).

The report does not deal with the question of how the primacy of security over political and economic development should influence the approach to the Muslim world by the United States and its allies. As long as the West makes the litmus test for who is a “good” Muslim based on whether he or she favors a secular, liberal democracy and the full plethora of human rights, the West will continue to define most Muslims as part of the opposition with which we must vie. If instead the West uses as its first litmus test the rejection of terrorism and a willingness to forego WMD, it will find that most Muslims—including those in the biggest nations such as Indonesia and Bangladesh—are on its side. They can be partners in peace, working with us against the small violent minorities among their ranks.

Libya is a small but telling case in point. One of the greatest successes of the Bush Administration has been to lead Libya to give up its support for terrorism and cough up its program of WMD (not merely open its facilities to inspection). In response, the administration wisely allowed Libya to emerge from isolation and sanctions, despite the fact that it has barely begun to reform its authoritarian regime. Such reforms can now be promoted as a second stage. In short, putting security first, no regime change required up front, can work well. This approach is now being tried in dealing with North Korea, and should be with Iran.

Setting Priorities

There is one other crucial conclusion that a diffuse world points to, one that held true even under earlier circumstances but holds true ever more strongly under current ones: setting priorities is essential. Anyone who has read about the U.S.’s confused dealings with North Korea in *Meltdown* by Mike Chinoy, or about the chaos in dealing with post-war Iraq in *Bad Days in Basra* by Hilary Synnott, or *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* by Rajiv

Chandrasekaran will have a vivid sense of why setting such priorities is necessary. The setting of clear priorities, and the choices made in the process, is the major contribution of this report. One naturally has some questions about the way each of these is spelled out—as well as a considerable number of kudos. I will review them in the order they are laid out by the authors.

Prevent catastrophic terrorism. The report not only grants security its due (rather than considering it what social scientists call “a dependent variable”), but also sets clear and appropriate priorities among the various security measures that must be undertaken, as not all of them can be delivered in short order. It defines preventing catastrophic terrorism (namely, WMD terrorism) as the highest priority. (The report does not differentiate among WMD. Actually, nuclear weapons and some biological agents are much more threatening than chemical and radiological arms.) Several sound measures are listed to advance this goal, such as preventing terrorists from gaining access to nuclear bombs and the material from which they can be made, reaching terrorists before they reach us, disturbing their financing and training, and improving our collection and processing of intelligence.

Regrettably, the report repeats—in this context and elsewhere—the very widely held notion that socioeconomic development can help prevent terrorism, especially by curtailing the sea in which terrorists “swim,” the sympathizers. However, there is very scant data to show that socioeconomic development turns sympathizers against terrorists, especially when religious or nationalistic motives are involved. For instance, there are more sympathizers in Iran, Iraq, and Palestine than in poorer countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Even if socioeconomic development were a viable security tool, the U.S. and its allies still could not do much to develop the many nations whose governments are deeply corrupted, wasteful, and

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poorly managed. The West has been unable to turn around even small countries like Haiti and East Timor. Larger ones pose far greater challenges, as is all too evident in Afghanistan. I am all in favor of helping others—those who go hungry, who are ill or abused—out of humanitarian, moral reasons. However, framing such efforts as security building, admittedly a common practice, may not seem credible to many Americans. Preventing terrorism, especially of a catastrophic nature, is mainly a job for security forces, backed up by diplomacy.

Curb nuclear proliferation. Listing non-proliferation as the second priority for a new national security strategy is of great merit. The more nations that acquire nuclear arms, the more likely nuclear war becomes. The fact that the U.S. and USSR came close to nuclear blows on several occasions suggests that one cannot rely (as some have suggested) on the “rationality” of the actors to restrain themselves and deter one another. Israel reportedly has come close to using its nuclear arms when its defense minister believed the country was overrun. One can hardly presume that the messianic religious leaders of Iran will not seek to wipe out Israel—or attack Saudi Arabia, and even the United States—if they acquired nukes and long range missiles.

Regrettably, the report embraces an idea that has been recently championed by four senior and

influential statesmen (George Schultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn). These statesmen argue that the way to proceed is for the United States and Russia to significantly cut their nuclear stockpiles. Such cuts, they assume, will generate sufficient political capital to propel other nations to give up their arsenals or to prevent them from acquiring any. In the same vein, the report calls for the United States to “reaffirm the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons,” suggesting that the America “start by reducing nuclear force levels to 1,000 weapons, provided Russia does likewise.”

At best, it might take the next administration years to reach such an agreement with Russia, and even more years to implement the cut. Meanwhile, nuclear hot spots would be left simmering. The possibility of the Taliban acquiring a Pakistani nuclear weapon poses a serious danger that must be dealt with in the near future. The Cooperative Threat Reduction Initiative must be accelerated to reduce the danger of loose nukes and the material from which they can be made in Russia and the former Soviet states. Even the Global Threat Reduction Initiative, which deals with reactors and fissile materials in the third world, ought to be accorded a higher priority than dealing with the stockpiles of the superpowers.

Even if the U.S. and Russia cut their arsenals in the near future, other nations are unlikely to follow. Pakistan, for instance, which relies on nuclear arms to counterbalance the much larger Indian conventional force, *might* be persuaded to give them up if the Kashmir territorial dispute was somehow resolved, and if UN peacekeepers were in place to secure the new border (and of course if India did the same); but not because of what the United States and Russia do or don’t do with their nukes. The same holds for Israel and Iran.

The other measures the report lists in service of non-proliferation are highly commendable, albeit not necessarily attainable. These include: negotiating an end to the production of weapons grade nuclear materials; a five-year global moratorium on the construction of all fissile material production facilities; establishing an international fuel bank for fissile materials under multinational control; and securing universal



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Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Navy Admiral Mike Mullen converse prior to testifying before the House Armed Services Committee regarding the security and stability of Afghanistan during a hearing in Washington, D.C., 11 December 2007.

ratification of the nuclear test ban treaty. So far, there are next to no indications that most nations that seek to enrich uranium are willing to rely on foreign suppliers or that the nations which have yet to sign the test ban treaty are inclined to do so now.

Importantly, the report goes way beyond the concept on which the non-proliferation treaty (NPT) rests without ever stating so. Rather than allowing countries to build dual-use nuclear facilities, and then relying on inspections to ensure that they are not used for military purposes (as the NPT permits), we need—at least the way I see it—to move to a world in which nations forgo the use of highly enriched uranium which is close to weapons grade. And, rather than allowing nations to quit the NPT after brief notice and take with them their dual-use nuclear facilities, we need a world in which nations do not have such facilities. Much can be done on this front, correctly highlighted as very important by the report, but it needs to be done without awaiting a Russia-United States nuclear arms reduction deal.

Climate and oil? The weakest part of the report combines the very popular notion of climate improvement with the need for reducing U.S. dependency on imported oil. Despite some claims to the contrary, climate improvement, however desirable, is not a pressing national security issue for the United States. Moreover, progress on this front is particularly hard to come by. As the report duly notes, whatever the United States and its allies do in this realm is most likely to be more than offset by damage to the climate from China and India and other emerging economies. At best, climate improvement is a very slow and costly process.

In contrast, a serious disruption in the supply of oil from other nations would pose a very serious and immediate threat to the United States economically, and even militarily. (The German counteroffensive in World War II stopped dead in its tracks when the tanks ran out of fuel.) Even without such a supply disruption, American import of oil at current prices amounts to a major wealth transfer that enriches its adversaries and helps finance their misadventures. The weekly oil bill from Iran exceeds whatever annual damage sanctions cause to this rogue nation. Venezuela and Russia are also emboldened.

The report lists several very sound measures that can be undertaken to reduce U.S. dependency on oil, including encouraging innovation and competitive-

ness in the energy sector and setting new standards for efficiency in automobiles and the electricity industry. To this list, I would add a twenty-dollar tax on every imported barrel of oil. Even if half the revenue from such a tax were dedicated to reducing the deficit and only the other half to equipping every public building (e.g., jails, schools, hospitals, military bases, etc.) with solar panels and other “greening” measures (such as improved insulation), this would cut consumption drastically and, above all, quickly. Better yet, the funds might be made available only to municipalities that provide dedicated lanes to busses and passenger vans. Throwing in higher Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards, accelerated approval of nuclear plants, rededication of the highway trust fund to public transportation, and, yes, allowing for some careful and well-regulated, environmentally sound off-shore drilling, would further enhance our security while also contributing to improving the climate. In short, reducing our dependency on foreign oil is indeed a top security priority, but climate improvement, which might be highly desirable for all kinds of reasons, is hard to defend as a high priority national security issue, and its treatment is particularly challenging.

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Middle East: bite the bullet? The report favors a drawdown in Iraq, and hopes that it would lead to political stabilization. At the same time, it stresses the importance of ensuring that Iraq not become a haven for terrorists. Yet, it is not clear that these two goals are reconcilable if the United States and its allies’ forces are withdrawn in the near future.

With regard to Iran, the report favors using diplomatic and economic carrots and sticks. It strongly

implies that, although a military option ought to be considered, it is a very poor choice. And the report calls for intensifying the efforts to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. All represent worthy but elusive goals. There are no big novel ideas (what about the Mediterranean Union, promoted by Sarkozy?) and no biting of the bullet with regard to Iran.

The report avoids the mistaken notion that the road to peace in the Middle East leads through Jerusalem, that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would magically turn the “Arab street” in the U.S.’s favor. However, it seems not to realize that the road to losing the Middle East leads through Tehran, that if the U.S. lets Iran become a nuclear power, thus the Middle East superpower, all bets are off.

Thus, this priority is also well placed, although there is room to differ on the ways it is best advanced.

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East Asia: new tigers? The report calls for integrating China and India into a “cooperative global liberal order” for them to remain vibrant and open economies and become members in good standing of regional and global institutions. At the same time, the United States ought to prepare for the possibility that internal developments in China, over which the U.S. has no control, will lead it to become more of an adversary, not just economically but also militarily.

I am unqualified to comment on East Asia, as I am unfamiliar with the region and with writings and reports on that part of the world. (In contrast, I lived for 21 years in the Middle East and spent two and half of those years fighting.) However, my sociological instincts warn me against linear projections. It is far from obvious to me that China will continue to grow at anything near its current rate or that it will be able to avoid the internal turmoil that results from economic and technological changes already in place. It might well be wise to follow the

caution expressed in the report—to be safe rather than sorry, and to be prepared for the worst—but, as the report does recognize, it seems too early to sound the alarm regarding China.

The Wrong Public Diplomacy

Major segments of the paper are devoted to soaring rhetoric, which many believe such documents need in order to inspire the public. Thus, the report calls on the United States to “stand up to tyranny, inequality and injustice” and “help [other nations] regain their power and prosperity as members of a spreading zone of liberty and peace.” The United States must “work to widen the circle of winners at home and abroad.” The report stresses that “in the American tradition, security goes hand in hand with liberty—for Americans and for all peoples.” What can one say?

Even when it was the only superpower, when its economy was in a much better shape than it currently is and its military was not overstretched, the U.S. was unable to deliver on any of these goals, let alone on such a demanding list. Inequality is growing in the United States, and it is far from clear which policies could curtail it *and* win the voters’ support. (For instance, raising taxes on the richest may be a good and fair idea, but the record shows it does not do much to decrease inequality because the super-rich find ways to circumvent such new taxes, and their income keeps rising.) Presumably, the West would have a hard time urging others, say Russia, to curb their rapidly rising inequality if the United States and its allies do not know how to do it themselves. Moreover, a case can be made that as long as all boats rise, and some will rise more than others will, this is a morally acceptable development.

Standing up to tyranny is surely a very worthy idea, but the United States has not found a way to curb the abusive regimes in places such as Burma and Zimbabwe, or even—what I consider a very basic, minimalist humanitarian goal—to stop the genocides in the Congo and Sudan. When the United States sought to promote democracy in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, it got cold feet after Hamas won the election in the West Bank and in Gaza.

If public diplomacy is going to pay homage to such lofty goals with little reality to back them up, a jaded public (quick to note when nations do not

deliver on what they promise) will dismiss it. If you favor democracy, people across the world will wonder about your support for Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Did the CIA not train the police in brutal interrogation methods all over Latin America? And so on. Soon the public becomes first disenchanted and then resentful.

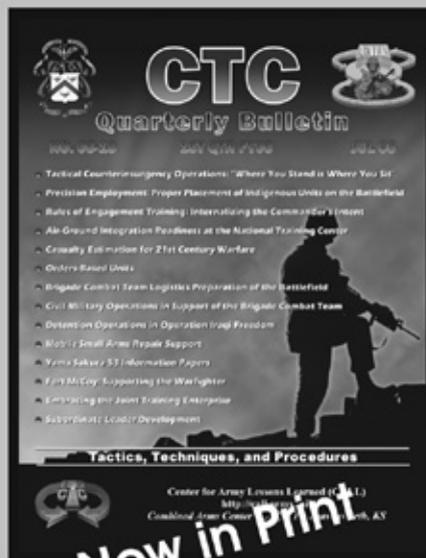
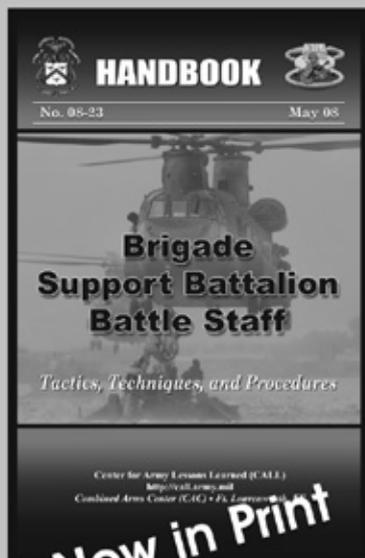
One cannot but wonder whether the time has come for the United States and its allies to frame their public diplomacy in the same terms in which some hold we should address our own disadvantaged citizens: we shall give you a hand up, but you must do your share. If you do not curb corruption, cease to support predatory government, change behaviors that lead to the spread of HIV, allow girls to be educated and all children to learn to think

critically—we cannot and will not do the job for you. We should warn all concerned that the road to democracy and prosperity is a long one, which we will walk with them one step at a time, but one must expect setbacks and circumstances under which we will be unable to proceed. Above all, we ought to put ourselves in a position where we shall deliver more than we promise, and exceed expectations rather than so often disappoint.

The report lifts the dialogue about which security policies the next administration should follow to a higher level, and above all, to the needed scope. It sets priorities that make sense, at least to this observer, and it leaves ample room to re-specify, sharpen, and modify the agenda to which these priorities point. **MR**

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