

Purpose of a National Security Strategy

By Barry Pavel with Alex Ward

In 1947, the National Security Act passed by Congress mandated that the president deliver a comprehensive annual “national security strategy report.” The goal was for the administration to let the American people know four elements of its foreign policy and national security thinking:

- “The foreign policy, worldwide commitments, and national defense capabilities of the United States necessary to deter aggression and to implement the national security strategy of the United States.”
- “The proposed short-term and long-term uses of the political, economic, military, and other elements of the national power of the United States to protect or promote the interests and achieve the goals and objectives referred to in paragraph.”
- “The adequacy of the capabilities of the United States to carry out the national security strategy of the United States, 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.”
- “Such other information as may be necessary to help inform Congress on matter relating to the national security strategy of the United States.”¹

Since the original Congressional mandate and its update in the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act, the purpose of the National Security Strategy has changed in order to better reflect a changing global landscape. Today, there are six broad purposes for a National Security Strategy.

1. **To outline the president’s vision for America’s role in the world.** Throughout history, the United States has played different types of roles in the world. Since 1945, America has been the world’s undisputed superpower, with some even calling it the “indispensable nation.” It is up to each new administration to decide what kind of role it prefers the United States to play.
2. **To highlight the President’s top national security priorities.** There are many things an administration could try to achieve. However, the essence of strategy is to pick a few key issues and prioritize them over other, less important issues. Once those priorities are decided upon, the President must demonstrate which resources will be used to achieve stated goals and how they will be marshalled.
3. **To broadly guide the resource allocation for the national security related departments and agencies.** The agencies and departments that receive the most resources will be relied upon to lead on many elements of the top national security priorities. The resources are a mix of money, personnel, and mandates.

¹ National Security Act of 1947, P.L. 80-235, §108, and Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, P.L. 99-433, §603.

4. **To articulate to friend and foe alike the strategy and subsidiary national security policies of the United States.** The document should make clear how the United States will work closely with our allies and partners and deter our adversaries. It will serve as the most important declaratory document about the national security vision of the United States.
5. **To justify the national security departments' and agencies' budgets with the Congress.** The budget is policy. Since the administration must request funds from Congress, the National Security Strategy articulates why funding is required for certain elements of the administration's vision. In other words, it is the rationale behind the proposed numbers in the president's yearly budget.
6. **To inform the public debate and garner public support for US national security efforts.** Every administration is beholden to the American people. The administration must be transparent about what it aims to achieve in the world and how it will use taxpayer-funded departments and agencies to further secure the interests of the United States. At the same time, the public should have a chance to weigh on whether the administration is pursuing the right priorities. To make informed decisions, voters should know the general trajectory of their country.