

Elements of National Security Strategy

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Every nation in the world has a national security strategy of some sort – a plan for ensuring its own continued existence. Whether it is formally articulated in a published document available to the public or indirectly conveyed through speeches by government leaders, a national security strategy’s basic purpose is to provide guidance on managing the risks associated with future challenges, thereby assuring the enduring security of the nation over the long term in the face of both general uncertainty and well-defined threats.

Although national security strategy takes many forms around the world, there are certain basic elements that are common to all national security strategies, without which the strategy is either incomplete or incoherent. This paper enumerates the key pieces of a national security strategy and explains their importance. It also explores several additional elements that can be found in some national security strategies; these additional elements are not strictly necessary for the strategy to be viable, but are intended to strengthen the document or the government’s ability to implement it.

Core Elements

National security strategies vary widely in length, format, and complexity, from one U.S. Administration to another and in comparison to those of other countries. As such, the extent to which these core elements are present in each strategy document is not consistent either.

Endorsement by the head of government. For a national security strategy to have the gravitas essential for its implementation, it must have the unambiguous imprimatur of a senior government official who has formal authority for overseeing national security matters, usually the head of government. In the United States, the National Security Strategy’s legitimacy derives clearly and directly from the President, who has traditionally signed an introductory letter which serves as the formal frontispiece of the document. That letter, together with the fact that the National Security Strategy is drafted and coordinated by National Security Staff associated closely with the President, ensure that the document is specifically understood to be an accurate reflection of the President’s intent and guidance. The President’s direct involvement also implies his ongoing intent to advocate for and facilitate the appropriate amount of resources to ensure implementation of the strategy. It additionally signals his interest in pegging accountability to the highest level of government: himself. The President’s explicit and public approval of the document, when considered in the context of the full array of national strategies that govern various aspects of U.S. policy, also indicates that other U.S. national strategies that do not carry his signature are subordinate to the U.S. National Security Strategy.

Thus, the Presidential endorsement lends the U.S. National Security Strategy the necessary legitimacy for it to be taken as formal guidance for the rest of the government, and the various public audiences for the strategy can reasonably expect that the President’s intent will be carried out.

The President has been known, on occasion, to sign other national strategies. For example, in 2012 President Obama signed the new version of the national defense strategy contained in the Defense Strategic Guidance – yet he did not sign its 2014 successor document, the Quadrennial Defense Review, or other national strategies published during that timeframe such as the Quadrennial Homeland Security Review and National Intelligence Strategy. Such Department-level strategies only carry Presidential signature in rare cases when the President wants to draw special attention to a strategic change in approach – especially one that will require increased interagency coordination and collaboration. In the case of 2012, significant budget cuts that affected every department prompted a wholesale review of priorities, and the DSG was the only Department-level strategy produced during that timeframe that was available to capture the new resource-constrained approach.

In nations without a formally published national security strategy, speeches and other public messaging by national security leaders in the government are typically understood to collectively convey that government's national security strategy. In such cases, although the legitimacy of the leaders' intent may not be in question, there is increased room for error in interpretation by the leader's audience, which may lead to accountability and implementation difficulties.

In nations where the rule of law is not well established or there is internal conflict resulting in competing centers of authority, endorsement by the head of government may not be sufficient to convey the legitimacy required for effective implementation of a national security strategy.

Accurate reflection of national values. National security strategy must take into account and reinforce a nation's values in order to appropriately prioritize threats and interests. Often, this reflection of values is done implicitly or indirectly through the formulation of goals, since the purpose of the document is not to publicize a comprehensive and explicit list of national values, but rather to articulate a plan of action in support of those values. National values are generally broadly conceptual and do not substantially change except over the long term; they are the slowly evolving essence of a nation's character.

A national security strategy that is not sufficiently connected to national values will be difficult to implement because 1) it will not likely be easily understood by the elements of government charged with implementing it; 2) the nation will not likely have the right kind of resources or government structures to support it; and 3) the priorities it contains will not be an accurate reflection of what is actually necessary to safeguard the nation.

Clear articulation of national interests. In the hierarchy of national security strategy elements from broad to more precise, national interests lie below national values and above national security goals. National interests are specific ideas that both derive from and support the broad concepts contained in national values. They are then translated into a finite list of goals which can reasonably be accomplished within a certain time frame. While national values remain broadly static, national interests may change from one Administration to another based on domestic political priorities and emerging issues around the world.

Political deadlock within a government, or the existence of a weak head of state, could make it difficult for the government to agree on a clear set of national interests to lay out in a national

security strategy. Belgium is an example of a country that has been experiencing such deadlock for years during multiple drawn-out negotiations regarding the Prime Minister position; this prevented the government from coalescing around a clear set of national interests. In such cases, national security strategy is de facto deprioritized in favor of domestic political maneuvering, and inertia rather than planned action can come to dominate the approach to national security. Countries that have difficulty articulating national interests thus run the risk of failing to anticipate and prepare for threats.

Declaration of strategic vision. This declaration is a concise summary of the overall effect the government wishes to achieve with the national security strategy. Previous U.S. national security strategies have sometimes alluded to the strategic vision in the title of the document, as a clear way of signaling its purpose. For example, President Clinton's 1994 National Security Strategy was called "A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement." More recently, in his introductory letter to 2015 National Security Strategy, President Obama emphasized the imperative of continued American leadership around the globe as an outline of his strategic vision. The strategic vision should allow for the articulation of a finite set of goals that will enable its realization.

Identification and assessment of future challenges. National security strategies are by nature forward-looking documents intended to enable governments to prepare to manage issues that may arise in the future. Research on forecasting and prediction has indicated that reasonably accurate predictive assessments, including about national security issues, are possible only in the very short term – generally less than a year. This short time frame renders prediction an unfeasible approach to use in a national security strategy, which must be viable beyond a single year. Predicting the long-term future with any meaningful degree of precision is impossible, and attempting to do so is a misguided waste of resources. Rather, governments can use foresight to lay out the range of future challenges they are likely to face and test how prepared they are to meet them.

Some governments – notably Finland, Singapore, and the Republic of Korea – have recognized the problems of prediction while also valuing the growing field of foresight. These governments have prioritized the development of foresight capabilities, and have centralized those capabilities so that the entire government is engaged in and guided by a proactive forward-looking approach that ties the identification and assessment of future challenges to the strategies needed to prepare for them.

The United States government does not have a specific body leading foresight work. Every four years, the U.S. National Intelligence Council creates a Global Trends document that looks forward twenty years and attempts to identify the major trends and issues that will characterize the future world. Global Trends inform the creation of strategy documents including the National Security Strategy, but the relationship is not formalized. There is no requirement or expectation that the National Security Strategy will envision a response to every aspect of future challenge articulated in Global Trends, or even that the National Security Staff be required to consult with the authors of Global Trends when drafting national security strategy.

Foresight is an emerging field that has a growing body of methodologies associated with it, but in the end it is as much art as science. It is necessary but insufficient to identify trends and forecast their likely future manifestation; unanticipated disruptive changes in the global landscape (e.g., the advent of the internet) will be missed by trend analysis. In addition, trends do not always develop in linear fashion. A certain amount of imagination – a quality not usually associated with government bureaucracies – is required to productively engage in foresight.

Every age has its group of pundits who declare that the world is increasingly chaotic and unpredictable and government's ability to manage the risks associated with growing future uncertainty is in jeopardy. Any national security strategy that echoes such sentiments wastes the paper it is written upon, because absent an identification and assessment of future challenges, the strategy merely becomes a needless repetition of previously stated interests. The world is not more unpredictable now than it was 100 or even 1000 years ago. Instead, it is characterized by increasingly complex interactions between emerging trends across the globalized security landscape. The fact that we have not perfected the analytical capabilities to understand the implications of that complexity does not mean it is impossible to do so. Governments that want their national security strategies to be relevant over the longer term must prioritize the development of those capabilities.

Risk assessment. It is not necessary or feasible for a national security strategy to identify every risk that a nation will face over the longer term. Indeed, national security strategies that attempt to do so dilute their own meaning by turning the strategy into a laundry list of problems instead of a clear plan of action. For a strategy to provide appropriate guidance to the government, it must prioritize risks based on the likelihood and severity of their likely impact on national interests. Catastrophic risk to the homeland, however unlikely and no matter whether as the result of human or natural events, must be considered.

The assessment of risk can mistakenly be conflated with threat and vulnerability assessment. Threats and risks are not the same thing; however, intelligence tradecraft and government leaders do not always recognize this fact. Instead, intelligence tradecraft contains well-developed threat assessment capabilities which enumerate the specific vulnerabilities of both physical infrastructure, governments, and people, but has never focused on risk. Unlike straightforward threat assessment, true risk assessment takes into account the national interest and the potential effect (positive and negative) of inaction to create a prioritized approach.

It is essential for government leaders to understand that not all risks are bad and not all risks must be mitigated. Instead, the appropriate approach for risk is management, not mitigation. Sometimes the most appropriate approach to managing a particular risk will be to accept it rather than expend resources trying to minimize or avoid it; the concept of risk management allows for this choice, thereby providing governments with flexibility. Otherwise, threat assessment itself becomes the government imperative and the mere identification of a threat requires its mitigation.

Overview of required resources. Relevant national security strategies must take available resources into account, but should not be defined by them; strategies that are tied to and defined by the resources that are already available inevitably become a restatement of current efforts

rather than a proactive outline for how to effectively shape the future. This topic will be considered more in depth in a separate paper. Here it is sufficient to point out that governments can effectively use national security strategy to advocate for the kinds of resources that they do not currently possess but that they believe will be necessary to support the long-term national security of the nation. In addition, it is necessary to keep in mind that strategies enumerate ends and to a certain extent ways; the means, or resources, can vary over time even if the ends do not. Changes in resources in themselves do not automatically cause the ends to change; there are many potential methods for achieving a single goal. Finally, it is important to realize that resources can include everything from relationships to specific capabilities.

Effective time frame. The Goldwater-Nichols Act requires an annual “report” on national security strategy, but recent Presidential administrations have not produced a full-blown national security strategy every year. It is now commonly understood, even though the law has not yet changed to reflect it, that a viable national security strategy must have an effective life span of more than a single year in order to appropriately guide long-term policy and investment. Presidents George W. Bush and Obama each produced two national security strategies during their respective tenures. Presidential administrations should always be monitoring the global security environment and considering it in the context of national interests. Substantial changes in the security environment, which impact national interests and thus lead to a reconsideration of strategic vision and goals, should occasion the drafting of a new strategy, and do not generally occur on an annual basis. Well-conceived national security strategy should be flexible enough to withstand the less-than-substantial security environment changes that take place every day, week, and year.

Measures of effectiveness. For the President and his Administration to ensure accountability and implementation, measures of effectiveness should be either stated outright or contained within the goals of the strategy. In order to be viable, measures of effectiveness must be quantitative to some degree and should also have the potential to be monitored within a specific time frame. For example, the 2006 U.S. National Security Strategy’s chapter headings stated the strategy’s goals and also could be used as measures of effectiveness. One of those headings, “Develop Agendas for Cooperative Action with Other Main Centers of Global Power,” suggests several measurable elements that could be regularly monitored in order to hold the Administration accountable. Have any cooperative agendas been developed this year? With which entities has the U.S. engaged on this issue in the past six months? It also suggests what kinds of actions should be avoided – by stating “main centers of global power” it prioritizes some relationships over others. Less specific goals such as “Promote Democracy” do not easily lend themselves into the translation of such measures, and thus both implementation and accountability for results become more difficult.

Basic implementation guidance. The details of how a national security strategy will be implemented are usually highly sensitive, and thus specific implementation guidance is often included in classified companion documents. The Goldwater-Nichols Act requires both unclassified and classified strategy reports to be produced annually. For a strategy to serve as an effective blueprint for government action, it must assign responsibility for its elements to appropriate subordinate bodies across the government. In the United States, the national security

strategy is the only whole-of-government strategy published by the government, so it is important for each element of the government to understand its respective role.

Some Optional Elements

Some governments around the world have elected to include additional elements in their national security strategies. Here are a few exemplars.

- **Feedback mechanism.** During the implementation of its 2009 national security White Paper, the government of Australia required its Department of Defense to provide quarterly reports, which enabled the government to consistently monitor implementation progress. The United States does not have any such formal feedback mechanism for assessing its strategy's success on an ongoing basis.
- **Legacy statement.** While national security strategies are intended to be forward-looking documents to help governments prepare for the challenges of the future, some governments also leverage them to highlight self-described successes of the recent past which have (in their assessment) contributed to national security thus far. This approach can sometimes turn a strategy an overly politicized document, limiting its effectiveness over time, especially if the head of government should change.
- **Explanation of methodology.** Sometimes a national security strategy will illuminate the methods used to produce the document in addition to containing the results of those methods. For example, if the government wishes to emphasize that the strategy was the result of a collaborative process – thereby potentially strengthening perceptions of the strategy's legitimacy – it might highlight the interagency nature of the drafting effort.