



Where Are the Neo-Cons?

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Theme: The White House has issued a new national security strategy.

Summary: The revised 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', dated March 2006, explains the strategic underpinning of American foreign policy. It is the first revision of the original security doctrine developed by the Bush Administration in September 2002. The central thesis of the new strategy is that spreading democracy is the best way to build a better world. It also recognises the unique opportunities and formidable challenges posed by globalisation. While the revised document leaves US strategic priorities basically unchanged from before, they are restated in a tone that is much more diplomatic. They are also reformulated in an approach that is more pragmatic. The new strategy reaffirms an American right to use pre-emptive force to eliminate emerging threats. But it also calls for working with other countries and international institutions when possible. In any case, the report singles out Iran as the biggest future challenge facing the United States, and it warns that current international diplomacy to halt Tehran's nuclear enrichment programme 'must succeed if confrontation is to be avoided'. The revised doctrine arrives at a time when many of the neo-conservatives who drafted the earlier version have departed the Bush Administration. Indeed, since US President George W. Bush was re-elected in November 2004, there has been a subtle but discernable rebalancing of US foreign policy back towards traditional American realism. In this context, the revised strategy describes itself as 'idealistic about goals and realistic about means'. Thus the idealism of neo-conservatism has been synthesised with the pragmatism of realism in a new ideological paradigm: it is called neo-realism.

Analysis: The White House published a new version of its National Security Strategy in March 2006. It updates the previous strategy dated September 2002, which was one year after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, but before the invasion of Iraq. The doctrine, which is the broadest national security document produced by the US government, explains the strategic underpinning of American foreign policy. The revised document was drafted by US National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley and his team at the National Security Council.

The revised strategy document identifies nine essential tasks for US foreign policy. The United States must: (1) champion aspirations for human dignity; (2) strengthen alliances to defeat global terrorism; (3) work with others to defuse regional conflicts; (4) prevent enemies from threatening the United States and its allies with weapons of mass destruction; (5) ignite a new era of global economic growth through free markets and free trade; (6) expand the circle of development by opening societies and building the infrastructure of democracy; (7) develop agendas for cooperative action with other main centres of global power; (8) transform America's national security institutions to meet the

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challenges and opportunities of the 21st century; and (9) engage the opportunities and confront the challenges of globalisation.

In a covering letter, US President George W. Bush attempts to place the report into a broader political context by asserting that: 'America is at war. This is a wartime national security strategy required by the grave challenge we face –the rise of terrorism fuelled by an aggressive ideology of hatred and murder, fully revealed to the American people on September 11, 2001. This strategy reflects our most solemn obligation: to protect the security of the American people.' Indeed, the revised doctrine, like its predecessor, offers a vision of a distinctly American form of internationalism.

What follows is an analysis of the central elements of the new strategy.

Continuity in American Foreign Policy

The most striking feature of the revised national security strategy is its conceptual and ideological continuity with the path previously chosen by the Bush Administration. Indeed, those looking for a change of course or a confession of error will be sorely disappointed: winning the global war against terrorism will continue to be the central priority of American national security policy; the Middle East will remain the primary focal region for US foreign policy; and the pre-emption of emerging threats will still be a fundamental element of American grand strategy.

Moreover, the revised strategy oozes with the neo-conservative idealism that characterised Bush's first term. The concept that promoting democracy is the best way to build a better world is weaved throughout the document. Indeed, freedom and liberty are offered as the only lasting solution to problems that range from ending terrorism to controlling proliferation. The revised doctrine also focuses on policies that the White House has laid out since Bush was re-elected in November 2004. It calls for freer trade in the global market and warns against isolationism, two recurring themes in Bush's speeches since he began his second term.

To be sure, the revised doctrine is considerably more conciliatory in tone and refreshingly more pragmatic in approach than was the previous version. In the covering letter, for example, Bush says that American strength is 'not founded on force of arms alone. It rests on strong alliances, friendships and international institutions.' In fact, the updated document elaborates far more than the 2002 version on the vital role of international diplomacy in addressing urgent problems.

Despite discernable changes in style, however, the revised strategy presents no fundamental shift in policy. Some of the most memorable passages in the 2002 document, such as the vow to maintain military forces strong enough to dissuade any adversary with hopes of 'surpassing, or equalling, the power of the United States' have simply been reworded with phrases like: 'We must maintain a military without peer'. Moreover, the revised document staunchly defends the White House decision to invade Iraq in 2003, and then moves on to single out Iran as the biggest future challenge to the United States.

Hadley says the 2006 document, which at 49 pages is twice as long as the 2002 version, is not intended to formulate new strategy, but to 'take stock of what has been accomplished and describe the new challenges we face'. Indeed, whereas the earlier doctrine was premised on preserving and enhancing American military, economic and diplomatic strength, the revised strategy outlines a long-term 'forward strategy of freedom' to defeat terrorists. (The revised document is also consistent with the Quadrennial Defence Review, a long-term strategy to transform the US military, which was released by the Pentagon in February 2006.)

Although a 1986 law requires that the national security strategy be revised annually, the White House says an update was unnecessary until now because the core of the doctrine has not really changed. Says Hadley: 'I don't think it's a change in strategy. It's an updating of where we are with the strategy, given the time that's passed and the events that have occurred.'

In any case, the two main pillars of the revised strategy (promoting human rights, freedom and democracy, and working together with friends and allies) have been central features of US foreign policy for many decades. Thus Bush stresses the continuity of his vision: 'The path we have chosen is consistent with the great tradition of American foreign policy. Like the policies of Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan, our approach is idealistic about our national goals and realistic about the means to achieve them.'

Focus on Democracy Promotion

Promoting freedom and democracy abroad has become the central theme of the Bush presidency as well as the fundamental underpinning of his foreign policy. In this context, the revised security strategy underscores in a highly thematic way the proposition that international peace and stability rest on a foundation of free nations. In fact, the opening words of the revised strategy are lifted verbatim from Bush's second inaugural address in January 2005: 'It is the policy of the United States to seek and support democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world'.

The strategy repeats assertions that democracy and freedom are the only lasting solutions to problems that range from defusing regional conflicts to ensuring global economic growth. At the same time, the document infuses a dose of realism by acknowledging that 'elections alone are not enough' and that countries also need to build democratic institutions. The strategy also recognises that democracy by itself cannot guarantee stability, especially without a solid middle class and a strong economy to support it.

The strategy commits the Bush Administration to: speak out against human rights abuses; hold high-level meetings at the White House with reformers from repressive nations; use foreign aid to support elections and civil society; and apply sanctions against oppressive governments. The doctrine also makes special mention of religious intolerance, subjugation of women and human trafficking.

In practical terms, however, the United States still spends far more on counter-terrorism, non-proliferation and defence-related cooperation than it does on promoting democracy. Indeed, the bulk of the roughly US\$20 billion in American foreign aid in 2006 is destined for countries that are strategically important for the United States, in some cases regardless of their non-democratic nature. Moreover, although the United States has appropriated US\$1.7 billion to support opposition groups, many countries, including China, Russia and Egypt, have enthusiastically cracked down on them and sent prominent opposition leaders to jail.

Inherent Right of Self-Defence

The revised national security strategy reaffirms the American right to use pre-emptive force to eliminate emerging threats that involve weapons of mass destruction. 'There are few greater threats than a terrorist attack with weapons of mass destruction', the document says. 'To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act pre-emptively in exercising our inherent right of self-defence' because it cannot afford to 'stand idly by as grave dangers materialise'. The report also says that although al-Qaeda has been 'significantly degraded' since the war in

Afghanistan, its dispersal poses new challenges, requiring the United States to defend itself against a less-centralised enemy.

The Bush Administration first posited the doctrine of pre-emption in 2002. That strategy marked the most fundamental reassessment of American grand strategy in more than 50 years by shifting US foreign policy away from decades of Cold War deterrence and containment. Instead, the doctrine moved towards a more pro-active stance of eliminating 'asymmetrical threats' stemming from terrorists and unstable countries armed with weapons of mass destruction before the United States is attacked. The wording of the 2002 strategy was that the United States reserves the right to take 'anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack'.

In an important change in style, the document emphasises that military action is a last option, and that diplomacy and collective efforts are the preferred ways to remove threats. However, it defends the Bush Administration's rationale for going to war with Iraq. In fact, it says that one of the main lessons learned from the failure to find weapons of mass destruction is that countries like Iran should proceed with caution: Saddam Hussein's 'strategy of bluff, denial and deception is a dangerous game that dictators play at their peril', the report says.

Iran is the Greatest Challenge

In a clear sign that Washington's pre-emptive strike policy is meant to send a direct message to Tehran, just two pages later the revised document declares that Iran's nuclear threat is the biggest future challenge to the United States. 'We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran', the report says. 'We will continue to take all necessary measures to protect our national and economic security against the adverse consequences of their bad conduct', the document says. (Indeed, just hours after the national security strategy was published on 16 March, Iran publicly expressed its desire for direct talks with the United States over Iraq.)

In any case, many analysts see this as an effort by the White House to begin to lay the political groundwork to prepare the American people for pre-emptive military action against Iran. Indeed, the document cites the ongoing diplomatic efforts of Britain, France, Germany and Russia to defuse the Iran crisis and warns of the consequences of failure: 'This diplomatic effort must succeed if confrontation is to be avoided', the document says.

The revised document uses exceptionally harsh language to denounce Tehran as an 'ally of terror' and 'enemy of freedom'. By contrast, Iran was mentioned only once in the 2002 national security strategy, and then only as a victim of Iraqi chemical weapons attacks in the 1980s. At the same time, the document attempts to reach out to the people of Iran. 'Our strategy is to block the threats posed by the regime while expanding our engagement and outreach to the people the regime is oppressing', the text says.

Multilateralism à la Coalitions of the Willing

The revised document calls for working with 'other main centres of global power', a conspicuously amorphous category that includes NATO, the World Trade Organisation and countries like India. Indeed, the strategy embraces multilateralism in foreign affairs, but probably not in the manner that many Europeans would prefer. In his covering letter, Bush writes that 'effective multinational efforts are essential' to solving many global problems, such as pandemic disease, terrorism, human trafficking and national disasters. 'Yet history has shown that only when we do our part will others do theirs. America must continue to lead', Bush writes.

To be sure, 'effective' is the operational term in Bush's choice of words. Although the document often employs phrases like 'strengthening alliances', 'working with others', and 'developing agendas for cooperative action', the White House has no intention of limiting itself to working only through pre-existing multilateral institutions, where action may be blocked by others who are often hostile to the United States.

Indeed, the White House is certain to continue to pursue the established path of building 'coalitions of the willing' on particular problems. This is because it believes that such ad hoc structures can be more effective than formal multilateral arrangements like the United Nations. In this context, the revised document mentions a range of ad hoc initiatives: the Proliferation Security Initiative, which is supported by more than 70 countries; the AIDS initiative in Africa; the Asia-Pacific Partnership for Clean Development and Climate with Australia, China, Japan and South Korea; and the Global Peace Operations Initiative to train peacekeepers for duty in Africa.

A Country-Specific Strategy

Viewed by regions, the revised security strategy stresses the need for: democracy and economic stability in the Western Hemisphere; good governance and peace in Africa; increasing democratic participation in the Middle East; continued transformation of NATO and the European Union; and respecting human rights in China and Russia.

But the document is also far more country-specific than was the previous version. The strategy says that the main goal of American foreign policy is to end tyranny everywhere, which is characterised as a combination of brutality, corruption, instability and poverty, and suffering under despotic rulers and systems. The document then lists the governments of Belarus, Burma, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Syria and Zimbabwe as 'despotic systems'.

The document puts Syria among the 'allies of terror' and 'enemies of freedom', and calls on the world to 'hold these regimes to account'. It also singles out Cuba's Fidel Castro as an 'oppressive dictator' and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez as 'a demagogue awash in oil money' who is 'seeking to destabilise' Latin America (Venezuela was also mentioned by name in the Pentagon's February 2006 Quadrennial Defence Review. That was notable because that document rarely lists countries by name).

Although the strategy says that 'genocide must not be tolerated' it curiously fails to name the government of Sudan on the list of abusive regimes. Moreover, the document somewhat unconvincingly compliments Saudi Arabia's 'preliminary steps to give its citizens more of a voice in their government'.

According to the text, both Iran and North Korea pose potential threats to regional peace and security. But the document also heavily criticises China and Russia, two of the key countries involved in the international negotiations aimed at curtailing Iran's nuclear programme. The American relationship with China and Russia is complex; both countries present the United States with unique challenges and opportunities. In that context, Washington has sought to coax Beijing and Moscow into more transparency.

The document takes a notably tough line on China: 'As China becomes a global player, it must act as a responsible stakeholder that fulfils its obligations and works with the United States and others to advance the international system that has enabled its success'. Although the White House applauds China's economic success, it says its transition from a state-planned economy to a free-market system is incomplete. 'China's leaders must realise, however, that they cannot stay on this peaceful path while holding on to old ways of thinking and acting that exacerbate concerns throughout the region and the world', the document says.

In recognition of completely new challenges, the strategy says that China's leaders are 'acting as if they can somehow "lock up" energy supplies around the world or seek to direct markets rather than opening them up—as if they can follow a mercantilism borrowed from a discredited era'. And in reference to China's activities in countries like Sudan, Beijing is chided for 'supporting resource-rich countries without regard to the misrule at home or abroad of those regimes'. These admonitions do not appear in the earlier version of the strategy, and in a briefing subsequent to the release of the new doctrine, Hadley said the warning is an effort to get China's leaders to think about 'the broader constellation of their interests'.

The revised document is also sceptical about Russia. In fact, in a reflection of growing tensions between Washington and Moscow, the national security strategy seems downright pessimistic about Russia: 'Recent trends regrettably point toward diminishing commitment to democratic freedoms and institutions. Strengthening our relationship will depend on policies, foreign and domestic, that Russia adopts'.

Challenges of Globalisation

The revised strategy recognises the opportunities and challenges arising from globalisation, a topic that was addressed only indirectly in the 2002 version. The text says the United States aims to tackle public health challenges such as pandemic influenza and HIV/AIDS, for example. The illicit trade in drugs and people, as well as environmental destruction and natural disasters such as the tsunami, also require close attention.

Although existing international organisations have a role to play, here again the strategy says that individual situations may be better served by 'coalitions of the willing'. It also weaves globalisation together with freedom by stating that effective democracies are better suited to facing global challenges than are poorly governed states.

Neo-Conservatism + Realism = Neo-Realism

Opinion polls say that most Americans are now critical of the Bush Administration's foreign policy. According to a survey titled the 'Confidence in US Foreign Policy Index' published on 30 March by Public Agenda, a New York-based non-profit research organisation, only 36% of those polled believe the United States can help spread democracy—a major objective for the Bush administration in Iraq and throughout the Middle East—. Only 22% believe the United States can do 'a lot' to create democracy in Iraq. The goal of spreading democracy received the lowest support among other priorities, with only 20% saying it was 'very important'. By contrast, 71% said it was 'very important' to help countries deal with natural disasters such as the Indian Ocean tsunami.

Doubts over the war in Iraq extend far beyond general public opinion, however. Within the Republican Party, the invasion has also pitted neo-conservatives, who saw the war as a catalyst for democratic change in the Middle East, against traditional realists, who argue that Arabs are culturally unready for democracy. Neo-conservatives (who are sometimes also called idealists) want a foreign policy that promotes American ideals of self-government and human rights in despotic countries. They say that spreading democracy is always in the American interest and they are not afraid of using military force, unilaterally if necessary, to achieve this aim. By contrast, realists want a foreign policy that is governed by a clear and narrowly-defined idea of the US national interest. They are also notoriously suspicious of military entanglements. In any case, both idealists and realists believe that the main goal of American foreign policy should be to make the United States more secure.

But there has also been a split within the ranks of neo-conservatism itself. One of the most vocal proponents of the war in Iraq, the neo-conservative theorist Francis Fukuyama, has changed his mind and now says the invasion was a bad idea. In a book titled 'America at the Crossroads', Fukuyama offers a blistering critique of the neo-conservative push for war and says the Bush Administration 'vastly underestimated the cost and difficulty of reconstructing Iraq and guiding it toward a democratic transition'. He also accuses neo-conservatives of failing to heed one of their basic principles, namely that 'ambitious social engineering often leads to unexpected consequences and often undermines its own ends'. He undermines his own argument, however, by failing to acknowledge his own support for invading Iraq that began as early as the Clinton Administration.

In any case, many of the neo-conservative strategists who shaped the American response to 9/11 have left the White House, and their direct influence on US foreign policymaking is no longer what it once was. At the same time, so-called 'neo-realists' have stepped in to fill the vacuum. Led by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, neo-realists share the neo-conservative belief that spreading democracy is important, but they also favour the realist approach of working more closely with allies to accomplish American objectives abroad. In practical terms, this implies that the second-term Bush Administration will probably pursue a more 'multilateral' foreign policy than it did during its first term, although as the revised strategy document makes clear, it will be no less muscular.

Indeed, to the extent that the debate over Iraq is a debate over the whole shape and content of American policy in the Middle East, the Bush Administration has vowed to stay the course. In his State of the Union address in January 2006, Bush somewhat ambitiously proclaimed that the aim of his administration is to defeat radical Islam. Echoing this theme, in a speech titled 'The Long War', in February 2006 Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld said the West must quickly face up to the threat from radical Islam. 'Compelled by a militant ideology that celebrates murder and suicide, with no territory to defend, with little to lose, they will either succeed in changing our way of life, or we will succeed in changing theirs', he said.

Most Europeans and Americans would agree that freedom is a goal worth pursuing around the world. But can the Bush Administration's revised national security strategy work in practice? Will its democracy agenda end in success or failure? To these questions the revised document ventures to provide only a tentative answer: 'Achieving this goal is the work of generations'. What remains beyond dispute, however, is that the neo-conservatives have had a permanent impact on US foreign policy, one that will be felt for many decades to come.

Conclusion: The revised national security strategy says that promoting democracy is the main goal of American foreign policy. It reaches out to critics of the Bush Administration's first-term go-it-alone style by stressing the need for strong alliances, and by saying that diplomacy is strongly preferred to military action. At the same time, it keeps the policy of pre-emption elevated to a central part of US strategy. Moreover, it defends the decision to invade Iraq in 2003, and it singles out Iran as the primary future challenge to the United States. Although the revised document is more conciliatory and pragmatic than its predecessor, it is also noteworthy for its ideological continuity. In this context, it attempts to blend the idealism of neo-conservatism with the pragmatism of realism. Thus neo-realism is the new philosophical paradigm that will guide American foreign policy for the rest of Bush's presidency. How this will play out in practical terms remains to be seen. But muscular idealism is the new American realism.

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