

Biden's National Security Strategy: Takeaways and Pakistan

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Nearly 20 months taking office, Biden administration finally released its National Security Strategy (NSS) on October 12, 2022. The White House published the unclassified part of NSS, which defines broad strategic priorities and guidelines for US government departments and agencies dealing with both domestic and external policies. The document that is released in the name of the sitting President, however, incorporates policy choices and interests of several bureaucracies and organizations that make up the whole-of-government. After release of NSS, Department of Defence published National Defence Strategy (NDS) and Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). In this way, NSS serves as a foundation for strategic documents and outlook of other departments of the US government.

This piece highlights key takeaways of the NSS, and situates it in the context of Indo-Pacific, particularly South Asia to highlight implications for Pakistan.

NSS: Context and Takeaways

The 2022 NSS is comprehensive both in its scope and ambitions. The NSS covers a wide-range of issues and as a result there is a significant nuanced information present in the document. It builds on the December 2017 NSS issued by the then Trump administration and the 2021 Interim Strategic Guidance issued by the Biden administration. NSS situates America's strategic priorities in a world beset by complex challenges. For instance, the US looks at India as a fulcrum for its Indo-Pacific strategy but at the same time, Washington is leaning on New Delhi to curb its energy imports from Russia that enable Kremlin to finance its war in Ukraine, among other "malign" activities. Meanwhile, expanding cooperation with Europe is an American priority, which entails facilitating energy security of European nations as they decouple from Russia, and tap into alternate energy sources and markets implying that those scarce cargos would pivot away from India. North America could potentially supply more energy in the market but production and building export infrastructure would create new environmental issues and impede the shift towards greener forms of energy in the medium-term.

Meanwhile, Green energy is part of the Fourth Industrial Revolution where the US has competitive advantages over China. Now does that incorporate areas such as exporting hydrocarbons, which could potentially impact climate. And relatedly, exporting US oil to other markets will increase energy prices in the US market, and thus, is not politically sustainable. It is this complex environment in which policy-makers are seeking to chart a policy response that meet all over-arching strategic goals.

In this broad strategic context, NSS envisions US being able to navigate two broad set of challenges i.e., a) containing revisionist powers while advancing cooperation; and b) balancing US interests in different regions while addressing domestic concerns. To meet these challenges, the strategy envisions 'out-competing' China and rejuvenating America's domestic industrial base for maintenance of America's competitive power. NSS has declared climate change an existential

issue and seeks to deepen trade and economic cooperation across Pacific and Atlantic Ocean basins.

Prioritizing Great-Power Competition

A key takeaway of the NSS 2022 is that much like previous versions, greater emphasis has been placed on big power competition as the fulcrum of US national security interests and outlook. NSS explicitly prioritizes China and then Russia, followed by others. And even in the section where region-wise strategies are discussed, the Indo-Pacific region is addressed first, followed by Europe and then other regions. For instance, NSS states:

... this strategy recognizes that the PRC presents America's most consequential geopolitical challenge. Although the Indo-Pacific is where its outcomes will be most acutely shaped, there are significant global dimensions to this challenge. Russia poses an immediate and ongoing threat to the regional security order in Europe and it is a source of disruption and instability globally but it lacks the across the spectrum capabilities of the PRC. We also recognize that other smaller autocratic powers are also acting in aggressive and destabilizing ways. ... (p.11)

And also:

Russia and the PRC pose different challenges. Russia poses an immediate threat to the free and open international system, recklessly flouting the basic laws of the international order today, as its brutal war of aggression against Ukraine has shown. The PRC, by contrast, is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective. (p. 8)

This emphasis on China and Russia has also been reflected in the newly released National Defence Strategy, which underscores same prioritization. This prioritization, going forward, will inform division of focus and resources by the US government departments. Meanwhile, it will reassure every US ally and partner in the Indo-Pacific that US is committed to long-term presence in the region. Besides, this signals that while Washington will continue to channel support and mobilize resources in response to ongoing Ukraine conflict and other critical regions, the US government, however, will not take strategic eyes off the Indo-Pacific and competition with China.

Reviving America's Industrial Base

An essential element of the strategy for great-power competition, is to revive America's domestic industrial base through economic partnerships with like-minded democracies. NSS calls for investments in defense industrial hubs and several strategically important civilian industries. NSS calls for securing 'critical infrastructure and advancing cybersecurity', while ensuring security of 'supply chains through new forms of public-private collaboration'. NSS argues that:

“the United States is pursuing a modern industrial and innovation strategy. We are identifying and investing in key areas where private industry, on its own, has not mobilized to protect our core economic and national security interests” (p.14).

On the defense industrial base, NSS acknowledges the role US defence industry played in the Ukraine conflict, as US continues its deliveries of advance weapons to Ukrainian forces. NSS underscores that the defence industry must be *“capable of rapidly manufacturing proven capabilities needed to defend against adversary aggression”* and able to *“innovate and creatively design solutions as battlefield conditions evolve”*. Underscoring importance of new technologies, NSS states that the US is:

“investing in a range of advanced technologies including applications in the cyber and space domains, missile defeat capabilities, trusted artificial intelligence, and quantum systems, while deploying new capabilities to the battlefield in a timely manner.” (p.21)

This has placed domestic industry as a core element of national security tools, which is a marked departure from past NSS editions. Biden administration, however, is focused on operationalizing this approach, as was advanced through legislation such as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, CHIPS and Science Act of 2022. This trend is likely accelerated across the government with adoption of new NSS.

Climate Change: Next Challenge

NSS 2022 edition recognizes climate change as the “the greatest and potentially existential” threat to all nations. It argues that climate change lies at the “very core of national and international security,” along with food insecurity, terrorism and inflation. It contends that the US is open to cooperation with rivals (such as China) on shared challenges. It, however, criticizes China’s climate policies as it states that Beijing “endangers the world with inadequate action on climate change domestically, particularly regarding massive coal power use and build up.” Beyond China, NSS calls for energy transition and the need to reduce dependence on regimes that “seek to weaponize energy for coercion” such as Russia.

For policy-action, NSS, rightly acknowledges that “global action begins at home, where we are making unprecedented generational investments in the clean energy transition through the [Inflation Reduction Act], simultaneously creating millions of good paying jobs and strengthening American industries.”

NSS 2022: Implications for Pakistan

In past two decades, this is perhaps the first NSS document that does not mention Pakistan. Earlier editions used to include Pakistan in the context of fight against terrorism and conflict in Afghanistan. That was the time when US and allied forces were present in Afghanistan. Pakistan, in that context, was important. Engagement with Pakistan was crucial. And stability in Pakistan was viewed as linked to stability in Afghanistan.

NSS 2022 is the first broader strategic guidance document from the Biden administration that emerged after departure of US forces from Afghanistan. Absence of Pakistan from the NSS means that Washington no-longer views Pakistan as a high-priority country. Not mentioning Pakistan in terms international terrorism and current situation in Afghanistan has both its upside as well as a downside. On the positive side, it means that for US, when dealing with Afghanistan situation, Pakistan's role is secondary. This does not put onus of developments in Afghanistan on Pakistan. Conversely, by separating Pakistan from the Afghan situation, Washington indicates preference for direct engagement with the Taliban government, which could in some ways undercut Pakistan's interests.

Beyond Afghanistan, NSS is relevant to Pakistan in the context of US Indo-Pacific strategy. Here Pakistan's two major neighbors i.e. China and India, are the focus of NSS, but in opposite ways. China, Pakistan's strategic partner, has been declared as a strategic competitor of the US. Now, this has direct and crucial implication for Pakistan. Increase in US-China tensions is not favorable for Pakistan, as increasingly, Pakistan will be expected from both sides to express support. Besides, a military conflagration or even between China and the US is not in Pakistan's interest. Any military confrontation between two major powers will undermine regional security in Asia, with direct implication for middle powers like Pakistan.

India, which is lynchpin of America's Indo-Pacific strategy to compete with China across Indian and Pacific Oceans, would see expansion of defence, technology and trade cooperation with the US in short-to-medium term. Pakistan's strategic environment, consequently, will become more complex as when India will receive advanced weapons and defence technologies, Pakistan would respond by enhancing strategic cooperation with China. This, in turn, will sharpen existing alignments in South Asia, while accelerating strategic competition in the region.

For Pakistan, expansion of India's naval presence across the Indian Ocean is of particular concern. For now, India is expanding cooperation with the US across the Indian Ocean. Though, for the US, Indian Ocean is of secondary priority in the broader competition with China, but for Islamabad, Washington's declaration of New Delhi being 'net security provider' in Indian Ocean Region is problematic. To balance, India's outsized role and influence, Pakistan would be compelled to seek enhanced naval cooperation with China in the Indian Ocean Region.

Beyond this, while US and Pakistan are maintaining robust engagement to put substance into a bilateral relationship marred by acrimony in recent years, the NSS, however, doesn't inspire much confidence about the meaningful strategic content in the relationship. Structural factors discussed earlier will inhibit efforts for building a deep-rooted Pakistan-US relationship. Functional engagement to avert a complete breakdown will continue, however.

Conclusion

To those who closely follow US foreign policy, most of the NSS is unsurprising. As before, this edition of NSS largely affirms strategic trends that have been underway over past couple of years, and in some ways build upon the strategic direction adopted during the Obama administration. In other ways, Biden's NSS adjust some mis-steps of the Trump administration, such as it reverses America First approach. Beyond this, are few subtle changes in the broader strategy, which are bound to have strategic implications. For middle powers such as Pakistan, NSS makes their task of maintaining a balance in relations with major powers, bit more difficult.