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The U.S. National Security Strategy: The Trump Administration's Approach

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The U.S. is departing from the assumption that American security and prosperity can be achieved through cooperation and engagement with other international actors. It is an adjustment to its rivalry with Russia and China, in which it finds at stake not so much the protection of the current international order but rather this order's adaptation to American needs and interests. The Trump administration intends to achieve this goal by strengthening the military domination of the United States and by focusing on challenges from state actors, although the catalogue of threats still includes international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

After a few months of work by the U.S. National Security Council, on 18 December the National Security Strategy (NSS) was published, keeping up the tradition of preparing this document at the beginning of each new presidency. The NSS is a general explanation and extension of President Donald Trump's national security policy, which during his campaign came under the slogan "America First". Among the vital national interests listed in the document are the protection of the American people, the homeland and borders, and the "American way of life", as well as the promotion of economic prosperity and strengthening the power and influence of the U.S. in the world. At almost 60 pages, the strategy document reflects this catalogue of interests in its presentation and derives tasks.

Threats and Challenges. The document claims to depart from the "false premises" of all administrations since 1991, that is, that the U.S. is tied to overcoming tensions between states and developing harmonious international cooperation. Instead, the NSS concludes that there is intensifying rivalry among states in the political, economic, military, information, and technological dimensions. Essentially, this is also the difference between Trump and his predecessors. The newest NSS clearly indicates that China and Russia are weakening U.S. security and influence. These states are mastering their propaganda and asymmetric, conventional, and nuclear capabilities to revise the international order and to promote rules contrary to American values while the U.S. wants to preserve its role as the main pillar of this order. Just after China and Russia, the NSS lists North Korea and Iran as countries destabilising their respective neighbourhood, sponsoring terrorism, and developing ballistic missile arsenals. North Korea, with its advanced nuclear and missile programmes, is listed as becoming a global threat. All the countries mentioned in the strategy are mastering their capabilities to operate just below the threshold of open aggression.

Among direct and potential threats to U.S. citizens and the homeland, the NSS lists global jihadist organisations, including Al Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State, as well as international organised crime groups. The NSS expects growth in threats from weapons of mass destruction, including capabilities developed by North Korea, Iran, and terrorist groups. Among the non-traditional threats, the NSS emphasizes the possibility of an outbreak of intentional, accidental, or natural pandemics in the U.S. At the same time, this Trump administration NSS omits the threat of climate change set out in previous

documents. The importance of the multi-dimensional rivalry between states and their corresponding military threats are translated into preferred U.S. means and methods to achieve the goals stated in the NSS.

Means and Methods. The NSS stresses that in coping with these challenges, the U.S. will use all means in its control, but the lead role is reserved for military power, with the priority to preserve military supremacy over its rivals. To achieve this, a full spectrum of economic activities will help the American economy regain competitive advantages. The strategy seeks to counter discriminatory trade practices, labelling them as “economic aggression”, and to introduce greater fairness and reciprocity by concluding new, preferably bilateral trade agreements. Military power is defined as a condition for the effectiveness of U.S. diplomacy, which is clearly perceived in the document as playing a secondary role. Moreover, how the NSS defines the priority of U.S. diplomacy (“sustains dialogue and fosters areas of cooperation with competitors”) testifies to the prevailing Trump administration thinking in terms of competition. The U.S. wants to be in a position of strength, which it perceives as the most effective position to secure its interests, not through dialogue or negotiations.

The NSS holds that U.S. military supremacy should deter its rivals from attempts to question American freedom of action in military, economic, or political dimensions. Importantly, the NSS concludes that the U.S. cannot rely only on a technological advantage and that—beside consolidation within the military—investments must be made in the growth of America’s armed forces. However, the document is silent on plans for increasing defence spending and additional revenue is foreseen to come from more effective budgetary procedures and allocation of funds. Trump himself many times suggested the U.S. should cease the use of “sequestration”, that is, limits on the base defence budget when other spending positions are above the legally approved levels. The NSS also emphasizes the important role of U.S. forward military presence, which it finds essential for deterrence and the eventual increase in the projection of power.

The NSS does not define how U.S. military power would be used but notes that threats to U.S. security will be pursued to their source, and that America reserves the right to react to potential threats, especially those that cannot be deterred in traditional ways. The last point is especially relevant to non-state actors, mainly jihadists. Moreover, the NSS announces that in response to any attack, the U.S. will “defeat” the aggressor, not just “punish” it, which can be seen as a warning to North Korea.

Prospects and Conclusions. The publication of the NSS coincides with the end of the first year of Trump’s presidency, which has been marked by many internal conflicts and personnel changes, including among his closest advisors. These seem not to have affected the preparation of the document, which always puts order to a given U.S. administration’s foreign and security policy. The Trump administration is also finalizing work on other complementary documents: National Military Strategy, Nuclear Posture Review, and Ballistic Missile Defense Review. Similar to the NSS, these reports should also reflect the lead role of the Department of Defense over influencing strategic reflection in this administration.

For the Trump administration, a key problem is the discrepancy between the contents of these official documents—prepared through a rigorous process by the most important agencies and departments responsible for U.S. national security policy and formally authorized by the president—and the chief executive’s own public statements. Even during the presentation of the NSS, President Trump again stated that the U.S. will demand “compensation” for the American commitment to the defence of its allies.

That increases the likelihood that doubts about the American political will to honour allied commitments will persist, not disappear. In the U.S. relations with its allies, this type of approach might mobilise them to increase their defence budgets, including modernisation of their armed forces. The NSS also reminds member states of NATO that they pledged to increase defence spending to at least 2% of GDP by 2024. This call was part of previous U.S. administration policies, but this is the first time it was included in document of this significance. President Trump’s introduction of ambiguity and tensions into relations with U.S. allies might also result in weakening cohesion across alliances, and in an extreme case could embolden rivals to test its credibility.

At the same time, if the contents of the latest NSS are consistently implemented, that could have positive results for U.S. allies on NATO’s Eastern Flank, including Poland. The strategy declares a further strengthening of U.S. forces in Europe, especially in deterrence and defence from threats from Russia. Moreover, and in the context of efforts by Central and Eastern Europe to diversify the sources of energy resources, the region also could benefit from the U.S. will to consolidate its position as an exporter. Another promising area for cooperation between this region and the U.S. is in countering specific types of threats—conventional and cyber—and critical infrastructure, including that related to energy.