

The National Security Strategy of the United States: Geopolitics

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Introductory Note

This essay provides ideas for incorporation in the coming version of “The National Security Strategy of the US” (NSS) and its successors. It is paired with a second essay addressing “The National Defense Strategy of the US” (NDS). These national documents have a close, symbiotic relationship, as do these two essays, which share a common logic, structure, and multiple cross-references. However, the ideas in these two essays are severable. The reader does not have to subscribe to one to endorse the other — though they are written with that linkage in mind. Critique and suggestions for action are offered in a spirit of utmost respect for the offices involved.

Abstract

Rewrite the National Security Strategy of the US; adopt a geopolitical perspective, specifically:

Acknowledge that the US is a geopolitical seapower engaged in long-term competition with great continental adversaries.

The ultimate stakes are control of Eurasia, either through a) a stable balance of power (with no single entity in control) or b) through the hegemony of one state or a duopoly.

The security of the US depends on preserving a) and preventing b) and requires maintenance of a favorable military balance in the key economic regions of Eurasia — and on the world ocean.

Recognize that, if war cannot be prevented, the side that can exert control of the world ocean will, sought or unsought, deny its weaker adversary all access to the sea and may well force its adversary to face existential choices regarding its sea-based intercontinental nuclear forces, its economic well-being, and its very sovereignty. This sea-denial process — provisionally designated “blockade” — appears unavoidable and difficult, if not impossible, to modulate.

*Defend the seapower’s vulnerabilities; the US has no greater vulnerability in conventional war than the sea lines of communication that link it to its allies; without defensible SLOCs, the US alliance will collapse, the US will **lose** the war, and then face a Eurasian hegemon alone — likely itself becoming the target of blockade.*

Exploit the advantages that a seapower enjoys: 1) forming alliances, 2) prosecuting military-economic warfare, 3) exerting blockade (global sea denial) which has strategic meaning independent of what happens on land. Note that the third is conditional on acquiring and maintaining capabilities to control the sea — an option that is open to continental powers as well.

Combine competitive strategies with cooperative ones to deal with the security dilemma.

Publicly express the NSS in ideological language; privately base its development on geopolitical principles.

Purpose

The *National Security Strategy of the United States* (NSS) is a congressionally mandated document, signed by the President.¹ It sits at the apex of the system of planning for the nation's security.² At the time of this writing, a new version is almost certainly being drafted.³

The existing (2017) NSS ignores geopolitics. It thus suffers four acute shortcomings. It does not:

- recognize the nation's unique position as a geopolitical seapower in competition with great continental adversaries;
- exploit the advantages that a seapower enjoys;
- target the vulnerabilities of its great continental competitors;
- encompass the world ocean — where the global balance of power can be decided just as surely as in Eurasia's centers of economic power.

This essay addresses these shortcomings⁴ and suggests ideas to incorporate into the next NSS and those that follow it. The twofold aim is to provide 1) a set of theoretical propositions on which to construct the NSS today and for the foreseeable future, and 2) concrete, real world concepts that take account of the nation's geopolitical position.

Although the nation possesses a large and sophisticated military-intellectual complex to analyze its strategic choices, the NSS is rarely addressed except after its publication.⁵ We

¹ Last issued as *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, (Washington DC: The White House, December 2017).

<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>. A new NSS is said to be issued soon. This post will be revised to connect it with the new document. However, as will be seen, this post is written at a quite fundamental level. Its key ideas and recommendations are unlikely to change.

² The writer's idealized view: The NSS is issued to guide the planning of all parts of the Executive Branch, especially, the Defense Department. The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) then issues the National Defense Strategy (NDS), signed by the Secretary, which is supported by the always classified, National Military Strategy, signed by the Chairman of the JCS. At the base of the system, the leaders of the military services issue "strategy" documents meant to provide guidance for each service's training and operations and the acquisition of forces for the future. This essay addresses only the NSS. It should be read in concert with its companion "The National Defense Strategy: Military-Economic Warfare" on the writer's *cliosmusings.blog*, hereafter referred to as *National Defense Strategy: Military-Economic Warfare*. All references to blog posts in this essay, unless otherwise noted, refer to *cliosmusings.blog*.

³ Ideally, the National Security Strategy will someday reach doctrinal status reflecting the enduring nature of the nation's geopolitical position and its deeply held ideological preferences. Thus the NSS would change slowly over time. The National Defense Strategy, on the other hand, would change more quickly because it must adjust to rapidly changing technology.

⁴ And only these. The NSS deals with many other aspects of national security. These arguments are fundamentally rooted in the "rational actor" model. Also, they are also action-oriented and so attempt to take account of "organizational processes" as they apply to long-term strategic planning. "Governmental politics," for example, how the content of the NSS has varied with the ideologies and policy biases of changing presidential administrations is out of bounds. These familiar categories are borrowed from Allison who applied them to crisis decision-making. Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, first published 1971; and Allison and Philip Zelikow 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1999).

⁵ A recent (and to the writer's knowledge, sole) examination of the NSS, its role, construction, and content concludes that the final product, overseen by the National Security Council staff, is the product of many earlier

seldom ask ourselves prior, fundamental questions that the writers of the NSS must effectively answer: what are we competing for and why? what are the foci of competition? how will we know if we're winning or losing? what are our sources of advantage? what are our adversary(ies)'s vulnerabilities? These foundational issues form this essay's departure point and guide its direction.

While the focus is the NSS, attention is also accorded to documents that fall below it, specifically, OSD's "National Defense Strategy of the US," (NDS) and the expressions of strategic role and purpose published by the chiefs of the military services. This is necessary because the coherence of the national planning system requires the logical alignment of its various levels. Important changes at one level should necessitate changes at the others. Today, however, the three levels are poorly aligned.⁶ The resulting incoherence brings inefficiency and a less than logical national strategy — far short of what is actually at the nation's disposal, and is very much required, for a long-term competition with great power rivals.

Order

This essay first outlines the broad geopolitical perspective the NSS should adopt and then explores specific definitions that give that perspective meaning today. The nation's geopolitical position gives it advantages in forming alliances, which are taken up next, and in waging military-economic warfare, which is addressed separately in the companion essay on the NDS. A penultimate section argues that the NSS should couple its competitive strategies with cooperative ones, without which it cannot deal with the security dilemma.⁷ A final section addresses the language in which the NSS is expressed — geopolitics vs. ideology — and the relationship between the two.

Background

The public version of the NSS is directed at multiple foreign and domestic audiences. It combines realism and idealism, hard and soft power, competition and cooperation. A defining feature of a new NSS adds a further duality to its fundamental perspective: ideology and geopolitics.⁸ These are the twin bases on which the alliance system, at the core of the national strategy, rests. Ideology provides the NSS's *raison d'être* and the language in which the

drafts that originate at lower levels, including the military services. Notable by its absence is any mention of the NDS. Steven Heffington, Adam Oler, and David Tretler (eds.) *A National Security Strategy Primer* (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 2019, available at nwc.ndu.edu/.)

⁶ As is described in the post "The National Defense Strategy: Military-Economic Warfare."

⁷ The security dilemma describes the situation where a build-up of armaments meant to defend against attack is viewed by the potential attacker as reflecting not defensive but offensive intentions and so triggers an arms build-up in response. The result is an arms race, an unstable relationship between the parties, and a greater likelihood of war. The concept was first introduced by the German-American scholar John H. Herz in "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma", *World Politics* vol. 2, no. 2 (1950), pp. 171–201. A generation later it found expression in Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* vol. 30, no.2 (January 1978), pp. 167–174; and Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 58–113.

⁸ As will be discussed in detail in the final section, geopolitics is concerned with tangible matters — who controls what areas of the world's land and ocean. Ideology deals with intangible ideas — the shape of the international order and of the governments of the states that make it up, but also reflecting religious, cultural, and historical antagonisms and bonds between states.

strategy is publicly expressed. Geopolitics provides the ideas on which it is privately planned.⁹

The existing NSS is based almost entirely on ideological considerations. It depicts the nation as standing alone in unquestioned possession of world leadership based on a superior ideological model of near-irresistible attractiveness to other nations, coupled with dominant military strength. The document cannot be modified or added to. It must be completely rewritten, a process, as noted, that is under way.

Ground Rules

The ideas presented here give priority to realism, hard power, and competition. To students of the NSS and its lower-level doctrinal counterparts, and to those who play or have played official roles in their development, many of these ideas individually are unlikely to be new. However, the documents in which they have been expressed invariably do so in fragmentary form with no unifying intellectual infrastructure. This essay's highest aim is to supply at least a candidate that might meet that lofty goal.

The argument follows these ground rules:

- The focus is on the use of the nation's capabilities today.
- Planning for war is at the level of conventional weapons, made in the shadow of ever-present nuclear arsenals.
- Attention concentrates on great power competition. Other important, but still lower order, motivations for national action are not addressed, including: countering at their source terrorist threats to the homeland, enforcing international principles like freedom of navigation¹⁰ and the unacceptability of altering borders through military force.
- The unit of attention is the nation-state; sub-national entities are not addressed.

The dominant perspective is geopolitical.

Geopolitics

The United States spans a continent. From a geopolitical point of view, however, it is an island off the shores of the great Eurasian landmass — a geopolitical sea power in competition with two great Eurasian continental powers. That competition is shaped by geopolitics — defined here as the influence of global geography on the balance of power (BOP) in international relations.¹¹ This essay sees the current era — starting at least as early

⁹ In many cases ideology and geopolitics are closely intertwined. Consider, for example, Taiwan and Israel today. As will be addressed in the section Expressing the NSS, ideology is a vital component but an inadequate guide for strategic choice.

¹⁰ It is rarely recalled that this was the second of Wilson's Fourteen Points.
https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp Twenty-four years later the Atlantic Charter repeated the proposition almost word for word as one of the seven "common principles in the national policies of their respective countries [the US and the UK] on which they base their hopes for a better future for the world." To wit, "Seventh, such a peace should enable all men to traverse the high seas and oceans without hindrance"
<https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/atlantic.asp>

¹¹ Geopolitics as a field of study can be quite complex. With apologies to its practitioners, it is here employed with the fewest of its basic elements possible for the purposes at hand. Occam's razor applied with, hopefully, a judicious hand.

as the beginning of the 20th century¹² — as one governed by a balance of power system.¹³ From the BOP vantage point, WWI, WWII, and the Cold War were all aimed at preventing first Germany, then (Soviet) Russia from conquering, or acquiring the means to conquer, Europe from the Urals to the Atlantic.

Geopolitical theory holds that such a conquest would make the conqueror an “emperor” with unanswerable global reach.¹⁴ This is the meaning the geopolitical perspective takes on in a new NSS: ultimately, today’s competition is between 1) China and Russia, great continental states whose geography, population, and economic strength give them the potential to dominate Eurasia, and 2) an alliance of the states on Eurasia’s periphery led by the US, a geopolitical seapower — if it chooses to lead.

Geopolitics provides a broad and enduring basis for national security planning. No viable alternative is at hand — except the possibility that an NSS that lacks a unifying construct, as does the current version, continues to be seen as acceptable.¹⁵

Geopolitics determines the stakes over which a big war would be fought, the war’s shape (who fights whom, and where the fighting takes place), the definition of victory, and the structure of great power competition in the “postwar” world (assuming the warring powers survive the war).¹⁶

¹² The focus here is Europe, where there have been aspirants but no hegemon since 1815. This observation does not take account of ways other than military power through which a dominant state may oversee a stable international order, as argued for example by Keohane. Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

¹³ Since antiquity there have been long periods when international relations have been governed not by systems of balance of power but by empire, raising questions about the explanatory power of BOP theory. See for example W.C. Wohlforth, Richard Little, S.J. Kaufman, et al., “Testing Balance-Of-Power Theory in World History”, *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2007 pp. 155–185. This essay, as noted, assumes the world is in a period governed by BOP. Equally important, and with a bow toward Wohlforth, et al., the objective of US national security policy is to prevent the emergence of Eurasian hegemon which could indeed end the reign of BOP and replace it with the historically more frequent pattern of empire.

¹⁴ This is the core of geopolitics, best, some would say timelessly, articulated by H.J. Mackinder. (“The Geographical Pivot of History,” *The Geographic Journal*, 1904. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History” in *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (New York: Holt, 1919). National Defence University Press, 1996, pp. 175–194; <https://ia802705.us.archive.org/30/items/democraticideals00mackiala/democraticideals00mackiala.pdf>. Nicholas John Spykman drew heavily on, and was also a critic of, Mackinder. Writing as WWII was well under way, Spykman took account of the second battle of the Atlantic to offer counsel on the shape of the postwar peace in *The Geography of the Peace* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944). He saw control of the oceans between the US and the “rimlands” of Eurasia as mandatory. Control of the rimlands might itself give the US a dominant position in world politics and would, in any case, be necessary to contain a single power that might dominate the continental “heartland.” Though not usually regarded as a geopolitician, Samuel Huntington drew heavily on geopolitical concepts and language — seapower vs. land power, focus US naval power on the rimlands, etc. — in his celebrated 1954 article on the Navy’s “strategic concept.” (Samuel P. Huntington, “National Policy and the Transoceanic Navy,” *Proceedings* (March 1954). The power and persistence of this idea were more recently reconfirmed (though not named “geopolitics”) by historian Robert Kagan: After the Second World War, Americans were convinced that “their way of life could not be safe in a world where Europe and Asia were dominated by hostile autocratic powers.” Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (New York: Knopf, 2018), p. 124.

¹⁵ The current NSS gives lip service to geopolitics (op. cit., p. 26), but it is a label for a category with no content.

¹⁶ War between the great powers would be a catastrophe — not least for the warring parties. It must never be fought. The NSS should state that avoiding it is among the nation’s top priorities. However, human stupidity may someday prevail, and we are obliged to plan for one — aware that, because of the security dilemma, such plans may be self-defeating. (See the [Cooperative Strategies](#) section.)

Defining the War's Stakes

Competition between the great powers has served as the basis for US defense planning since 2018.¹⁷ Competitions usually are defined by their stakes. So, what is this competition about? What is to be won or lost?

The geopolitical answer can be found in reasons the US alliance system¹⁸ takes its existing form — who has joined it and why. Its members are geographically concentrated around the peripheries of the great continental powers. While each member has its own specific reasons, the ultimate reason they choose to ally is that they share with the US the objective of preventing China and/or Russia from achieving control of the Eurasian landmass. Were that to happen, no member — including the US — could successfully resist ultimate domination at the hands of the Eurasian hegemon.

The US must prepare for and may have to fight on behalf of the balance of power in the key centers of economic power in Eurasia and on the world ocean. The meaning of victory or defeat in any conflict would be found in the direction and degree to which that outcome affects the global balance — that is, the balance on land in Eurasia¹⁹ and on the sea. These are the stakes of the competition. They may seem remote from today's specific regional and oceanic plans. But they are real, influence strategic choice in the NSS, and must always be present in the planner's mind.

Defining Who Fights Whom

Thus, geopolitics explains the stakes of today's competition, and of a big war, if there should be one. Geopolitics came to life as a theory at the end of the 19th century.²⁰ It arose because over that century's course, technology, the steam engine on locomotives and ships, had injected a grand geographical dimension into the then-existing European balance of power calculus. By the century's end, continental-scale conquest became physically possible.

The concrete manifestation of geopolitical theory was first seen in Britain. In the pre-WWI period Britain increasingly viewed itself as a seapower facing great continental competitors. Its greatest concern was that various combinations of France, Russia, or Germany might ally against it. After the Anglo-French Entente of 1904 and the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, Britain settled on Germany as the priority competitor.²¹ Even then there remained the

¹⁷ Announced by Secretary of Defense Mattis. James Mattis, "Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy" [initial capitals Great Power in the original], speech, Washington, DC, January 19, 2018), <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1420042/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-on-the-national-defense-strategy/>. Mr. Mattis was announcing the recent release of "US National Defense Strategy," the summary of which uses the less specific term "inter-state competition," <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>, p.1.

¹⁸ Defined as made up of formal allies as in NATO and through bilateral treaties, and others to whom NATO-like relations have been extended, and less formal "partners."

¹⁹ The NSS must (re)emphasize that the US and its allies regard the existing balance as acceptable, that they have no interest in redrawing the political map, and that they intend to take action to oppose any effort to do so by military force. Critiques of BOP thinking observe that when the US speaks of "balance" of power, it really means "preponderance" of its own power. See John M. Owen IV "Transnational Liberalism and American Primacy; or, Benignity Is in the Eye of the Beholder," in John G. Ikenberry (ed.), *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp 239-259.

²⁰ In this essay under the rhetorical flag "Mackinder." See footnote 14.

²¹ A. Wess Mitchell, *How Great Powers Avoid Multi-Front War* (Project prepared for: Office of Net Assessment United States Department of Defense, September 14, 2020)

possibility that either Russia or Germany might conquer the other. In that case a single state (or a duopoly) would dispose of the preponderance of the European continent's economic resources and thus of a likely overwhelming military potential.

What was started before WWI as a continental-scale geopolitical competition in Europe between (seapower) Britain and (continental powers) Germany/Russia became globalized over the course of the 20th century.

In WWII the US became a combatant in part because it recognized that a German victory would present the danger to the US that Britain had long foreseen — the whole of Europe's economic power in the control of a single state. In the Cold War the US and its allies were motivated by this same geopolitical fear, with Soviet Russia replacing Germany as the potential menace. The Cold War is generally seen as a competition between ideologies, but it had a firm geopolitical foundation as well. In the post-Cold War era great power competition has become almost entirely geopolitical.²²

In sum, 21st-century geopolitics continues to cast the US in the role of seapower vs. continental powers — paralleling, now on a global scale, the position that Britain occupied in Europe in the 20th century.²³ After two centuries' evolution geopolitical competition has found its logical conclusion.²⁴ Geography does not change. Competition between the great powers may attenuate and be managed successfully (one hopes), but it is unlikely to disappear. Geopolitics is the 21st century's guide. Plans that ignore it or give it fragmentary expression are deficient from the start.

This point cannot be over-emphasized. After the Cold War ended, two of modern America's greatest theorist-practitioners of international politics, Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, each has strongly advocated geopolitics as the conceptual basis for the nation's security planning.²⁵

https://www.themarathoninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ONA-Report_Mitchell_TMI_FINAL-220214.pdf, Chapter V "Preclusive Accommodation: Edwardian Britain." Mitchell's thoughtful report is cited here for its treatment of the historical record. It does not argue geopolitical logic.

²² Ideological competition is of growing importance as the 21st century unfolds, a subject taken up in the Conclusion.

²³ History may not repeat itself but it does show patterns.

²⁴ It is tempting to see this as another "end of history" development, made famous by Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). This one, however, seems real and is not an "end" but a continuation.

²⁵ Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), particularly p.813; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard : American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997) and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Geostrategic Triad: Living with China, Europe, and Russia* (Washington, DC: CSIS Press, 2009) p. 55. Note that they served as advisors to presidents of opposing parties suggesting that geopolitics is both potent and bipartisan. Chinese specialists also use geopolitical constructs and language. See Xu Qi, Andrew S. Erickson, and Lyle J. Goldstein. "Maritime Geostrategy and Development of the Chinese Navy in the Early Twenty-first Century," *Naval War College Review* 59, no. 4 (2006) pp. 46-67, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26396769>. Xu Qi is a Senior Captain in the People's Liberation Army Navy and holds a PhD in military studies, Translators Erickson and Goldstein quote the author as saying China's "long period of prosperity [as well as] the Chinese nation's existence, development, and great resurgence [all] increasingly rely on the sea."

Defining Where the Fight Takes Place - On Land and at Sea

The land dimensions of a possible great power war have long been established: in Europe, the boundaries of the NATO alliance; in the Indo-Pacific, the Korean peninsula, Taiwan, and possibly Southeast Asia. A war's oceanic dimensions are complex. Some take their meaning from the shape of war on land — the prime example is NATO's sea lines of communication. If NATO cannot protect them, NATO loses — no matter how successful it may be in the war on land. Should this happen, the US would then confront the victor (Russia, or Russia in combination with China) on its own, without allies.

Global blockade, however, takes on strategic meaning largely independent of war on land.²⁶ Blockade's power arises from the sea-dependence of the great powers. All depend on the sea for their security and prosperity. Denial of access to the sea carries great debilitating and coercive potency. The world ocean has such importance that a favorable balance of power at sea is as important to this nation's security as is a favorable balance of power in Eurasia's leading economic centers on land.²⁷ This will likely be the case for many decades, perhaps the rest of this century. Thus, control of the sea, particularly exercised through blockade, has profound strategic meaning.

Note that global sea control (some may prefer "command of the sea") is dependent on the relative military, mainly naval, capabilities of the competing states. Today the US and China have the industrial capacity to produce forces that can contend for control of the world ocean. The US is currently dominant. (Today, no nation can use the sea except at the sufferance of the US and its allies.) It cannot be ruled out that Russia may eventually be able and willing to produce similar military capabilities.

Global blockade is given detailed attention in the revised NDS²⁸ because global sea denial is a primary task of the DOD and, despite its deep historical roots, it is widely misunderstood and has been little analyzed, if at all.

What Happens if US Alliances Fail?

The reasons why a big, many-member alliance may end up fighting an "alliance" with one or two members is important to understanding the motivations of the lesser states involved. States do or do not join in alliances for a variety of reasons.²⁹ In the case at hand, because of a common fear of domination by a continental power, lesser states join and stay in alliance with the US because the US underwrites their security while posing no threat to their

²⁶ Neither SLOC protection nor blockade appears in the current NSS and the subordinate NDS. No matter how a new NSS may be changed, if it continues to ignore the world ocean, it will be worse than inadequate.

²⁷ Both the National Security Strategy (2017) and the National Defense Strategy (2018) specify favorable balances in Europe and the Indo-Pacific (also in the Mideast and Latin America) as their strategic objectives. As noted, both are silent on the world ocean.

²⁸ See the post "The National Defense Strategy: Military-Economic Warfare."

²⁹ The authoritative source on alliance formation is Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Spring, 1985), pp. 3-43; Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990). For a useful summary of writings on alliances see Simon Saradzhyan, "Why Russia's alliance with China is improbable, but not impossible," Paris: Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (Recherches & Documents n°13/2020) September 21, 2020, <https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/recherches-et-documents/2020/202013.pdf>, pp.1-9.

independence and, in any case, has no means of coercing their support on behalf of defending its own independence.³⁰

In contrast, lesser states do not choose to ally with a great continental state because “alliance” always means diminished independence if not loss of sovereignty altogether. By virtue of their power and geographic proximity continental states are an ever-present threat to lesser neighbors. The result is the present state of affairs: The seapower has multiple and enduring allies. The continental powers have none.³¹

Unless the US is forced by defeat in war to withdraw from its alliance system or voluntarily chooses to withdraw³² (an action called Plan B, below), the system will endure. It may well attract new members as the continental states (China) grow in economic and military power and extend their potential to threaten ever more intensely a wider arc of states. Ironically perhaps, the stronger the continental state(s) becomes the more numerous and more dedicated the members of the opposing (US-led) alliance. India’s steady movement in the direction of strategic cooperation with the US and its friends suggests this process is actively underway today.³³ Similar considerations have caused historic neutrals, Sweden and Finland, to apply for NATO membership.³⁴

Global alliances are the bedrock of US strategy today — what might be called the nation’s “Plan A.” An alternative “Plan B” is available: the US could choose, or be forced, to withdraw from the overseas world and to construct a fortress America defended behind two oceanic moats. However, an entity then left in control of the Eurasian landmass would possess such enormous economic resources it could likely, in the course of time, dominate an economically shrunken, trade-deprived, Plan B-defended America.³⁵ In this case America would be less likely to face invasion than blockade - denial of the use of the sea. As well, it

³⁰ This last is not a trivial point. It suggests an hypothesis with explanatory power regarding an important question in recent international relations. Walt (Stephen Walt, “Imbalance of Power,” *Foreign Policy*, 193 (May 12, 2012) and others have asked why in the period 1990-2010, when the US enjoyed unrivaled dominance of a “unipolar” world, did other powers not move immediately to balance US preponderance — as balance of power and alliance theories would predict? Here, the geopolitical seapower-land power dichotomy points to an answer: all parties recognized, perhaps unconsciously or subconsciously, that a geopolitical seapower, as is the US, cannot, as can a continental power, coerce its “allies” through threats of military occupation and subjugation. (This contrast is fundamental. The continental power enjoys the advantage of internal lines of communication in his own and adjacent territories. The seapower does not.) The US lacked the means, as well as any motivation, because it was/is satisfied with the existing order, to threaten anyone except minor states in the Mideast. (The outcome of conflicts there have little effect, if any, on the overall balance of power in Eurasia except to the extent they involve the seapower’s expenditure of vast resources.) Thus, in the period of the unipolar world, there was no “preponderance” for other states to balance.

³¹ Actually, China has none except North Korea. Leaving aside weak states like Belarus, whose leadership is domestically in extremis, Russia has a few “allies” in Central Asia. These states, to the degree they have had a choice in the matter, are drawn into Russia’s orbit by a shared fear of domination by China. The existence of non-aligned states like Finland during the Cold War and Vietnam today is not addressed here.

³² If “withdraws” means the removal of US forces currently stationed on the ground overseas, it would be a historic physical action that is probably politically irreversible.

³³ The subject of much commentary. See for example Susan A. Thornton, “The Quad (finally) delivers: Can it be sustained,” Washington, DC, The Brookings Institution, April 12, 2021 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/14/the-quad-finally-delivers-can-it-be-sustained/>

³⁴ Gabriela Rosa Hernández, “Finland Sweden Apply to Joint NATO,” *Arms Control Today*, June 22, 2022 (<https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-06/news/finland-sweden-apply-join-nato>)

³⁵ This is the greatest concern expressed by both Kissinger and Brzezinski, ops. cit.

would likely face fractious neighbors in the Western Hemisphere stimulated by 21st-century Zimmermann telegrams and other initiatives aimed at fracturing the Union.

In any case, Plan A has been effective since 1945. The job of the new NSS is to follow it for continued success. To do that it must address the world ocean and direct the DOD to maintain the nation's ability to defend alliance SLOCs and to deny any other nation the use of the sea.³⁶

What Happens if China and Russia Ally?

The greatest concerns for the US, extending into an uncertain future, are 1) that China and Russia may voluntarily ally, or be forced to do so by a war versus the US and its allies; or 2) that one might conquer the other, or, more likely, China may become so powerful economically and so unmatched demographically, especially in the key regions of their shared border, that Russia eventually becomes its virtual vassal.³⁷

Were China and Russia to make common cause, for whatever reason, the US would find itself in a world in the 21st century that Britain faced in the 20th: the possibility of a single state (or a duopoly) disposing of the preponderance of the world's economic resources and acquiring, ultimately, an overwhelming military potential.³⁸

This China-Russia geopolitical nexus presents the US with its most difficult planning dilemma.³⁹ In a war with either, the more successful the US becomes — including via blockade — the more likely the other will come to the losing party's aid, and the more likely the US and its allies will be facing not one great continental enemy but two. The aiding power would not have to become a combatant — except in the case of resisting blockade — but only to provide its losing partner/ally levels of material support that ensure the war, whatever its length, has no victor.⁴⁰

In concluding this section on geopolitics, the reader should note its extraordinary explanatory power — its theories account for and explain, to a quite significant degree, the shape the world has taken over the last 120 years and the likely behavior of states today and in the

³⁶ Concepts and language to do so are in the post “The National Defense Strategy: Military-Economic Warfare”.

³⁷ This latter is not just a theoretical possibility. Already demographic and economic trends on the two sides of the Russia-China border strongly favor China's informal expansion at Russia's expense. Simon Saradzhyan, op. cit., p.26.

³⁸ As the title of his work suggests (see footnote 24), Saradzhyan concludes that a Russia-China alliance is unlikely. However, he addresses only peacetime competition, not the case of a war between the US and either.

³⁹ And for Russia as well. Russia's leaders are well aware of the danger China poses to its independence and the “unique role Russia has played for centuries as a counterbalance in international affairs.” (“Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 1, 2016 (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016), cited by Saradzhyan, op. cit.) The US-Russia-China cosmic triangle will occupy America's strategic analysts for at least the remainder of this century. The 2020s will likely see a continuation of Russia-China military cooperation aimed at the US. However, whether that trend will continue as China grows ever stronger relative to Russia remains to be seen. Much will depend on the adroitness of US diplomacy - which is sorely challenged by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's verbal support thereof.

⁴⁰ Here one finds a real world example of Mearsheimer's “bloodletting” strategy. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001), Chap. 5.

foreseeable future. As Colin Gray has made clear, its greatest utility is as a guide to broad strategic choice, itself a subject for continuing analysis.⁴¹

Defining Victory

US military achievements at the conventional level are highly unlikely to produce the conditions approaching those of WWII's unconditional surrender, i.e., occupation of the enemy's territory, defeat of his conventional armed forces and the destruction of the means to produce them, and — possibly — replacement of the governing regime. This last condition must be qualified. Regimes that lose wars or are seen to be on the path toward defeat often fall from power. One of the objectives of military-economic warfare is the destabilization of the enemy's social and political system leading to war termination, likely through regime change.

For the US, “victory” in a war with a great power adversary(ies) must be narrowly conceived. The NSS must envision necessarily limited war goals, likely confined to the restoration of the status quo ante.⁴² Note the geopolitical basis for this judgment, which is independently reinforced by the presence of nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the warring parties.

Note as well that if a war that terminated under these conditions leaves one or even both parties dissatisfied regarding the issue that gave rise to it, another war might fairly soon follow.⁴³ The NSS needs to encompass this possibility, plan for it, and convey to adversaries that the US possesses genuine, long-term strategic vision.⁴⁴

Expressing the National Security Strategy - Geopolitics vs. Ideology

Geopolitics is concerned with tangible matters — who controls what areas of the world's land and ocean. Ideology deals with intangible ideas — the shape of the international order and of the governments of the states that make it up, and also reflecting religious, cultural, and historical antagonisms and bonds between states. Both are vital determinants of the national strategy. The question is what roles each should play in its public expression. As noted in this essay's opening remarks, the NSS communicates its message to a wide variety of domestic and foreign audiences. Internally: to the multiple entities of the US government, the

⁴¹ Colin Gray, “In Defence of the Heartland: Sir Halford Mackinder and His Critics a Hundred Years On,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 23, Issue 1 (2004), pp. 9-25; published online 24 Jun 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930490274454> Subsequently appearing in Brian W. Blouet, ed., *Global Geostrategy: Mackinder and the Defence of the West*. (London and New York: Frank Cass/Routledge, 2005.)

⁴² This was and remains the founding objective of NATO which defines itself as a “defensive” alliance. Yet the world wars of the 20th century resulted in wholesale redrawing of borders, as well might a big war in this one. The point here is that pre- and intra-war US statements of war goals should be confined to restoration of the status quo.

⁴³ The brief period from 1918 to 1939 provides a painful example of how quickly a defeated power, whose territory has not been occupied by the victor, whose means of armament production remain intact, and whose regime has changed (for the worse) can fight again. As is argued in the post “The National Defense Strategy: Military-Economic Warfare,” a strategy of military-economic warfare, including blockade and cyber, is well suited for war termination generally and the “inter-war” periods for however many wars may follow.

⁴⁴ This point would likely not be lost on strategic planners in China, a nation fabled for its long view of history.

NSS must display leadership, coherence and logic and convey clear guidance for its implementers.⁴⁵

Externally: to adversaries, it must express competitive strength and resolve — while simultaneously stating the desire for cooperation; to allies, it must express shared values as well as similar strength and resolve; and to the Congress and the US public at large, it must be a compelling narrative that describes the threats to the national security and a plan to meet them that justifies a particular investment of the nation's resources.

Ideology must take the lead in addressing these multiple audiences. Geopolitics provides the intellectual foundation for the NSS and should dominate its internal construction and articulation. Geopolitics's external role, however, is an open question. By its nature geopolitics is cold, abstract, and reflective of the ruthless, unrelenting competition that marks international relations.⁴⁶ It provides a pessimistic, unlikely, and untested rationale for unifying popular sentiment domestically and with and within allies. These attributes suggest that today it should play a small, certainly not a leading, role in the language of the external expression of the NSS — whose dominant public language should remain ideological.⁴⁷

Fortunately, the US alliance system is drawn together both by shared voluntary ideology as well as by shared geopolitical imperative.⁴⁸ A new NSS should be mindful of the dual origins of the alliance system on which it is centered.

⁴⁵ As noted, changes in the NSS must be matched by changes in documents that draw from it — the National Defense Strategy and the strategies of the military services. If such changes are not effected, the authors of the new NSS will have plowed the sea.

⁴⁶ Moreover “geopolitics” was given a pseudoscientific expression by Nazi-associated theorists like Haushofer supporting Germany's expansionist goals in the 1920s and 1930s. The aim of the variety of geopolitics being advocated here is the opposite idea: not expansion by any state but a stable balance of power among existing states.

⁴⁷ This is not to say that America's allies and partners are not fully capable of privately engaging in geopolitical discourse. The question of how much prominence to give to geopolitics in public will doubtless evolve over time.

⁴⁸ Why the geopolitical alliance and the ideological alliance are coterminous raises questions whose answers bear on how the balance between geopolitics and ideology is struck in the NSS. The issue centers on competing explanations for alliance formation. One school of thought holds that ideology regarding state governance may, on its own, provide substantial impetus for alliances to form when like-minded states join together against states holding a different view and when the latter threaten the legitimacy of the former. For a well-balanced review of the considerable literature on this subject see John M. Owen IV, “When Do Ideologies Produce Alliances? The Holy Roman Empire, 1517–1555,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Volume 49, Issue 1, March 2005, pp. 73–100. Owen argues that alliance formation is not the result of purely material — in the case at hand, geopolitical — calculation. Rather, the rational balance of power calculus is heavily alloyed by ideological considerations. Owen points to ideology's role in the foundation of NATO: The US and the Western European states feared that Communist governments might come to power in non-Communist European states through ideological subversion of domestic politics and electoral processes rather than through military action by the USSR. It is undoubtedly correct to see ideological motivation as fundamental in NATO's founding in the late 1940s. But geopolitics was present as well. More importantly, ideology has played little role in the continued cohesion of NATO after 1989-90, when the ideological reasons it came into being disappeared. This essay argues that the last 30 years of NATO's endurance has reflected the power of geopolitical calculation in the states who make it up (or, as noted, those of the Nordics who have applied to join it). And, for the same reasons that Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski turned from being Cold War ideological warriors into post-Cold War geopolitical ones, geopolitics will continue to dominate the thinking of statesmen who are mainly but not always the purely rational actors about whom Owen expresses skepticism. Even the most hardened “homo geopoliticus” would acknowledge that the US commitment to Israel and Taiwan are grounded in intangible “ideological” considerations.

A number of attributes of ideology disqualify it as a guide for planning strategy. First, in contrast to the unchanging verities of geopolitics, its effects can be variable. At the end of the Cold War, ideology almost disappeared as a factor shaping state behavior, yet for geopolitical reasons the US alliance system remained intact and in recent decades, as noted, is growing: This pattern is likely to continue, i.e., if Russia becomes more aggressive on its periphery and abroad and China's strength and assertiveness increase, the numbers and dedication of the members of the US alliance system that opposes them will also increase — assuming the US chooses to continue to lead its alliances.

As a guide to strategic choice ideology's effects are not always benign. Again, at the end of the Cold War the US, with strong endorsement of its allies, chose to expand the NATO alliance eastward and take in new members, including states on Russia's borders. The decision was driven mainly by emotional commitment to central/east European states who had suffered first from subjugation by Nazi Germany and then from governments imposed by Soviet Union. NATO's expansion in due course produced sentiments in Russia of deep dissatisfaction, betrayal, and threat, which Gaddis pointed out at the time would likely come to pass.⁴⁹ These sentiments are widely understood to have given rise to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in March 2022.

A more recent case is US policy toward Iran in the 2000s. The US intervened in Iraq in 2002 to remove Saddam Hussein, a brutal autocrat to be sure, but a natural and historic constraint on Iran's expansionist designs. The US then insisted on following the ideological dictates of democratic self-determination in Shiite majority Iraq with the predictable result that post-Saddam Shiite governments would be heavily influenced by Iran, and Iran's reach into Shiite-governed Syria and to Shiite factions in Lebanon increased markedly. In sum, ideology led to US decisions that were a massive gift to its adversary Iran and resulted in huge costs in blood and treasure.

A further reason ideology cannot provide the basis for national strategic plans is its geographic limitation. It focuses attention on states which physically exist only on the world's continents. It disregards the world ocean. Purely ideological thinking leads to planning whose center of attention is confined to the earth's land areas. To encompass the world ocean national plans must be anchored in geopolitical, not ideological, concept.

The public version of the NSS, however, should continue the emphasis of the current document and its predecessors on the competition of ideas regarding 1) the rules that shape the relations between states of the world, and 2) the purpose and form of the governance of those states.

Regarding the first, the current NDS (though not the NSS) already expresses the US commitment to supporting existing international rules and legal principles which are seen as under attack by Russia and China.⁵⁰ The new NSS should underline this commitment and the

⁴⁹ John Lewis Gaddis, Commentary Series on Putin's War: NATO Expansion: A Grand Strategy?, 15 March 2022. <https://issforum.org/essays/PDF/E417.pdf>. Originally published as John Gaddis, "History, Grand Strategy and NATO Enlargement," *Survival* Vol. 40, issue 1 (1998).

⁵⁰ "China and Russia are now undermining the international order from within by exploiting its benefits while simultaneously undercutting its principles and "rules of the road." Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, no author, no place, no publisher. Signed by "Jim Mattis," then Secretary Of Defense, but not so identified, p. 2.

essentiality of agreed rules in the cooperative relations between states, especially the great powers.

Regarding the second, today's political language frames ideological competition in terms of democracy vs. autocracy, continuing a century-old practice: The US fought WWI "to make the world safe for democracy."⁵¹ WWII had a similar purpose, as did the Cold War. The US and its allies share common ideals about the form and purpose of government: Liberal democracies are based on respect for individual human rights and the rule of law and exist only to serve their citizens.⁵² They are unified in their opposition to autocratic governments that exist and manipulate their citizens primarily for the purpose of keeping the governing elite in place. The fate of their citizens is determined by the degree to which the citizenry's well-being contributes to that end.

Autocracies, if they become more powerful over time, tend to become expansionist. In post-monarchical times, autocracies have commonly come to power in part through an ascending faction's manipulation of popular sentiment regarding revanchist territorial claims. When that faction becomes the government, the state it controls by definition becomes "expansionist." This was obviously the case with Nazi Germany and at some point apparently became true of China, regarding Taiwan today.

During the Cold War the expansionist urge of the Soviet Union was seen as driven by the ideological objective of spreading communism around the world. However, it also had a geopolitical underpinning, which, as has been argued, is ever-present even when unacknowledged.

Neither Russia nor China today has messianic ideological goals. Today, however, both often use ideological language in their competition with the US. From China's point of view "recovery" of Taiwan and the realization of sovereignty over claimed waters in the East and South China Seas are not only territorial objectives but unalterable ideological goals.⁵³ An increase in the number of states governed by autocratic principles diminishes human freedom and, in principle, can shift the geopolitical balance toward the autocratic continental powers. However, for geopolitical reasons, this rarely happens except as a result of domestic weakness of a lesser state or coercion by its larger continental neighbor.

⁵¹ President Wilson's speech to a Congressional joint session convened to declare war, April 2, 1917. Sixty-Fifth Congress, 1 Session, Senate Document No. 5

⁵² The possibility that another state may, through malicious electronic means, penetrate the social and political workings of a liberal democracy and so reduce it to total dysfunction or even cause it to transform itself into an autocracy does not fall within the purview of the NSS as currently conceived. Whether the nation should seek to defend itself against such penetration and choose to include that defense in the NSS should be an open question. In any case, the topic lies outside this essay's remit.

⁵³ Management and ultimately resolution of the Taiwan issue seems necessary if the US is to avoid the perils of the "Thucydides trap." The term, coined by Graham Allison and appearing in the titles of a number of his publications, is given insightful critique in Alan Greeley Misenheimer, *Thucydides' Other "Traps" The United States, China, and the Prospect of 'Inevitable' War*; National War College Case Study (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, June 2019),

https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/casestudies/nwc_casestudy-3.pdf. It is useful to recall that it is not abstract concepts like the accommodation of a dominant power to the appearance of a rising one that give occasion for war between the two. It is, rather, concrete issues, usually territorial.

Ideology is likely to play a growing role in international relations as the great autocratic powers visibly control their citizens through ever more advanced — and human freedom-crushing — technological means.⁵⁴ Democratic states find such practices unacceptable in principle. All states recognize that such means would be applied to their own populations if they were to lose their independence to a great continental neighbor. Such independence, once lost, would be extremely difficult to recover.

Ideology — the shared ideals and values of the US and its allies — may take a back seat to geopolitics in shaping strategic documents like the NSS, but it is the ultimate reason we write them.

Cooperative Strategies

No NSS would be complete if it did not address the security dilemma⁵⁵ and seek to prevent the emergence of an arms race that can spiral downward into great power war, as happened in the years before 1914.⁵⁶ The new NSS should do that through the language in which it is expressed and by providing cooperative as well as competitive ideas. Lest the nation come to be viewed as excessively bellicose, the external NSS should avoid adversary-explicit language. Our competitors, particularly China, already are well aware of the vulnerability that their dependence on use of the sea entails⁵⁷ and will hardly be surprised to learn that the US contemplates exploiting it.

Cooperative actions are much easier to state than to implement for two reasons. First, a modicum of mutual trust between the competing parties may be a necessary condition.⁵⁸ Second, security planning in all competing states tends to give a prominent role to military professionals whose métier is war. The NSS should direct a revised NDS to search for and, where possible, to implement cooperative plans.

Beyond moderation in its language, the NSS should make clear that the US seeks cooperation with competitors in the interests of mutual security, similar to the Navy's cooperative plans articulated and pursued in the 2000s.⁵⁹ The aim is to make sure the nation's strategies, taken

⁵⁴ Namely, biometrics, 3-D facial recognition, 5G CCTV, etc., directed by highly organized, specialized cadres committed to perpetuating the control of a ruling elite. In the longer term autocratic states seem more likely than others to exploit neuroscience for political sentiment detection and control and emerging genetic technologies to develop human-machine hybrids or varieties of humans designed for warfare. See Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), inter alia, chapter 11, "War."

⁵⁵ Defined in footnote 7.

⁵⁶ Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860–1914* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980).

⁵⁷ In 2003, President Hu Jintao described China's "Malacca dilemma," alluding to the vulnerability of China's fuel imports and other trade that pass through the Malacca Strait. That China's trade dependence could expose it to harm was restated in 2019 by professor Hu Bo of Peking University who reportedly said if China provoked a blockade it would be on a "suicide mission." *The Economist* (July 6, 2019) p. 47.

⁵⁸ Even where trust is absent, cooperation is still possible, as demonstrated by the Cold War's arms control agreements. It remains to be seen whether the steady erosion since the 1990s of formal agreements of the US with Russia will be reversed and new agreements with China achieved. Even without formal agreement, minimal levels of cooperation have been suggested. See for example Vince Manzo, *Nuclear Arms Control Without a Treaty, Risks and Option after New START* (Arlington, VA: CNA Corporation, 2019).

⁵⁹ "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower," 2007 <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=479900>, a bold, if little-noticed and short-lived, experiment in moving beyond pure competition. See Geoffrey Till, "The Accidental Dialectic: The Real World and the Making of the Maritime Strategy Since 1945," in Sebastian Bruns

as initiatives or in response to those of its adversaries, are not self-defeating. Competitive strategies pursued on their own can lead to unnecessary expenses for defense. Far more important, they can make war more likely rather than less.

A new NSS might open by stating the nation's satisfaction with the existing international order and its governance by existing legal rules and norms — that it supports the first and wishes to strengthen the second. Thus, specifically, the US seeks:

- stability in the key regions of Eurasia (a veiled geopolitical point); and
- mutually beneficial use of the world ocean by all states.

While it hopes to provide for its security through cooperation with other states, the US nonetheless finds it necessary to make competitive plans because the future is uncertain and attempts at cooperation may not always be reciprocated.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the NSS should adopt a geopolitical perspective. Geopolitics is not a be-all, end-all. The NSS must be expressed in strong ideological language. But geopolitics is the sine qua non of its intellectual infrastructure.⁶⁰

It has sought to define how geopolitical theory would translate into concrete plans: that the nation should exploit the advantages that a seapower enjoys — particularly in alliance formation — and should target the vulnerabilities of its great continental competitors through military-economic warfare, including global blockade.

It has offered answers to fundamental questions.

- What are we competing for? Control of Eurasia, either through a) a stable balance of power (with no single entity in control) or b) through the hegemony of one state or a duopoly.
- Why compete? A Eurasian hegemon would pose a mortal threat to the nation's independence, a uniting danger which concerns all members of the US alliance system, current and aspiring.
- What are the foci of competition? Eurasia's centers of economic power and the world ocean (which the current NSS totally ignores).

These answers are highly likely to stand for the foreseeable future: Geography does not change. Competition is a fact of international life. One competitor, China, continues to grow in strength to the point that the other competitor, Russia, may become its virtual vassal. Coming decades display all the ingredients for a slowly unfolding geopolitical Armageddon.

Therefore, the new NSS's must combine, conceivably give the lead to, cooperative strategies to complement the highly competitive ones being proposed here. Cooperation is ultimately the only way out of the security dilemma. Nonetheless competition rules. The National Security Strategy should publicly express US plans to deal with the nation's competitors in

and Sarandis Papadopoulos (eds.) *Conceptualizing Maritime and Naval Strategy* (Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2020), pp.19-20.

⁶⁰ If, as noted, it is to have one. The current version of the NSS is at best well suited to the theory-free, seat-of-the-pants national planner. It is hardly worthy of the nation's intellectual traditions or the gravity of the issues the document must address.

clear ideological language. It should be privately planned on the basis of geopolitics — the enduring grounds for planning a secure future.

Bradford Dismukes

San Francisco, 3 June 2022