
Modern U.S. National Security

Enduring Long-Term Core Objectives and Changing Short-Term Interests

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This paper analyzes U.S. national security interests since 1987. While core objectives have not changed with various U.S. administrations over the past three decades, the fast-changing international environment has required an additional, small set of security interests that are more flexible and tailored to the situation at hand.

The U.S. government spends more than \$600 billion on its annual defense budget.¹ The question remains which national security interests the defense budget aims to protect and whether those interests have changed over time or remained static. The United States has pursued long-term core interests to safeguard the American people, territory, and way of life. In reaction to dynamic threats and risks, short-term, responsive or reactionary interests have been created alongside consistent core interests. In an age of global information, increasing international interdependence, and an unpredictable world economy, the U.S. government must remain flexible by creating temporary national security interests in response to current world events while still maintaining core interests in order to protect the United States and its people.

This work analyzes the White House's National Security Strategies (NSS)

¹ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal" (Washington D.C. August 05, 2015), Retrieved February 2, 2016. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/08/05/remarks-president-iran-nuclear-deal>.

since 1987 and finds three core U.S. national security interests: democracy, freedom, and security. This specific date was chosen because every strategy since 1987 has followed a consistent format, allowing for more accurate comparison. The second part of this paper identifies areas and events that require changing national security interests, though core interests are never forgotten. The paper does not aim to give a detailed background on the chosen issues, but tries to exemplify the equally consistent yet shifting focus of U.S. national security interests more generally.

CONSISTENT CORE INTERESTS OF DEMOCRACY, FREEDOM, AND SECURITY

To understand the core interests of U.S. National Security since 1987, historical information regarding the strategies of different U.S. administrations must be highlighted. Core interests are understood as the key objectives that need to be protected in policies and grand strategies.

In January 1987, Ronald Reagan pointed to U.S. core interests in his National Security Strategy. He stated that the U.S. aimed to survive as a nation, protect its economy, freedom, democracy, and to create a secure world.² Again, the themes of democracy, freedom, and security were central. George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton mirrored these same core interests in their respective strategies throughout the 1990's. Both sets of publications highlight the need to protect the United States as a free, independent nation, and the need to safeguard human rights, democracy, and economic freedom.³

² White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States" (Washington D.C.: February 1987), 3-4, Retrieved February 5, 2016. <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/1987.pdf>.

³ White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States" (Washington D.C.: February 1991), 4, Retrieved February 5, 2016. <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/1991.pdf>.

Consistent throughout are the notions of the protection of freedom, democracy, and security.

Turning to the 21st century, the same three core interests remain. In 2002, following the events of 9/11, George W. Bush identified the interests and commitment to democracy and freedom.⁴ After September 11th, ensuring national security became increasingly important. Instead of deviating from core interests, the Bush administration confirmed and reiterated these same long-term security objectives for the United States. Naturally, after 9/11, Bush prioritized the physical safety of the U.S. population throughout his NSSs.⁵ The Obama Administration argued in its NSS in 2010 and 2015 that U.S. core interests included “the security of the United States... [and] respect for universal values at home and around the world.”⁶ Once again, the emphasis of the NSS is on freedom and security (perhaps even democracy, though to a lesser extent) and is consistent with core interests of former administrations. Democracy, freedom, and security are just as vital to U.S. national security policy as they were during the Reagan administration.

In the midst of changing times and dramatic world events, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama maintained the consistent national security interests of

democracy, freedom, and security of the American people. Reaganomics, the Iran-Contra Affair, the end of the Cold War, fall of the Berlin wall, the Persian Gulf War, and 9/11, though significant, have not altered the core interests of U.S. National Security. Understanding core national security interests is necessary to understanding the minor and more temporary interests that have changed with time and environment.

EVOLVING AND SHIFTING INTERESTS

The common core U.S. national security interests do not reflect the entirety of U.S. national security policy. Additional security interests have been added, and often later removed, in response to current events and according to the will of the politician in power. Global threats that were eminent in the 20th century have become less significant when compared to modern threats. Secondary interests had and have to be adjusted to reflect a changing political and global environment and according to current U.S. administration policies.

Containing and Restraining the Soviet Union

While not a current matter of national security interest, containing and restraining the USSR was vital during previous administrations, prior to 1991. During the most intense period of the Cold War, the prevention of nuclear war (and conventional war with the USSR) was of the utmost importance to the United States. In 1987, during the final years of the conflict, Reagan described it as a matter of national security to “[seek] meaningful ways of working with the Soviet leaders to prevent war and make the world a more peaceful place.”⁷ Interests were prioritized based on the presence of Soviet power, communist propaganda, and nuclear weapons. Reagan prioritized a peaceful relationship with the USSR alongside freedom and democracy.

White House, “A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement” (Washington D.C.: February 1994), 5, Retrieved February 5, 2016. <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/1994.pdf>.

⁴ White House, “A National Security Strategy of the United States of America” (Washington D.C.: September 2002), iv, Retrieved February 4, 2016. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>.

⁵ Ibid, 7, 26, and 31.

⁶ White House, “National Security Strategy” (Washington D.C.: February 2015), 2, Retrieved February 1, 2016. https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf.

⁷ White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States”, 1987, 1.

Reagan's NSS was generally militaristic because of the threat of the Soviet Union. In response to a powerful USSR, the U.S. "undertook the Strategic Modernization Program in order to maintain the essential survivability and effectiveness of our own forces in the face of... the Soviet threat."⁸ The strengthening of the military to contain the USSR was a primary interest of the NSS in 1987. The end of the Cold War eliminated containment as an objective of national security interest. This reaction to a shifting global environment exemplifies that not all current national security interests are core to American policy and demonstrates that security interests are flexible enough to react to current events (such as current state relations, new administrations, and/or international events).

Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Sanctions in Iran

As some concerns dissipate, like restraining the USSR, new ones arise. One recent example is the nuclear deal with Iran. The U.S. government reached a milestone in limiting the expansion of Iranian nuclear program. As Obama stated: "[the agreement] achieves one of our most critical security objectives."⁹ The objective of nuclear non-proliferation serves the core interest of safeguarding the American people and territory as well as the secondary interest of preventing a nuclear arms race.¹⁰ This has been an interest for the U.S. since 1945. However, the specific interest has changed. The U.S. objective is not only to prevent nuclear proliferation in Iran but also to prevent terrorists and other radical groups in the region from obtaining nuclear weapons as well. A few decades ago, major national security concerns focused on great power politics, such as during the Reagan administration. The threat of terrorists obtaining nuclear

weapons, or Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD's), was relatively small (if not nonexistent) compared to the threat of the Soviet Union, but has now become key in the Bush and Obama administrations. Non-state actors play an important role in shaping American security interests. The psychological threat of terrorists obtaining nuclear weapons has been taken into consideration by U.S. national security as well.

As per the Iranian nuclear agreement, the reduction of Iran's stockpile of nuclear weapons will be followed by an easing of international sanctions. The EU and U.S. agreed to terminate "all nuclear-related economic and financial sanctions..."¹¹ The removal of trade barriers allows for the expansion of U.S. economic ties. It is believed that with an expansion in trade, the U.S. will be able to promote freedom and democracy in Iran. The potential this, however, will depend on the flexibility of the regime in Iran, the institutions that are created, and the will of the people.

Global Health

Global health is yet another example of a dynamic interest that has been prioritized because of the current global situation, though it can be linked to the core U.S. interest of security. Typically, protecting the population of the United States is described as a defense of the population against threats and violence committed by state and non-state actors. A global disease pandemic could be equally as devastating as more traditional security threats. The spread of disease has long been present, however, and it has become a more pressing issue with simplified global travel.

⁸ Ibid, 23.

⁹ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal."

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Joint Statement by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif Switzerland" (Bruxelles: April 2, 2015), Retrieved February 2, 2016. http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/150402_03_en.htm.

Diseases like Ebola or the current Zika virus can reach American territory in a shorter amount of time than ever before. It is now in the interest of U.S. national security not only to fight pandemics within the country or its neighbors, but also to pursue global health programs.¹²

Energy and Cyber Security

An additional American interest that has arisen over time as a priority is energy security. The United States believes that it is in the interest of national security to create “buffers against the coercive use of energy...”¹³ In reaction to the changing national environment, the Obama administration tackled the use of energy as a political weapon. For example, Russia is aware of the dependence of Ukraine and Europe on its energy resources. Obama explained that there is a need for more “diversification of energy fuels, sources, and routes” to create greater political independence.¹⁴ The Bush administration mentioned the same interest in one of its NSSs.¹⁵ In Reagan’s strategy, however, the issue of energy security was not expressed because the political environment did not require it.

Future Capacity of National Security Interests

Past administrations highlighted similar national security interests that together form a core of consistent U.S. national security interests. The next NSS will, in all likelihood, employ the protection of the same fundamental values: individual freedoms of the American people, democracy, prosperity, and national security. However, especially in a digital, interconnected age, a new government would be wise to shift U.S. national security interests according to current issues. This

could include a larger emphasis on the “protection of intellectual property, online freedom, and respect for civilian infrastructure...”¹⁶ This is just one example of acknowledging new interests related to modernization through digitalization. Other threats, like the acquisition of WMDs by terrorist organizations, global diseases, and the procurement of nuclear power by non-state actors, will require a modernization of security interests as well.

CONCLUSION

The interest of protecting United States’ citizens, territory, and values has not and will not change under any U.S. administration. Each administration since 1987 has maintained the U.S. national core interests of democracy, freedom, and security in their respective NSSs. At the same time, these presidents had to adjust short-term interests according to current global events. For example, the NSS of the Reagan administration did not show as much interest in preventing religious extremist groups from obtaining WMD’s as President Obama’s does. In 2016, the United States faces different threats than it did in previous decades. Cyberattacks, terrorism, counterintelligence, and weapons of mass destruction are contemporary concerns that will need to be addressed. Only the future will determine if the next administration will maintain these same core interests or reshape them for their own purposes. Any new administration should remain flexible in its National Security Strategy and in its response to challenges that arise when addressing and protecting these security interests.

¹² White House, “National Security Strategy”, 2015, 14.

¹³ Ibid, 16.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ White House, “A National Security Strategy of the United States of America”, 19.

¹⁶ White House, “National Security Strategy”, 2015, 13.