



The Strategic Direction of the United States in an Era of Competition

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Key Take-Aways

- Competition remains central to US strategic thinking.
- Russia and China represent distinct challenges to US national security: Russia must be constrained; China must be outcompeted and outmaneuvered.
- Allies and partners play a key role for the US ability to succeed in strategic competition. The United States intends to deepen and modernize its partnerships and alliances.
- The United States will fortify global supply chains against subversion, compromise, and theft.
- The United States focuses on modernizing its military technology, including the nuclear triad.
- Tensions in the Arctic are increasing, due to climate change and Russia's continued military modernization and aggression in Ukraine. Despite this, the United States intends to work to maintain regional stability through cooperation.

Introduction

Since President Joe Biden's entry in the Oval Office in January 2021, his Administration has issued several national strategies on various topics. These documents are important for understanding the strategic direction of the United States. In the realm of security and defense, two stand out: the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the National Defense Strategy (NDS). Also the National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR) has a strong security dimension. US strategy-documents are often seen as descriptions of current outlook and policy rather than authoritative instruments that direct policy. However, they can provide clarity and nuances on central themes of the US political agenda and strategic approach.

Security considerations of smaller states like Norway are far from detached from the strategic approaches of major powers. Understanding US strategy and doctrine is thus vital for policymakers crafting Norwegian security policy. This Policy Brief reviews US thinking on strategic competition, with a particular focus on technology, the Arctic, and implications for Norway.

Outcompeting Strategic Competitors

The "reemergence of long-term strategic competition" was declared as early as in the 2018 NDS during Trump's presidency, replacing violent extremism and terrorist threats as the primary concerns for US national security. *Competition* soon became a buzzword. *Strategic competition* is a multifaceted concept, and the 2022 NSS offers a broad understanding of the term: the competition of major powers to "shape what comes next." The US national strategies of 2022 continue and amplify the tendency to perceive certain states as competitors.

Whereas the 2017 NSS presented China and Russia largely as a single set of adversaries, the 2022 national strategies draw clear distinctions between them. Russia is described as "an immediate and persistent threat to international peace and stability" that "must be constrained"; China is referred to as the main strategic competitor that must be "outcompeted" and "outmaneuvered": "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it." All this contrasts with the language in the 2008 NDS: "China and Russia are important partners for the future and we seek to build collaborative and cooperative relationships with them."

Despite the emerging China-Russia "No Limits" partnership, the US strategies have few references to their cooperation. Although recognizing that the two countries are "increasingly aligned with each other," the Biden Administration also highlights their "diverging interests and historical mistrust." Despite limited attention in the national strategies, potential deepening of cooperation between China and Russia would represent a long-term

challenge that the United States would have to tackle. This would necessitate adjustments in national security policy, including in the economic and military spheres.

The 2022 NSS makes it clear that both Chinese and Russian aggression must be deterred. Whereas previous national strategies presented the idea of integrating "all aspects of national power" in order to achieve increased security, *integrated deterrence* appears for the first time in the 2022 NSS and is expounded upon in the NDS. Integrated deterrence entails an all-encompassing approach to deterrence relying on departments across the US government as well as its allies to curb hostile actions from adversaries. Such inclusion of allies in deterrence thinking signals that the Biden Administration views cooperation as important for US national security. This is also evident in the resolute confirmation of the US "bedrock commitment to NATO collective security."

The 2022 NDS affirms that close cooperation with allies and partners is fundamental to US national security interests, and for addressing the challenges that China, Russia and others represent. The NSS highlights deepened defense and technology integration through AUKUS – the trilateral security pact involving Australia, the UK and the United States. It also calls attention to intensified cybersecurity partnerships with Quad – the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involving Australia, India, Japan and the United States. These trends, which underscore the shift of US attention to the Indo-Pacific, must be seen in light of the competition with China.

While deepening and modernizing its partnerships and alliances, the United States declares its conditional willingness to cooperate with any country. To advance its national interests, the United States employs a pragmatic approach to cooperation, willing to "cooperate with any country, including our geopolitical rivals, that is willing to work constructively with us to address shared challenges." By opening the door for cooperation, the United States gives itself the flexibility it needs to tackle global challenges, such as climate change, global health, and arms control.

Technology in Contemporary Strategic Competition

A persistent trend in many US strategic documents is the focus on technology necessary for achieving strategic goals. Indeed, discussions on technology have never been so prominent as in the 2022 strategies. According to the 2022 NSS, the "competition to develop and deploy foundational technologies that will transform our security and economy is intensifying." In the NSS, certain critical and emerging technologies are highlighted, such as artificial intelligence, microelectronics, advanced computing, biotechnologies, clean energy technologies, and advanced telecommunications.

Chinese and Russian innovations in key military capabilities have been a source of US concern for several years. The United States aims to strengthen its leadership in technological innovation, also in military technology: the ability to innovate and remain at the cutting edge of technological development is a deciding factor for its standing as the undisputed leading power in military affairs.

In the 2022 NDS, success in modernizing the Joint Force is presented as dependent on *broad* and *deep* change in the production and management of military capabilities. The United States must “...act with urgency to build enduring advantages for the future Joint Force, undertaking reforms to accelerate force development, [and] getting the technology we need more quickly...” This also applies to US nuclear forces, nuclear command, control and communications systems (NC3), and nuclear weapon production enterprises. A full triad replacement is planned, with modernized systems replacing the old deterrence systems now operating beyond their estimated design lifetime.

Given the complexity involved in project management, achieving more rapid development and procurement may prove challenging – especially in view of the growing need for technological integration of systems across all domains. The envisaged operational concept Joint All-Domain Operations (JADO) entails the merging of sensors and effectors from all domains into one combat system. Considerable research and development (R&D) is necessary to achieve functioning Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2), as reflected in the NDS approach to technological development.

Further, the 2022 NDS emphasizes that strengthening the system for developing and procuring military technology is necessary to maintain a competitive advantage over strategic competitors. Efforts to achieve this will be undertaken in close cooperation with relevant research institutions, R&D centers, small businesses and innovative technology firms. With China’s comprehensive official “military-civil fusion” strategy as a counterweight, the ability to draw benefits from military-civilian interaction will be decisive for maintaining the US technological advantage. Public-private collaboration in innovation and technology development is a key component in further developing the US techno-industrial base by leveraging US economic and societal advantages. This is in line with the overall aim of leveraging US advantages to outcompete other powers, also presented in the 2022 NSS.

A more subtle, and relatively new, trend in the 2022 national strategies is the heightened focus on supply chain security and resilience. National strategies under the Obama Administrations barely touched on supply chains. Under Trump, their resilience was seen as a national priority, and supply chain security and resilience gained momentum in the 2022 strategies. Supply chains had

never been mentioned in an NDS, but the 2022 version emphasizes the importance of protecting them against subversion, compromise, and theft – indicating that supply chains are deemed increasingly important in the defense realm, ensuring continued military modernization.

Among the objectives of the newly established US-EU Trade and Technology Council mentioned in the NSS, is strengthening the technological and industrial leadership of the United States and the EU, and to protect and promote critical and emerging technologies. At its third ministerial meeting, held on December 5, 2022, the parties agreed to work on developing “coordinated action to foster supply chain diversification, build resilience to economic coercion, and reduce dependencies.” They also agreed to “cooperate on the export controls of sensitive and emerging technologies, while ensuring appropriate protection against misuse.” This underscores the propensity of the Biden Administration to include partners and allies in strategic thinking.

Also on the US agenda is using supply chains to obstruct the modernization efforts of competitors. This is already evident in policy, notably through the export controls aimed at preventing China from gaining access to chip technology. In attempting to curtail Chinese military modernization, the new policies will reportedly target technologies underpinning a range of systems – from nuclear weapons simulation software to hypersonic missile development, from artificial intelligence to high-performance computing. These efforts may be driven by US concerns that its position as the dominant technological power could be under threat.

Strategic Competition in the Arctic

The 2022 NSS and NDS feature the Arctic region to an extent that is unparalleled in previous strategies, and according to the 2022 NSAR, strategic competition in the Arctic is increasing. China, calling itself a near-Arctic state, has been stepping up its efforts to boost influence in the region through a broadening range of economic, diplomatic, scientific, and military activities, including joint China-Russia military exercises. Concurrently, Russia has invested heavily in its military presence in the region over the last decades, modernizing its military infrastructure and increasing the frequency of exercises and training operations. Russia operates numerous submarines able to launch long-range nuclear missiles, the majority of them stationed in the Kola Peninsula.

As the ice melts, new economic opportunities and navigable areas are created. This has contributed to the significant attention paid to freedom of navigation in the NSS and the NSAR of 2022 and will presumably result in greater US willingness to engage in operations in the Arctic. However, some analysts question the future ability of the United States to maintain a robust force posture in

the Arctic while also expanding its presence on NATO's Eastern flank and in the Indo-Pacific.

The level of tension in the region is contingent on the policy and actions of major powers as well as the functionality of the Arctic Council (AC) as a stabilizing political force. The recent pausing of AC activities could lead to a weakening of stability. However, the United States has shown its intentions of sustaining the AC. Despite the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the United States opens for conditional AC cooperation with Russia in the future. Russia has continued to adhere to existing multilateral agreements in the Arctic, indicating continued relative stability.

US Strategy and Norway

Increased strategic competition between major powers has implications for smaller states like Norway, whose security is inextricably linked with US strategy, doctrine, and military capabilities. The Biden Administration considers allies and partners fundamental for US security; cooperation with the United States is also pivotal to Norwegian security. Norway should take the 2022 US national strategies into consideration when crafting policy. It should strive to be a reliable and relevant partner in defense cooperation and technological innovation.

The close defense cooperation between Norway and the United States includes exchange of knowledge and resources in the development and procurement of materiel vital for Norwegian security. US commitment to broad and deep change in technology development and procurement, as communicated in the NSS and NDS, will therefore have implications for Norwegian armed forces and

industry. The Norwegian defense industry has firm traditions as a contributing partner to US-led military technology projects, perhaps most notably the F-35. Maintaining this role will require increased agility in the development processes of the Norwegian defense industry and the research activities of relevant institutions.

In a world affected by strategic competition with major powers, Norway must carefully define and balance its interests, and make its own assessments in consultation with its partners. Although Norway shares many US security concerns, it also sees China as an important market for Norwegian petroleum, fertilizer, and seafood. With the Biden Administration encouraging European partners to toughen their stance towards Beijing, Norway should pursue an approach tailored to Norwegian interests and priorities.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many NATO members have signaled their intention to increase their defense spending significantly, aimed at achieving two percent of GDP as prescribed in the NATO Defense Investment Pledge. On burden-sharing, the 2022 NSS states that "European defense investments, through or complementary to NATO, will be critical to ensuring our shared security at this time of intensifying competition." With Norway remaining at around 1.5 percent, it risks being in the lower half in the ranking of NATO members by defense spending as percentage of GDP. Considering the massive profits from petroleum exports, Norwegian policymakers should assess whether this is a politically acceptable development, given the potential reputational costs.

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