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March 19, 2019

Evaluating DOD Strategy: Key Findings of the National Defense Strategy Commission

On January 19, 2018, the Department of Defense (DOD, or the Department) released an unclassified summary of the congressionally mandated National Defense Strategy (NDS). On November 14, 2018, the congressionally appointed bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission (NDSC, or the Commission) issued its report, *Providing for the Common Defense*. The NDSC's mandate was to critique the NDS in order to provide Congress some alternative ideas for improving DOD. All quotations are from the NDSC report unless otherwise specified.

The National Defense Strategy (NDS)

Consistent with comparable documents issued by prior Administrations, the NDS maintains that there are five central external threats to U.S. interests: China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, and terrorist groups with global reach. The NDS mandate requires DOD to prioritize those threats. In a break from previous Administrations, the NDS views retaining the U.S. strategic competitive edge relative to China and Russia as a higher priority than countering violent extremist organizations. Further, the NDS appears conceptually consistent with the National Security Strategy regarding the notion that "peace through strength," or improving the capability and lethality of the joint force in order to deter warfare, is essential to countering these threats. It also contends that, unlike most of the period since the end of the Cold War, the joint force must now operate in contested domains where freedom of access and maneuver is no longer assured.

The NDS organizes DOD activities along three central "lines of effort"—rebuilding military readiness and improving the joint forces' lethality, strengthening alliances and attracting new partners, and reforming the Department's business practices, and argues that all three are interconnected and critical to enabling DOD to advance U.S. objectives effectively.

The National Defense Strategy Commission: Key Findings

The Commission evaluated the NDS as well as the activities and priorities of the Department of Defense more broadly. Overall, the NDSC endorses DOD's strategic approach, particularly its orientation toward strategic competition with other great powers. Nevertheless, the Commission believes that successive Administrations and Congresses have significantly underestimated the scale of this reorientation, the urgency with which it must occur, and the resources required in order to do so. Two key trends led the NDSC to this conclusion:

1. **"Changes at home and abroad that are diminishing U.S. military advantages and threatening vital U.S. interests (p. v)."** The NSDC argues that the United States is both in competition and conflict with an array of challengers, including China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. The United States must also contend with transnational organizations that pose threats to the United States and its allies, to include the Islamic State (IS). Finally, the proliferation of sophisticated technologies is enabling adversaries to challenge U.S. military supremacy in innovative and dangerous ways. In other words, the United States must contend with more, and more severe, national security challenges than in previous decades.
2. **"Due to political dysfunction and decisions made by both major political parties across administrations … America has significantly weakened its own defense" (p. vi).** In the NDSC's view, the combination of DOD budget reductions and the lack of stable, predictable defense funding have negatively affected the size and readiness of U.S. forces. Further, DOD's ability to buy the equipment it needs in order to contend with challenges presented by other militaries has been hampered.

Failure to address these challenges has led to what the NDSC refers to as a "crisis of national security for the United States," because "U.S. military superiority is no longer assured and the implications for American interests and American security are severe." (p. vi).

The 2017 National Security Strategy argues that since the 1990s, the United States has "displayed a great degree of strategic complacency," (p. 27) largely as a result of overwhelming and unchallenged U.S. military and economic superiority. Operations in the Balkans, Africa, Afghanistan, and Iraq, while challenging and complex undertakings, did not existentially challenge the capabilities and strategies of the United States. Yet both China and Russia appear to be developing capabilities and concepts that potentially demonstrate technological superiority over U.S. military capabilities. As a result, the NDSC, in assessing whether DOD is adequately prepared to meet these challenges, concludes that the U.S. "might struggle to win, or perhaps lose, a war against China or Russia" (p. vi).

This analysis rests on the Commission's concern with six areas that, taken together, touch upon the structures, intellectual capabilities, priorities, and funding of DOD.

Realizing the Vision of the National Defense Strategy?

The Commission agrees with the NDS's assessment of the strategic environment and its prioritization of great power competition, the enduring value of alliances, and its focus

on lethality and readiness. It also agrees with the Department's assertions that almost two decades of war, combined with fiscal uncertainty in recent years, have led to an erosion of DOD capabilities in power projection, anti-submarine warfare and electronic warfare that are generally believed necessary to win current and future fights against a near-peer adversary. However, the Commission assesses that the concepts and programs that DOD has proposed in order to better prepare the military for great power competition, such as "dynamic force employment" and "expanding the competitive space," lack sufficient analytic rigor. Further complicating the scale of the analytic and strategic challenge, some states are deliberately blurring the lines between "conventional" and "irregular" conflict and sowing confusion as to what constitutes "civilian" versus "military" activities. The NDS Commission assesses that "[a]bsent a more integrated, whole-of-government strategy than has been evident to date, the United States is unlikely to reverse its rivals' momentum across an evolving, complex spectrum of competition." (p. vii)

Operational Challenges and Concepts

The NDSC notes that for the past 25 years, the United States has focused on prosecuting crisis management and counterinsurgency operations against adversaries that had relatively limited ability to contest U.S. and coalition forces. As a result, it argues, DOD has lost its intellectual appreciation for how to fight and win against capable adversaries such as Russia or China. In the NDSC's view, operational concepts, a key tool DOD uses to develop theater-level plans and campaigns and, in so doing, link strategic objectives with capabilities and budgetary priorities, urgently need updating in order to understand how to win future fights. (p. vii, 26-27). What then follows is acquiring capabilities, modifying doctrine and training, and other modifications across DOD in order to do so.

National Security Innovation Base (NSIB)

Although not currently defined in any publicly available document, the NSIB is a concept that appears to refer to industries and infrastructure that support innovation for national security purposes. The NDSC agrees with DOD's emphasis on innovation, generally understood as the rapid inventing, prototyping, and fielding of new technologies that can have an impact on battlefield success. However, the NDSC argues that while this innovation is necessary, it is not sufficient relative to the scope of the challenge. This is especially due to the fact that "America's edge is diminishing or has disappeared," with respect to many key technologies that have underpinned U.S. military superiority. As an example, they point to Chinese 5G wireless technology, which is a Beijing-orchestrated "whole of society" effort that "may yield great economic, geopolitical, and military benefits for Beijing – and equally great dangers to the United States." (p. viii).

Near- and Mid-Term Force Priorities

The Commission explored augmentations to U.S. capabilities in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe to better prepare for near-term challenges. In all instances, maintaining a "forward posture"—a U.S. military presence in all these regions—is viewed by the NDSC as essential to "deterring competitors and adversaries and thereby reducing the chances of conflict" (p. ix).

Readiness

Overall, the NDSC agrees with DOD's emphasis on improving military readiness. Still, the NDSC contends that preparing the military to win tomorrow's wars will require that soldiers, sailors, and airmen be trained to operate in a broader, more technologically sophisticated range of missions. In the NDSC's view, doing so will require more resources as well as improving DOD's analytic toolkit to measure readiness.

Civilian-Military Relations

Civilian control and authority over military forces has been a core principle by which the United States has designed and managed its forces. The NDSC expresses concern, however, that the relationship between civilians and the military overall is currently unbalanced. As a result, civilian views on a variety of issues across DOD have been "muted." Further, the NDSC maintains that recent efforts to centralize global force management under the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff could lead to "profound strategic problems." This is because, "put bluntly, allocating priority – and allocating forces – across theaters of warfare is not solely a military matter. It is an inherently political-military task, decision authority for which is the proper competency and responsibility of America's civilian leaders" (p. xi).

Resources

The NDSC did not prepare a precise cost estimate for the programs it suggests DOD adopt. Instead, the Commission notes that available resources are currently insufficient to meet DOD's goals as articulated in the NDS. It also underscores that cost savings resulting from efficiencies in business practices are unlikely to offset the expense of reorienting DOD for great power competition.

Reactions to the NDSC Report

Some observers have expressed skepticism regarding the NDSC's key conclusions, in particular, that the United States has reached a point of national security "crisis," and that prior Administrations have failed to adequately and predictably fund DOD. Others, including members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, have indicated they intend to use the NDSC report as a "blueprint" for overseeing DOD's activities, budgets and programs in the coming years.

Further Reading

CRS Report R45349, *The 2018 National Defense Strategy: Fact Sheet*, by Kathleen J. McInnis

CRS Insight IN10842, *The 2017 National Security Strategy: Issues for Congress*, by Kathleen J. McInnis

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IF11139

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