

## Unveils Its National Security Strategy

*Check Russia, fend off China, boost the middle class—the paper has everything, except clarity.*

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The Biden administration unveiled its long-awaited National Security Strategy on Wednesday, singling out competition among major world powers and shared threats, such as climate change, as the two biggest challenges facing the United States.

As the world enters what the document describes as a “decisive decade,” it outlines three priority areas: investing in the underlying sources of U.S. strength, working with allies and partners to address mutual challenges, and setting the rules of the road on trade, economics, and emerging technologies.

It sketches in broad terms a road map to navigate between the near-term threat of a revanchist Russia and the longer-term threat of a rising China.

“Russia poses an immediate threat to the free and open international system, recklessly flouting the basic laws of the international order today, as its brutal war of aggression against Ukraine has shown,” the document states. “[China], by contrast, is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective.” The strategy also acknowledges that Russia’s status compared to other Asian powers, such as China and India, has been “profoundly diminished” by Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decision to go to war.

The 48-page document offers the most in-depth look at the Biden administration’s worldview to date. Building on the interim strategy released shortly after U.S. President Joe Biden’s inauguration as well as adding to policies already rolled out by the administration, its central themes will contain few surprises for close observers of his foreign policy.

“I do think this is a very clear strategy,” said Emma Ashford, a senior fellow at the Stimson Center. “It’s making a very clear case for what it is the administration wants. And I think that is an American foreign policy not for Americans but for the world.”

The National Security Strategy was initially slated to be released in the spring but was delayed by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February. Although the interim version released in March of last year contained no mention of Ukraine, the document released on Wednesday makes 32 references to the embattled nation.

“I don’t believe that the war in Ukraine has fundamentally altered Joe Biden’s approach to foreign policy,” U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on a call with reporters. “But I do believe that it presents in living color our approach and the emphasis on allies, the importance of strengthening the hand of the democratic world.”

Revitalizing international alliances, such as NATO, which was shaken by the Trump administration’s isolationist instincts, as well as strengthening partnerships in the Indo-Pacific have been central to the Biden administration’s approach to competing with China and addressing shared transnational threats, such as climate change, pandemics, terrorism, and energy shortages. At the same time, Sullivan said Washington is willing to “cooperate with any country, including our geopolitical rivals, that is willing to work constructively on shared challenges.”

Some analysts see an inherent tension in the goals of the strategy, a critique that has been leveled at National Security Strategies across administrations.

“The document still looks like it was written by two different sides of the Democratic Party,” said Gabriel Scheinmann, executive director of the nonpartisan Alexander Hamilton Society. “There are some internal inconsistencies in the way this was written, which I suspect was an effort to assuage different constituencies.”

The administration’s dual efforts to champion democracy around the world while addressing the realpolitik of pressing global challenges has, at times, come under strain, which has been underscored by the United States’ turbulent relationship with Saudi Arabia.

In June, Biden visited the Persian Gulf state as he sought the oil-rich nation’s help in tamping down global energy costs, which were sent soaring following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, despite having previously vowed to render the kingdom a “pariah” over the murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi. On Tuesday, White House officials said the administration was reevaluating its relationship with the country after the OPEC+ grouping of oil-producing nations announced the biggest cut in production since the beginning of the pandemic, threatening a rise in energy prices and undermining Western efforts to target the Kremlin’s oil revenue.

Speaking to reporters, Sullivan acknowledged these challenges. “There are tensions between trying to rally cooperation to solve these shared challenges and by trying to position ourselves effectively to prevail in strategic competition,” he said.

On the campaign trail, Biden spoke at length about his vision for creating a foreign policy for the middle class, and the concept features highly in the new strategy, which sees a prosperous and resilient America as the key to projecting power and influence abroad. “We have broken down the dividing line between foreign policy and domestic policy,” the strategy states.

The contours of this approach have already emerged in legislative efforts, such as the \$1 trillion infrastructure bill; the CHIPS and Science Act, which authorized \$280 billion for research and development of advanced technologies and the semiconductor industry; and the Inflation Reduction Act, which seeks to reduce carbon emissions by 40 percent by 2030.

The document was also notable for what it didn’t say. Afghanistan, the most ignominious chapter of Biden’s foreign-policy record so far, is mentioned four times. “The fact that the president lost a war and it merits a sentence ... is sort of shocking,” Scheinmann said. The section on the Middle East, once at the forefront of U.S. national security priorities, was also markedly pared back compared to previous administrations.

But in other areas of statecraft, trade, economics, and emerging technologies, the strategy underscores the importance of the United States continuing to set the rules of the road—and enforce them.

But here, Ashford pointed to a “real tension” between the strategy’s emphasis on the liberal international order and the importance of international institutions while, at the same time, asserting the need for U.S. leadership in certain areas