BREAKING DEFENSE

E-BOOK:

National Defense Strategy

UNDERWRITTEN BY:

Editor's Letter

When a new administration takes control in Washington, it always looks to put its stamp on how the United States approaches national security. The Biden administration, like the Trump administration before it, sought to lay those out in two documents: first, the National Security Strategy, which sets direction across the administration on national security issues, and second, the National Defense Strategy, a Pentagon-specific document.

The plan had been to roll the strategy documents out early in 2022, roughly to coincide with the administration's budget request. After all, the strategy documents themselves feed directly into the choices made by the Pentagon and other national security-related departments. But things, as they often did throughout 2022, got a little complicated.

A classified version of the NDS was released to the Hill in late March, weeks after it had been expected. And the public version? Whenever they were asked about it, officials insisted it was just a few weeks away. And kept insisting that was the case, throughout spring, summer and early fall. While insisting the delay wasn't caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine — and, one would assume, subsequent rewrites of the document — officials never offered a better reason for why the delay was ongoing.

Finally, on Oct. 12, the NSS was released. Two weeks later, the NDS followed. And that meant after months of hounding officials about where the report was, journalists and analysts could finally dive into what the report actually said.

In the following pages, you'll find a collection of our coverage around the NSS and NDS, from the first hints of policy in March to deep dives on both documents after they were released. And to find out more about how the implementation of the NDS is going, make sure to check BreakingDefense.com in the coming weeks and months.

Thanks for reading

Aaron Mehta

Editor in Chief, Breaking Defense

Table of Contents

Editor's Letter 2

The upcoming defense strategy dubs Russia an 'acute threat.' What does that mean? 4

SASC lawmakers bemoan classification, lack of detail in Pentagon strategies, budget 7

After months of waiting, Biden's National Security Strategy is 'coming soon' 9

Biden's National Security Strategy balances military threats against climate change, inflation 11

Three key takeaways from the Biden administration's National Security Strategy 14

The new National Defense Strategy keeps the Pentagon's focus locked on China 17

The Pentagon's new defense strategy is out. Now the real work begins, experts say 20

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The upcoming defense strategy dubs Russia an 'acute threat.' What does that mean?

"Acute is a sharper, sort of more immediate word," said Mark Cancian, a senior adviser to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "I think that's a response to Ukraine, and the fact that this is not a long term challenge, it is immediate [and] happening today."

U.S. Paratroopers assigned to 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division conduct sling load training in Zamość, Poland, March 18, 2022. (US Marine Corps/Sgt. James Bourgeois)

By **VALERIE INSINNA**
on March 30, 2022 at 3:46 PM

WASHINGTON: Defense policy wonks, get ready to add the phrase "acute threat" to your Pentagon bingo card.

That's the term Defense Department leaders are using to describe Russia in its new defense strategy and budget. It's an attempt to differentiate the very near-term threat of Russia from the longer-term, whole of government challenge of China, and you're about to start hearing it everywhere.

"Russia poses an acute threat to the world order, as illustrated by its unprovoked invasion and vicious tactics [in Ukraine]," Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks said Monday, during a rollout of the fiscal 2023 budget.

"Even as we confront Russia's malign activities, the defense strategy describes how the department will act urgently to sustain and strengthen deterrence with the [People's Republic of China] as our most consequential strategic competitor and pacing challenge," she said. China "has the military, economic and technological potential to challenge the international system and our interests within it."

The Pentagon delivered the classified version of the National Defense Strategy to Capitol Hill on Monday in tandem with the release of the FY23 budget — an attempt to ensure that the proposed spending plan is viewed by lawmakers as being closely linked to the strategy.

The unclassified version will be released "in the coming months," Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl tweeted Monday evening. In the meantime, those without a security clearance will have to be content with the two-page fact sheet on the new strategy released by the Pentagon on Monday.

The Trump administration's 2018 National Defense Strategy marked a distinct shift in US defense policy, stipulating that the Pentagon would pivot towards focusing on its greatest strategic competitor: China.

While the Biden administration's strategy seems to uphold that view, calling Russia an "acute threat" is a new turn of phrase — and one that has been used not only by Hicks during budget briefings, but also by senior leaders such as Pentagon Comptroller Mike McCord, Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall and Army budget director Maj. Gen. Mark Bennett.

So what does that mean?

"Acute is a sharper, sort of more immediate word," said Mark Cancian, a senior adviser to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "I think that's a response to Ukraine, and the fact that this is not a long term challenge, it is immediate, happening today."

Stacie Pettyjohn, director of the defense programs at the Center for a New American Security, agreed that the change in terminology likely reflects the ongoing war in Ukraine, signaling the "urgent, pressing threat" posed by Russia due to its role in launching the conflict.

"But what I don't like about it is just that it sort of implies to me that it is going to be acute, but that you're going to move past it quickly. It's not something chronic," she said.

The idea of Russia as the "second-place" threat to China was echoed by Rear Adm. John Gumbleton, the deputy assistant Navy secretary for budget, during a budget briefing on Monday.

"This budget gets after a near-peer competitor, of which Russia is not," he told reporters. "Now, they have nuclear weapons and that's concerning, but they are not a near-peer competitor."

Pettyjohn said Russia's stockpile of nuclear weapons suggests that it should be not be underestimated in US strategy, even as if it continues to decline both militarily and economically — a trajectory that will likely worsen in the future as it tries to recover from its losses during its war with Ukraine and the crippling sanctions that have shut it out from the global market.

"[The strategy] seems a bit dismissive of Russia. And Russia isn't the same type of threat [as China], but it also could potentially be a more dangerous threat as a declining power — often it's states that are facing this irreversible type of decline that lash out," Pettyjohn said. "There is a real risk, I think, of escalation with what's happening in Ukraine should the West decide to intervene, or depending on what happens on the ground."

Experts Looking For Strategic Clarity After A "Pretty Mushy" Fact Sheet

There appears to be a great deal of continuity between the 2018 National Defense Strategy and the upcoming version, at least based on the preliminary information provided in the fact sheet.

China continues to be the pacing threat for the US military, and Hicks said the new strategy retains the same force sizing construct as the 2018 version: How can the US military defeat a major power in a conflict, while also deterring opportunistic aggression by a second entity elsewhere?

"Our classified NDS that we've shared with Congress goes into great, great detail in how we come at that issue of force sizing and provides a lot of forward-looking analysis in terms of how we will measure ourselves," she said Monday.

"It's very often in this town that folks are focused on a particular number — even dollar values but also numbers of platforms. We absolutely took a hard-nosed analytic look at what are the effects that we can create, and we use that to drive us in this strategy."

The fact sheet lays out three ways that the department will achieve its goals:

- Integrated deterrence, which entails "developing and combining our strengths to maximum effect, by working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, other instruments of U.S. national power, and our unmatched network of Alliances and partnerships."
- Campaigning, the term the department is using to describe a new way of operating forces, so as to complicate an adversary's military preparations and pose logistics challenges
- Building enduring advantages, which involves internal changes such as acquisition reform or investments in professional development

Cancian pointed out that the fact sheet also references "changes in global climate and other dangerous transboundary threats, including pandemics" — two areas of emphasis that would not likely be a major focus for the Pentagon if former President Donald Trump had won the 2020 election.

Both Cancian and Pettyjohn said they would be looking for the full, unclassified strategy to lay out clear objectives for how it will accomplish its goals.

"I look at those two pages, and it's pretty mushy," Cancian said. "I hope that the full document has more substance to it than these two pages."

The Pentagon has made "integrated deterrence" the cornerstone of the new strategy, and it has emerged as the latest buzzword used by senior leaders. But because the concept calls for leveraging other US agencies or international partners in order to amass power, one major question moving forward, according to Pettyjohn, is "is everybody else going to get on board with that?"

Justin Katz and Andrew Eversden contributed to this report.

SASC lawmakers bemoan classification, lack of detail in Pentagon strategies, budget

"I think having this hearing without any detailed information about the budget and when we are unable to openly discuss any of the administration's strategy documents directly undermines the committee's ability to conduct its oversight work," Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., said.

Sen. Deb Fischer (R-NE) speaks during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the conclusion of military operations in Afghanistan on September 28, 2021 in Washington, DC. (Photo by Patrick Semansky-Pool/Getty Images)

By **JASPREET GILL**
on April 08, 2022 at 1:22 PM

WASHINGTON: Two Republican lawmakers on the Senate Armed Services Committee pressed Defense Department leaders recently over the Pentagon's classified National Defense Strategy and the lack of details surrounding its fiscal 2023 budget request, with one senator saying it undermines the committee's ability to conduct public oversight.

DoD last week submitted classified versions of the NDS, the nuclear posture review and the missile defense review to Congress. But those documents, which SASC Chairman Jack Reed, D-R.I., said Thursday "will serve as key guideposts" for the committee's oversight work, have yet to see an unclassified counterpart released publicly.

Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., expressed concern over the Pentagon's classified strategy documents as well as what she said was a lack of detailed budget justification data.

"I think having this hearing without any detailed information about the budget and when we are unable to openly discuss any of the administration's strategy documents directly undermines the committee's ability to conduct its oversight work," Fischer said. "And it is contrary to the spirit of transparent government that these public hearings are intended to support."

She added the documents should be unclassified "so that the people in this country understand the threats that we face, so that when they have the information and can review that for themselves, they will support our national defense, they will support our national security."

Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, said there's "not much anything that's classified" in the NDS and DoD could get that out publicly pretty soon.

Austin confirmed an unclassified version of the national defense strategy will come out "a bit later," but didn't lay out a clear timeframe for when that might happen.

The "national defense strategy advances our goals in three main ways: forging integrated deterrence, campaigning and building enduring advantages," Austin said. "Integrated deterrence means combining our strengths across all warfighting domains to maximum effect to ward off potential conflict. Campaigning means our day-to-day efforts to gain and sustain military advantage and to counter acute forms of coercion by our competitors, and to complicate their preparations for aggression. And to build enduring advantages, we need to accelerate force development, acquiring the technology that our warfighters need."

The lawmaker complaints about the lack of unclassified versions of the national security strategies come just weeks after a leading Democrat on the committee, Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., raised concerns about the Pentagon restricting unclassified data in a critical Pentagon weapons report. (Warren did not weigh in on the classification debate Thursday.)

In January, the Pentagon's independent weapons tester eliminated data about the performance of more than 20 weapon programs from the public version of its annual report and, for the first time ever, included with a "controlled unclassified information" version. That version was available only to Congress and DoD personnel. In total, information was redacted from the public version for a total of 22 programs.

Then-acting head of the Pentagon's Director of Operational Test and Evaluation Office Raymond O'Toole said the decision to release the controlled version of the report was because some of the unclassified information could wind up in adversaries' hands.

Dan Grazier, a fellow at the Project on Government Oversight, previously told Breaking Defense it was concerning to see the leaders of DOT&E bending to pressure from the services on their anti-transparency push.

"Congress established DOT&E in 1983 over the furious objections of service and defense industry leaders because members knew

After months of waiting, Biden's National Security Strategy is 'coming soon'

"I think you will see the themes largely unchanged [from the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance released in March 2021]," said Cara Abercrombie, deputy assistant to the president and coordinator for defense policy and arms control for the White House.

The Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) transits the South China Sea. Abraham Lincoln Strike Group is on a scheduled deployment in the U.S. 7th Fleet area of operations. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication 3rd Class Thaddeus Berry)

By **VALERIE INSINNA**
on September 28, 2022 at 11:06 AM

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration's long-awaited National Security Strategy is "coming soon" and despite an ever-evolving security landscape, won't contain any major surprises, according to a White House official.

"I think you will see the themes largely unchanged [from the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance released in March 2021]," Cara Abercrombie, deputy assistant to the president and coordinator for defense policy and arms control for the White House, said during the ComDef conference on Tuesday. "I don't think you'll see any big surprises but rather a sharper articulation of those things."

Abercrombie did not provide further details about the timing of the rollout. In a later speech at ComDef, German Brig. Gen. Fritz Urbach, the defense attaché for the European Union in Washington, said he believes the document will be released in "a matter of weeks."

Both the NSS and National Defense Strategy were anticipated to come out early this year, with the NSS published first and the NDS following shortly after — and both before the release of the president's fiscal 2023 budget request.

But only the classified version of the NDS has been released so far. The Defense Department delivered it to Capitol Hill in conjunction with the FY23 budget request in March in an apparent effort to prove to lawmakers that the request was guided by the administration's defense strategy and not the other way around.

A two page interim NDS factsheet released in March labeled China as the "pacing challenge" for the Pentagon, with Russia representing an "acute threat" that is both immediate and but potentially less dangerous than the rising threat of China.

However, lawmakers have repeatedly criticized the Pentagon for not making a full unclassified NDS available to the public.

"I think having this hearing without any detailed information about the budget and when we are unable to openly discuss any of the administration's strategy documents directly undermines the committee's ability to conduct its oversight work," Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., said in April. "And it is contrary to the spirit of transparent government that these public hearings are intended to support."

On Tuesday, Abercrombie said the full unclassified version of the NDS "will be coming out shortly as well," but did not stipulate when.

Although Abercrombie downplayed the idea that the White House has made major edits to the NSS over the past few months, Defense News reported in August that the Biden administration had rewritten the strategy to have a larger focus on Russia due to the ongoing war with Ukraine. At the time the White House was considering a September release for the document, but with only two days left in the month, it seems unlikely to meet that timeframe.

Biden's National Security Strategy balances military threats against climate change, inflation

China is still the pacing threat, but challenges like climate change, inflation and food insecurity "are not marginal issues, they are not secondary to geopolitics," said National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.

Chinese military officers celebrate the 70th Anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (Kevin Frayer/Getty Images)

By **VALERIE INSINNA**
on October 12, 2022 at 12:57 PM

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration today declared that the United States finds itself in a "decisive decade" where it must grapple with a twofold problem: growing competition with major powers like China that threaten to reshape the international order, as well as global challenges that include pandemics, climate change, inflation and other economic security crises.

The Biden administration's National Security Strategy released today "makes clear that these shared challenges are not marginal issues, they are not secondary to geopolitics, but they operate on a plane alongside the geopolitical competition," National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters during a briefing.

"This decisive decade is critical, both for defining the terms of competition, particularly with the PRC [People's Republic of China], and for getting ahead of nascent challenges," he said. "If we lose the time this decade, we will not be able to keep pace with most notably the climate crisis, but other challenges as well."

Within the 48-page NSS, the Biden administration argues that the United States must be prepared to work with its rivals on worldwide problems like climate change, food insecurity and energy issues that affect people on a global scale. But at the same time, it must also take action to deepen its relationships with other democratic states and ensure that it maintains its competitive edge over China and Russia.

The document lays out three lines of effort:

- Invest in "tools of American power and influence" by strengthening the economy, securing critical infrastructure and making investments into key technologies like microchips and semiconductors
- Build "the strongest possible coalition of nations" to solve global challenges by deepening trade and security agreements
- Modernize the military to contend with strategic threats like China and Russia, while also maintaining the ability to protect the homeland from terrorist threats

The release of the National Security Strategy today follows that of the classified National Defense Strategy and Nuclear Posture Review — two documents that more narrowly focused on the Pentagon and are typically published after the NSS, which lays out an administration's broad thinking on national security issues.

Classified versions of the NDS and NPR were sent to Capitol Hill at the time of the release of the president's budget request in March, but Sullivan said the administration held back the NSS due to the ongoing war in Ukraine.

"We thought it would be imprudent in such a fast moving and consequential moment — where it was really unclear exactly what direction that war would take — to go out with the strategy," he said. "And, frankly, in February, there were a whole lot of people who thought the war would be over rapidly and Russia would be in a much better position today."

While the war didn't "fundamentally" alter the administration's approach to national security, "what has actually unfolded over the last six months, which has defied many of the expectations in conventional wisdom, is a vindication of taking our time and being methodical in putting forward the strategy," he said.

Sullivan said the NSS "will be the foundation upon which you will see the public release of the National Defense Strategy that includes the Nuclear Posture Review and the Missile Defense Review," but did not provide information on the timing of those documents.

Continuity Of Policy

The portion of the NSS focused on the US military shares many common through lines with previous strategies, including a focus on China as the military's "pacing challenge" and a stated intent to maintain a nuclear triad. The biggest difference the focus on "integrated deterrence" — a Biden administration buzzword that calls for greater integration throughout the military services, other US government organizations and with allies and partners.

In short, the idea is to press an adversary's back to the wall by being able to impose many different consequences for a given course of action. "Integrated deterrence requires us to more effectively coordinate, network, and innovate so that any competitor thinking about pressing for advantage in one domain understands that we can respond in many others as well," the strategy states.

The strategy also highlights the importance of the defense industrial base to achieving US defense goals, with the administration stating its intent to invest in "a range of advanced technologies" including space and cyber technologies, missile defeat capabilities, artificial intelligence and quantum systems.

Industry "must not only be capable of rapidly manufacturing proven capabilities needed to defend against adversary aggression, but also empowered to innovate and creatively design solutions as battlefield conditions evolve," the strategy states.

The strategy lays out a mandate with regards to the two biggest US adversaries: Outcompete China and constrain Russia.

The NSS clearly spells out China as the biggest threat to the United States, with the document calling it "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."

Although China hopes to use its economic and technological prowess to advance its own authoritarian interests, it is possible for the US and China to coexist peacefully, the strategy states.

"We will hold Beijing accountable for abuses – genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang, human rights violations in Tibet, and the dismantling of Hong Kong's autonomy and freedoms," the NSS states. However, the United States will be willing to work with China when its interests align with America's own.

"While we compete vigorously, we will manage the competition responsibly," the strategy states. "We will seek greater strategic stability through measures that reduce the risk of unintended military escalation, enhance crisis communications, build mutual transparency, and ultimately engage Beijing on more formal arms control efforts."

Russia, on the other hand, poses an "immediate" threat as exemplified by the war in Ukraine, with the potential to be a "seriously dangerous adversary" due to its nuclear arsenal, Sullivan said.

The US must continue to take steps to make Russia's invasion into Ukraine a strategic failure for Moscow, including fortifying NATO's eastern flank, weakening Russia's defense and aerospace industries, and adding Sweden and Finland to NATO.

"While some aspects of our approach will depend on the trajectory of the war in Ukraine, a number of elements are already clear," the strategy states. "First, the United States will continue to support Ukraine in its fight for its freedom, we will help Ukraine recover economically, and we will encourage its regional integration with the European Union."

Russia's war with Ukraine also makes it more vital for the United States and its allies to transition away from fossil fuels and develop energy resiliency.

"We know that long-term energy security depends on clean energy," the strategy states. "Recognizing this transition will not happen overnight, we will work with partners and allies to ensure energy security and affordability, secure access to critical mineral supply chains, and create a just transition for impacted workers."

Three key takeaways from the Biden administration's National Security Strategy

The National Security Strategy is finally out, 22 months into the Biden administration. But what does it actually say?

U.S. Navy MV-22 Ospreys take-off on Aug. 1, 2022 during an amphibious raid for a multinational littoral operations exercise as part of Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) 2022. (Cpl. Dillon Anderson/Royal New Zealand Air Force)

By **VALERIE INSINNA**
on October 14, 2022 at 7:15 AM

WASHINGTON — Twenty two months after taking office, the Biden administration finally released its National Security Strategy, ending a drawn out process that was compounded by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February.

On the whole, the strategy provided few major surprises. Concerns about the rise of China — and the threat the autocratic state poses to both its neighbors and the United States — continue to be the largest national security focus for the administration. And while the war in Ukraine has brought a sense of immediacy and greater attention to threat still posed by Russia, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said Wednesday that the conflict didn't result in any major alterations to the strategy.

However, the devil is always in the details, defense experts told Breaking Defense. Here's what they see as the major takeaways.

The Concept of 'Integrated Deterrence' Might Already Be In Trouble

While an unclassified version of the National Defense Strategy has not been released yet, Pentagon officials — including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in a statement on the NSS made earlier today —have made clear that a cornerstone of the NDS will be a concept called "integrated deterrence," which calls for the US military to work with other US government agencies as well as international partners to impose whole-of-government penalties on an enemy.

"We will rely on integrated deterrence, as detailed in the Department's National Defense Strategy, which will soon be released in unclassified form," Austin said in the statement, defining the concept as "seamlessly combin[ing] our capabilities to convince potential adversaries that the costs of their hostile activities far outweigh any possible benefits—in all theaters, in all domains, and across the spectrum of potential conflict."

But while "integrated deterrence" was mentioned in the NSS, it is cited only in a section on US military modernization, which could point to it being a Defense Department concept that won't be widely adopted by other government agencies, said Stacie Pettyjohn, director of the defense program at the Center for a New American Security.

"Integrated deterrence, in my view, always made the most sense as a centerpiece of the National Security Strategy where the DoD part focuses on the high-end deterrence," she told Breaking Defense.

And while the NSS does "more narrowly conscribe" the Defense Department's portion of integrated deterrence as the traditional backstop of conventional and nuclear capabilities, the concept "didn't seem to be the centerpiece of it the way that one might hope, since integrated deterrence includes a focus on all of the tools of government, and for that to happen that's beyond the DoD's remit," she said.

The definition of integrated deterrence in the strategy also failed to resolve a major question about the concept, according to Pettyjohn: Does threatening an adversary with so many potential forms of punishment actually make the United States more credible, particularly in a situation where the US will not actually follow through with all courses of action?

"If it's this huge encompassing of all things, I think that actually sort of makes it harder to have an explicit and credible deterrent threat that allies and adversaries understand," she said.

U.S. Marines with 2nd Marine Raider Battalion, Marine Raider Regiment set up communication during a night raid exercise at landing zone Dodo, Ariz., April 21, 2016. (U.S. Marine Corps/Zachary M. Ford)

Ye Olde 'Strategy Versus Reality' Problem

The NSS paints a complex and troubling challenge for the United States, which finds itself at the beginning of a "decisive decade" where it must contend with the threat of near-peer competitors like China and Russia, while at the same time mitigating problems like inflation, pandemics, climate change and other issues that threaten American prosperity and that of nations worldwide.

Bradley Bowman, senior director of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies' center on military and political power, said the strategy does a good job of describing the scope and urgency of the problems facing the United States. However, it lacks detail on how the administration plans on implementing solutions that will ensure that the nation is able to meet its strategic aims.

"I agree that we're at an inflection point. I agree that this is a decisive decade," he said. "But when I look at into details — when I look into our force posture, when I look at the insufficient defense budgets, when I look at how we're not procuring vital weapons systems at max production capacity … I see a large and increasingly dangerous gap between words and actions."

The Biden administration needs to be honest about where it faces risk and ensure that it does the work to mitigate capability gaps and fix potential vulnerabilities, he said.

"What are urgent Indo-Pacific requirements that are not being met right now?" he said. "If you say this is an inflection point or decisive decade, I think the burden of proof is on this administration to explain any cases where they're disregarding serious requirements in particularly [US Indo-Pacific Command], but also [US European Command]," he said.

Emma Ashford, a senior fellow with the Stimson Center, compared the scope of the NSS to "Lean In," the popular self-help book for women in the workplace by Facebook's former Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg that posited that women could find massive success in all areas if only they would "lean in" to a bigger workload.

But people — and nations — face constraints, Ashford said, and if the US doesn't have the resources or capability to meet its strategy goals, it needs to moderate those goals.

"The NSS wants to have it all: competition with China, containment of Russia, building global coalitions on climate change, and pandemics; shared democracy as a unifying principle and democracy promotion while continuing to work with autocracies, a diplomacy first approach while maintaining global military primacy; using trade as a core component of foreign policy while rejecting new trade agreements that don't 'level the playing field;' building on existing alliances while establishing new ones," she wrote on Twitter.

In short, the NSS "acknowledges that we live in an increasingly multipolar world, accepts that there are limitations to U.S. power, and then doesn't change policy in response," she said.

Climate Change Is a Top Priority...And the GOP Won't Like That

Compared to the Biden administration's interim strategic guidance in March 2021, the National Security Strategy emphasizes the competition between democracies like the United States and authoritarian regimes like its rivals, China and Russia — a change likely due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, said Mark Cancian, a senior adviser with the Center for International and Strategic Studies' international security program.

There's a greater concern with "irredentism — the fact that Russia and China are unsatisfied with their current borders and aiming to maybe expand them," he said. However, he added that the strategy's descriptions of China and Russia suggest a difference in tone rather than a substantive change in policy.

Like the Trump administration's 2017 strategy, the Biden-era NSS continues the focus on China as the single largest military and economic threat to the United States and similarly declares a need to modernize the military and invest in American technology, Cancian said.

However, the strategy's attention on progressive causes — specifically climate change, which the document says is the "greatest [problem] and potentially existential for all nations" — will likely draw the ire of Republicans, who may argue that the focus should remain solely on competition against China and Russia, Cancian said.

"Climate is mentioned [about] 65 times in the document," he said. "Of course, this is very different from the Trump national security document where they talked about energy dominance and encouraging fossil fuel production."

Several top Democrats have already released public statements expressing support for the NSS. House Armed Services Committee chairman Adam Smith, D-Wash., said the document is "right on target," while his counterpart, Senate Armed Services Committee chairman Jack Reed, D-R.I., called it a "strong, thoughtful vision for advancing America's interests."

Meanwhile, Republicans are starting to level criticism at the strategy. Alabama Rep. Mike Rogers, HASC's ranking Republican, blasted the document for asserting that the United States should be willing to work with China and Russia on areas where they share common goals with the US.

"The strategy produced by the Biden administration takes 48 pages to say nothing. It is based in a fantasy world where all nations, even adversaries, work together to advance the common good," Rogers said in a statement. "Our adversaries are dangerous, they don't care about the common good, and they don't want to work with us to achieve altruistic goals – they want to destroy us."

The new National Defense Strategy keeps the Pentagon's focus locked on China

The 2018 strategy "said we are worried about Russia and we're worried about [China]. And I think one of the things we did as we were going through our assessment of the security environment was actually see that those needed to be looked at a little bit differently," a Pentagon official said.

The US National Defense Strategy has finally been released, with China the focus. (U.S. Air Force/Kenneth W. Norman)

By **VALERIE INSINNA**
on October 27, 2022 at 11:39 AM

WASHINGTON — After six months of delays, the Biden administration today released the unclassified version of its National Defense Strategy — and despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the department remains confident the long-term threat lies not in Moscow, but in Beijing.

The focus on China as the larger threat — as opposed to a joint focus on China and Russia — is one of the biggest ways the latest National Defense Strategy diverges from its predecessor, a senior defense official told reporters ahead of the official rollout.

The 2018 strategy "said we are worried about Russia and we're worried about the PRC [People's Republic of China]. And I think one of the things we did as we were going through our assessment of the security environment was actually see that those needed to be looked at a little bit differently," the official said. "What that means is that as we are looking at our investments, our activities, our exercises, our posture, we're going to be thinking in that vein."

The 2018 National Defense Strategy marked a major shift for the Pentagon as it pivoted toward the challenge of great power competition against China and Russia after more than a decade of being focused on counterterrorism in the Middle East.

Largely, the 2022 NDS doubles down on that framework, naming China as the "pacing challenge" for the department, with Russia ranked as an "acute threat" that is "immediate and sharp," as seen in its ongoing war with Ukraine and nuclear saber rattling. North Korea, Iran, and violent extremist organizations followed on the list of threats.

However, the official added that there are areas of overlap in how the US military would need to resource and structure itself to defeat either China or Russia, such as increasing investments in areas such as cyber, space and undersea capabilities. "I like to think of it as sort of the two for one," the official said.

To accomplish its goal of staying ahead of China, the document lays out three priorities, each linked to a somewhat opaque concept.

The first, integrated deterrence, is the bedrock of the Defense Department's strategy. It calls for the military to work within all domains, theaters and spectrums of conflict seamlessly with other US government agencies and international allies and partners, in the hopes of shoring up multiple options to deter enemy aggression.

"Integrated deterrence means using every tool at the Department's disposal, in close collaboration with our counterparts across the U.S. Government and with Allies and partners, to ensure that potential foes understand the folly of aggression," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin wrote in a memo accompanying the strategy.

The second priority — campaigning — involves military actions and initiatives meant to advance the department's strategic priorities over time, such as exercises that allow the US military to train how it will mobilize and conduct logistics during a conflict.

Finally, the strategy calls for "building enduring advantages." This includes internal Pentagon reforms such as investments in the Pentagon's workforce, improvements to acquisition processes and making US military infrastructure more resilient in the face of climate change.

For the first time ever, the Pentagon created the NDS in parallel with the Nuclear Posture Review and Missile Defense Review, two other strategy documents that help shape the department's force posture and future budgets.

"That led to substantive coherence, a more integrated and seamless approach to issues like deterrence and risk management and it resulted in a very tight strategy resources linkage," the defense official said.

Today's release of the unclassified version of the NDS — along with the NPR and MDR — comes two weeks after the Biden administration finally revealed its National Security Strategy, a broader document that helps inform thinking at the Defense and State departments, along with other interagency organizations.

However, the classified version of the NDS was sent to Capitol Hill in tandem with the president's budget request in late March, a decision that department officials said then was meant to assure lawmakers that the department's fiscal 2023 budget was shaped by the strategy, not created in a vacuum.

The senior defense official remarked that classified version of the strategy hadn't changed the months since it was first released, in part because the Biden Administration had foreseen Russia's plans to invade Ukraine and had "baked that into our thinking" as it devised the strategy.

However, the official noted that "that some of the core ideas within the reviews have proven to be even more salient as this war has continued," such as the role of allies and partners who have supported Ukraine by providing military and humanitarian aid.

'Anti-Access Area Denial' Is Back

While defense strategies typically say little about technologies needed in the future — and even less about specific defense programs — the official laid out a list of operational challenges that all have implications for the defense industry: information advantage; command, control and communications; detection and targeting; mitigating anti access area denial capability; and logistics and sustainment.

During the Obama administration, the Pentagon frequently used the term "anti-access/area denial" or "A2/AD" to describe how an adversary could seek to prevent US forces from operating in a battlespace — a problem especially posed by China, given the long distance between islands in the Indo-Pacific region and China's proliferation of long-range missile systems. Although the term fell out of fashion during the Trump administration, it's back in the Biden administration's NDS.

"Competitor strategies seek to exploit perceived vulnerabilities in the American way of war, including by creating anti-access/area-denial environments," the strategy states. In a section on force planning, the strategy calls for the military to develop concepts and capabilities that can mitigate an enemy's A2/AD capability, including weapons "that can penetrate adversary defenses at range."

Another sign of shifting jargon is the absence of the "joint all domain command and control" — the Pentagon's concept to connect the military's sensors, allowing platforms to share information that cannot currently be directly transmitted.

But although JADC2 is not referenced explicitly in the strategy, it contains several calls to "build strength and capability" in the realm of resilient command and control, space-based surveillance technology and information technology — speeding up the US military's timeline for detecting and striking a target.

"To maintain information advantage, the Department will improve our ability to integrate, defend, and reconstitute our surveillance and decision systems to achieve warfighting objectives, particularly in the space domain, and despite adversaries' means of interference or deception," the strategy states. "To preserve command, control, and communications in a fast-paced battlefield, we will make our network architectures more resilient against system-level exploitation and disruption so as to ensure effective coordination of distributed forces."

Innovative ways of doing logistics and sustainment also remain a priority, particularly capabilities that will allow the military to mobilize and keep fighting even after enemy attacks.

The Pentagon needs to take steps to increase the speed of defense acquisition, with the strategy stating that the Defense Department will double down on rapid experimentation and fielding efforts to get technologies to troops more quickly. In particular, the department is placing a premium on open systems that can adopt improved tech as it becomes available.

The Pentagon "will fuel research and development for advanced capabilities," including in directed energy, hypersonics, integrated sensing, and cyber, as well as providing seed funding for biotechnology, quantum science, advanced materials, and clean-energy technology.

"We will be a fast-follower where market forces are driving commercialization of militarily-relevant capabilities in trusted artificial intelligence and autonomy, integrated network system-of-systems, microelectronics, space, renewable energy generation and storage, and human-machine interfaces," the strategy states.

The department also wants to forge a closer partnership with the commercial technology companies, particularly the burgeoning commercial space industry, to leverage "its technological advancements and entrepreneurial spirit to enable new capabilities."

The Pentagon's new defense strategy is out. Now the real work begins, experts say

"The issue is, can the department execute this strategy and really do it in time?" said Jim Mitre, director of the international security and defense policy program at the RAND Corporation. "In particular can it do so on a timeline that's sufficient to deter war with China, not just in some far-off future, but in the next few years?"

Izumo-class multi-purpose destroyer JS Izumo (DDH 183) cruises in formation with Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Higgins (DDG 76) while conducting routine operations in the South China Sea, Oct. 1, 2022. (Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Donavan K. Patubo/US Navy)

By **VALERIE INSINNA**
on October 28, 2022 at 2:09 PM

WASHINGTON — After months of delays, the unclassified version of the National Defense Strategy hit the streets on Thursday, pledging a renewed focus on China and including not much in the way of surprises.

Now, experts say, is time to answer the big question: Can the Defense Department actually execute it?

"Bottom line, regarding the strategy writ large, I'd say it's fundamentally sound and logically supported. The department did a good job of thinking through what problem it needs the military to focus on, and has a sensible, coherent approach to getting after it," said Jim Mitre, who served as executive director of the 2018 NDS.

"The issue is, can the department execute this strategy and really do it in time?" Mitre, currently the director of the international security and defense policy program at the RAND Corporation, told Breaking Defense. "Can it modernize its forces, establish greater resilience to adversary attack, develop a more tech savvy workforce, et cetera, with alacrity? … In particular can it do so on a timeline that's sufficient to deter war with China, not just in some far-off future, but in the next few years?"

Stacie Pettyjohn, director of defense programs at the Center for a New American Security, agreed that the strategy lays out a "sound vision," but will require the Biden administration to make difficult choices to allocate resources to prioritize threats — in particular, managing the immediate threat posed by Russia without "derailing efforts" to compete against China.

The need to deter China is the single biggest theme of the NDS, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said yesterday during a briefing on the new strategy. China is "the only competitor out there with both the intent to reshape the international order and increasingly, the power to do so," he said. In contrast, Russia represents an "acute threat" that poses an immediate threat to US interests, as seen in its invasion of Ukraine, the NDS states.

"Immediate needs have a tendency of overwhelming future threats, and the Pentagon has repeatedly deferred making changes to its force structure and posture necessary to bolster deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region," Pettyjohn said in a written statement.

On the technology side, the NDS lists command, control and communications systems, long-range strike, and space as key investment priorities, said Seamus Daniels, the defense budget analysis fellow for the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

However, "I think the strategy lacks a discussion of sort of the main trade offs when we're talking about force structure versus modernization versus readiness," he said. "Are they going to try and free up funds by limiting the day-to-day deployments? Or is that going to come in the form of force structure cuts?"

One missed opportunity, Mitre said, was that the strategy did not focus enough on how the department plans to overcome the well-established barriers that keep it from moving as quickly as it needs to accomplish its goals.

For example, the strategy notes a need for the Pentagon to forge closer ties with academia and industry — particularly with companies outside its typical roster of defense firms. It states that the department will be a "fast follower" on technologies like artificial intelligence, autonomy and microelectronics, where commercial firms are driving innovation. The NDS also vows to increase collaboration with the commercial space industry, a space it believes it can leverage "[industry's] technological advancements and entrepreneurial spirit to enable new capabilities."

But all those ideas have been well agreed upon for years, with a serious push for commercial technology starting with former Defense Secretary Ash Carter in 2015. While it's positive that the NDS signals the Pentagon's desire to work more closely with the private sector, Mitre noted that the strategy falls short in that it does not spell out why that has historically been difficult, and how the department will overcome those impediments this time.

"We know that that's been a challenge, there's been some important progress there. But the department's still grappling with the 'valley of death.' And the strategy doesn't have a clear solution to how the department should address the valley of death problem," he said, using a phrase that describes the funding gap between the research and development phase and a program of record, where technologies often wither and die.

During a Thursday background briefing on the NDS, a journalist asked how the strategy would lead to faster technology adoption. A senior defense official acknowledged that "this is a refrain you have no doubt been subjected to before," but said they had greater hope of success after seeing how the Pentagon mobilized to provide weaponry for Ukraine, including existing systems that have been used in new ways on the battlefield.

"So it does tell me … that this can be more more feasible going forward, because we've had this experience," the official said.

The fiscal 2024 budget could shed further light on how serious the Pentagon is about funding its strategic priorities, as well as the tradeoffs it is willing to make, Daniels said. One key indicator to look at is the size of the FY24 budget request next spring, specifically whether the department is able to keep defense spending from dropping below the rate of inflation.

"The still a significant and expensive strategy, similar to 2018," he said. "It will still require a significant level of investment, at least keeping pace, if not above inflation."

Daniels added he would be interested in seeing how the Pentagon "balance[s] the procurement platforms for the fight today versus [long-term] modernization investments."

Mitre added that the responsibility for implementing the defense strategy doesn't fall squarely on the Defense Department's shoulders. Congress must also allow the Pentagon to take calculated risks in order to fund its strategic priorities.

"There's too many programs that are sacred cows. Too many times people claim that any reduction in US forces anywhere is assuming unacceptable risk," he said. "As people critique what the department is trying to do, what happens is that the trade space gets narrower, and as its trade space narrows, its progress slows down."