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The Trump Administration's 2017 *National Security Strategy* and 2018 *National Defense Strategy*: Implications for Southeast Asia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Trump administration's 2017 *National Security Strategy* and 2018 *National Defense Strategy* identify strategic competition with China and Russia as America's primary national security concern.
- Both documents contend that the epicentre of Great Power competition is the Indo-Pacific region where China seeks to displace America as the paramount power in order to achieve regional hegemony and ultimately global pre-eminence
- An escalation in geopolitical competition between Washington and Beijing holds significant implications for Southeast Asia including:
 - A more complicated security environment in which regional states are increasingly presented with stark binary choices between the US and China;
 - Renewed tensions in the South China Sea as the US steps up pressure on China, and Beijing responds by increasing its military presence on its artificial islands in the Spratlys;
 - A renewed push by the US to strengthen military cooperation with allies and partners in Southeast Asia resulting in a counter effort by China to expand its defence diplomacy activities with regional states;
 - Further strains on ASEAN unity and hence the organization's centrality in the regional security architecture.

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INTRODUCTION

On 18 December 2017, President Donald Trump issued his first *National Security Strategy* (NSS), a congressionally mandated policy document which outlines the administration's national security concerns and the strategies it will pursue to address them.¹ In January 2018, the US Department of Defense (DoD) released the unclassified version of its *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) which lays out the Pentagon's strategic objectives in accordance with the NSS.²

Both documents combine elements of traditional thinking in US foreign and defence policies with President Trump's nativist "America First" agenda. The 2017 NSS reiterates the enduring importance of core US interests and values identified in previous national security papers, but also demonstrates a significant shift in strategic thinking. Most notably, the 2017 NSS adopts a more realist, almost Darwinian, view of international politics in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In the Trump administration's view, Great Power competition now poses a far greater threat to American security than terrorism as the two "revisionist powers", China and Russia, "challenge American power, influence and interests" and are working to reshape the post-1945 US-led international order in their favour. The NSS contends that the epicentre of Great Power competition is the Indo-Pacific region where China seeks to displace the US as the paramount power in order to achieve regional hegemony and ultimately global pre-eminence.

The geopolitical implications of the NSS and NDS for Southeast Asia are significant. Because the pattern of interstate relations in Northeast Asia is largely set, any increase in US-China competition is likely to be played out in Southeast Asia where relations between regional states and the Great Powers are more mutable. An intensification of Sino-US rivalry in the region would greatly complicate Southeast Asia's security environment and the foreign policy decision-making processes of regional states, increase tensions in the South China Sea and put further stress on ASEAN unity and hence its centrality in the regional security architecture.

TRUMP'S NSS/NDS AND THE EVOLUTION OF US STRATEGIC THINKING

According to the 2017 NSS, America lives in an "extraordinarily dangerous world" and faces three main challenges to its national security. The first is posed by China and Russia which "challenge American power, influence and interests" and "attempt to erode American security and prosperity". The second challenge comes from North Korea and Iran, "rogue powers" which destabilize their regions by pursuing nuclear weapons programmes and

¹ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington D.C.: The White House, December 2017), available at <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>>.

² *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, January 2018), available at <<https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>>.

sponsoring terrorism. The third challenge is transnational threats, including “jihadist terrorism” and transboundary criminal organizations.

The 2017 NSS adopts a much bleaker worldview than the Obama administration’s national security assessments of 2010 and 2015.³ According to those documents, the central challenges facing America at the beginning of the decade were: defeating the terrorist group Al-Qaeda; disengaging from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan; and recovering from the 2007-08 Global Financial Crisis. Additional challenges included halting the spread of weapons of mass destruction (especially from North Korea and Iran), global pandemics, cyberattacks and climate change. The 2010 NSS was relatively upbeat in its assessment of Great Power relations, noting that the “specter of nuclear war had lifted”, “major powers were at peace”, and the US was building “deeper and more effective relationships” with China and Russia. It was only after Moscow’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, and China’s construction of artificial islands in the contested Spratly archipelago in 2013-15, that the Obama administration’s tone hardened. The 2015 NSS described Russia as “aggressive” and expressed concern at China’s activities in the South China Sea. But while the 2015 *National Military Strategy* warned of “revisionist powers” it did so without naming them.⁴

In sharp contrast to the Obama administration’s assessments of national security, the Trump administration depicts rivalry with China and Russia as the principal challenge facing America today, downgrades the threat posed by terrorism and completely disregards climate change. The 2017 NSS and 2018 NDS explicitly identify China and Russia as “revisionist powers” that seek to undermine the existing world order from within by “exploiting its benefits while simultaneously undercutting its principles and ‘rules of the road’”, in order to “shape a world antithetical to US values and interests”.

In reordering American threat perceptions, the 2017 NSS repudiates 25 years of conventional thinking in Washington: that as the US engaged China, and China became more integrated into the international system, it would liberalize politically and become, in the words of US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick in 2005, a “responsible stakeholder”. In the Trump administration’s view, however, US engagement with China and Russia failed to transform those two countries into “benign actors and trustworthy partners” and instead Beijing and Moscow became strategic competitors. And as these two countries modernized their conventional and nuclear forces, America’s longstanding military advantages were eroded. According to the NSS, China seeks to turn its armed forces into the “most capable and well-funded military in the world”, after America’s.

While Russia seeks to restore its Great Power status and establish spheres of influence along its borders in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the Trump administration views China as America’s primary challenge due to its growing economic and military power. Accordingly, the Indo-Pacific—the Trump administration’s more expansive definition of the Asia-Pacific to include India—is at the heart of US-China competition over “free and repressive visions of world order”. Moreover, the NSS accuses China of seeking to displace the US as regional hegemon and of using economic inducements, influence operations and the threat of

³ *National Security Strategy* (Washington D.C.: The White House, May 2010); *National Security Strategy* (Washington D.C.: The White House, February 2015).

⁴ *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015* (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, June 2015).

military coercion to create a Sino-centric order in which regional states will be required to “heed [Beijing’s] political and security agenda”. While the NSS does not, of course, rule out cooperation with China (and Russia), it calls for “cooperation with reciprocity”.

In the face of the three major challenges mentioned above, the NSS argues that America must protect and advance four core national interests. First, protect the American homeland by strengthening borders, curbing illegal immigration, defeating terrorism and building a layered missile-defence system. Second, promote American prosperity by rejuvenating the economy and tackling unfair foreign trade practices. Third, preserve “peace through strength” by rebuilding America’s armed forces, streamlining DoD’s bureaucracy and strengthening relations with allies and partners. And fourth, advance American influence by enhancing America’s role in multilateral institutions and championing US values. While the first, second and fourth of these interests were articulated in the Obama administration’s national security strategies, the third is a strong echo of the Reagan administration and thus a throwback to the Cold War.

One of the biggest changes between the 2015 NSS and the 2017 NSS is that the phrase “Asian pivot” or “rebalance” is gone, as is reference to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) which President Trump withdrew America from within days of taking office. Instead the 2017 NSS speaks of a “free and open Indo-Pacific”. However, while Trump’s Indo-Pacific policy rejects multilateral trade deals, and is light on promoting democratic values and human rights, there is a strong element of continuity with the Obama administration’s Asian rebalance strategy in that the 2017 NSS pledges to expand Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships to create a “networked security architecture capable of deterring aggression, maintaining stability and ensuring free access to common domains”.

MIXED RECEPTION

The NSS and NDS received mixed receptions, both in the US and overseas. One of the main criticisms of the NSS is that it contradicts many of Trump’s own views and actions. For example: the NSS criticizes “adversaries” for interfering in America’s domestic politics and yet Trump has been loath to rebuke Russian President Vladimir Putin (and even praised US-Russia counter-terrorism cooperation when he launched the NSS); the NSS cites the need to upgrade America’s diplomatic capabilities yet the administration wants to cut the State Department’s budget by 30 per cent; the NSS talks of America leading multilateral organizations yet Trump has pulled the US out of the Paris Climate Change Agreement and the TPP, and criticized many of the multilateral organizations of which America was a founding member, including NATO, the UN and the WTO. Such contradictions were inevitable given the tensions between the so-called “internationalists” and “America First” nationalists in the Trump administration. However, at least in the framing of the NSS, the former seem to have exercised more influence than the latter.

Unsurprisingly, China and Russia responded negatively to both the NSS and NDS. China’s foreign ministry called on the US to “stop deliberately distorting China’s strategic intentions”, abandon its “Cold War mentality” and focus on mutual cooperation with

China.⁵ China's defence ministry called the NSS "poisonous" for US-China relations.⁶ Russia deplored the NSS' "imperialist character" and America's "unwillingness to give up on a unipolar world".⁷

America's allies and partners have been largely silent. However, Australia's defence minister, Marise Payne, said Canberra shared similar concerns to those expressed in the NDS, though Foreign Minister Julie Bishop was keen to point out that Australia did not view China or Russia as military threats.⁸

POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA

Four major themes in the NSS and NDS could directly impact the strategic environment of Southeast Asia and the foreign-policy calculations of regional states: first, the prospect of increased Great Power competition, especially between the US and China; second, the impact of Sino-US competition on the South China Sea dispute; third, the Trump administration's commitment to strengthen America's alliances and partnerships; and fourth, the role of ASEAN.

Great Power Competition

A more competitive dynamic between Washington and Beijing, in which the former seeks to counteract the latter's influence, will complicate the regional security environment and make it harder for Southeast Asian states to balance their relations with America and China. On certain issues, Southeast Asian countries may be increasingly forced into making hard choices between the two countries. Although a quantum of competition among the Great Powers allows Southeast Asian countries to play one off against another and thereby gain economic advantages, overt strategic competition could present regional states with stark and uncomfortable binary choices: America or China.

Any increase in US-China competition is likely to exacerbate Sino-Japanese competition in Southeast Asia and strengthen Sino-Russian relations. The former will be mainly played out in the economic sphere, e.g. competition over high-speed rail projects, while the latter will lead to a strengthening of China's military capabilities as Russia steps up the transfer of advanced defence technology to China.⁹ Moscow may also offer Beijing more diplomatic support over the South China Sea.

⁵ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on December 19, 2017", available at <

http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1520766.shtml>.

⁶ "US report called 'poisonous for US-China relations'", *China Daily*, 22 December 2017.

⁷ "Kremlin dismisses Trump's 'imperialist' security strategy", Reuters, 19 December 2017.

⁸ "'We have a different perspective': Julie Bishop distances Australia from US on China, Russia threat", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 January 2018.

⁹ See Ian Storey, "The Russia-China Strategic Alignment: Consequences for Southeast Asian Security", *ISEAS Perspective*, #59/2016 (26 October 2016).

The South China Sea Dispute

The NSS is highly critical of China's construction of military facilities on seven reclaimed features in the Spratly Islands which "endanger the free flow of maritime trade, threatens the sovereignty of other nations and undermines regional stability". The NSS asserts that America will "reinforce our commitment to freedom of the seas and the peaceful resolution of territorial and maritime disputes in accordance with international law", while the NDS highlights the importance of ensuring that "common domains remain free and open".

Washington's criticism of China's activities in the Spratlys, and its commitment to uphold freedom of navigation in the vital waterway, are not new, but the tone of the NSS suggests that the Trump administration may seek to counteract Beijing's assertiveness in the South China Sea. Possible options include increasing the frequency of US Navy and Air Force "freedom of navigation operations" (FONOPs) near and over Chinese-occupied features in the South China Sea. It is unlikely to have been a coincidence that the US Navy conducted a FONOP at Scarborough Shoal (its ninth in the South China Sea since 2015 and the fifth since President Trump took office) on 17 January 2018 just two days before the NDS was published. If the US plans to increase the frequency of FONOPs in the South China Sea, Beijing will respond by increasing its military presence on its artificial islands, and may even adopt a more aggressive approach to shadowing US warships operating in the South China Sea. Either of these responses would generate friction in Sino-US relations and could lead to renewed tensions between China and the Southeast Asian claimants which have been in abeyance since mid-2016.

US Alliances and Partnerships

As with the Obama administration's "Asia pivot", the NSS and NDS advocate closer security cooperation between the US and its regional allies and partners. On Southeast Asia specifically, the NSS pledges to "re-energize" America's alliances with Thailand and the Philippines (both of which have come under strain in recent years) and strengthen ties with "cooperative maritime partners" Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia. The NSS also calls for greater law enforcement, defence and intelligence cooperation with Southeast Asian states to address the threat of terrorism.

The NDS recommends greater interoperability between the US military and its counterparts in the Indo-Pacific region to create a "networked security architecture". It goes on to explain that closer defence cooperation will require America to boost arms sales to regional states, increase the frequency, scale and sophistication of combined military exercises (including US-led multilateral exercises such as the annual Cobra Gold exercises in Thailand), help countries improve their maritime domain awareness (MDA) capabilities and preposition military equipment overseas.

Southeast Asia has already had a foretaste of the Pentagon's push to improve military ties with regional states. Within weeks of the NDS' release, US Defense Secretary James Mattis had visited the two most important countries in maritime and mainland Southeast Asia respectively: Indonesia and Vietnam. Top of Mattis' agenda was broadening and deepening military-to-military engagements with those two countries, both of which are parties to the South China Sea dispute and which, to varying degrees, have been subject to coercion from China. In Jakarta, the two sides discussed the full resumption of military training between

US and Indonesian Special Forces, further sales of US F-16 fighter jets to Indonesia, counter-terrorism cooperation and improving Indonesia's MDA in an area off the Natuna Islands which overlaps with China's so-called nine-dash line.¹⁰ In Hanoi, Mattis discussed the South China Sea dispute with Vietnamese leaders and closer defence cooperation, including a visit by a US aircraft carrier to Da Nang in March, the first such visit since the end of the Vietnam War.

Mattis' trip was followed by US Ambassador Tina Kaidanow, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, who visited Vietnam in late January to hold bilateral security talks. Kaidanow reportedly discussed US arms sales to Vietnam to improve the country's military capabilities but also reduce the influence of Russia which has been Vietnam's primary supplier of military equipment since the Cold War.¹¹ In another sign of America's intention to increase its military presence in the Indo-Pacific, the *Wall Street Journal* has reported that the Pentagon is considering deploying heavily-armed and mobile Marine Expeditionary Units to train alongside regional militaries.¹²

While some Southeast Asian states will welcome the prospect of closer military cooperation with America, others may be more hesitant for fear of being perceived by China to be participating in a US-led containment strategy. In response to US efforts to increase interoperability with Southeast Asia militaries, China will look to expand its defence diplomacy activities in the region, including port visits, combined exercises and arms sales.

The Role of ASEAN

Although the NSS refers to ASEAN (together with APEC) as a "centerpiece" of the Indo-Pacific regional architecture, it does not discuss how the US can strengthen relations with the regional organization or what the role of ASEAN-led forums should be in the age of Great Power competition. In an era of escalating US-China rivalry, ASEAN unity will likely come under increasing strain—particularly over the South China Sea dispute—which undermines the organization's ability to speak with one voice and exercise centrality in the regional security architecture.

CONCLUSION

America's national security and defence strategies invariably undergo significant revisions due to new developments in international politics during the term of a sitting US president. Accordingly, the national security concerns and mitigation strategies outlined in the 2017 NSS and 2018 NDS could change over the next three years. Nevertheless, both policy documents are probably correct in anticipating greater geopolitical and geoeconomic rivalry between the United States and China (and between the US and Russia), at least in the near to mid-term future. A more competitive relationship between Washington and Beijing will greatly complicate Southeast Asia's strategic environment and the foreign-policy decision-

¹⁰ "US backs Joko Widodo bid for regional maritime power", *The Australian*, 24 January 2018.

¹¹ "US looks to increase weapons exports to Vietnam, decrease Russian influence", *Defense News*, 7 February 2018

¹² "U.S. Considers Boosting Asia Forces with Special Marine Units", *Wall Street Journal*, 9 February 2018

making processes of regional states as well as weaken ASEAN unity thereby undercutting the organization's centrality in the regional security architecture.

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