MOCK STRATEGY

The crazy-quilt National Security Strategy released a few weeks back is a patchwork of declarations of intent, admonitions thrown at other countries and *ad homonym* statements of dubious validity. It lacks coherence or consistency – much less a theme, a central idea, or a concept that gives pattern to its incongruent parts. Clearly, the document is the artless product of an assemblage of authors undisciplined by editorial direction. Yet, many serious analysts claim to see in this disjointed attempt at composing a grand strategy a landmark signaling a fundamental shift in the way the United States sees itself in the realm of international affairs. Only the last is surprising.

There is no formal policy process in the Trump administration. Neither clear organizational lines, nor designation of mandated responsibilities, nor fixed procedures for deliberation and decision, nor an articulated set of policy guidelines. The critical role of National Security Adviser belongs nominally to Marco Rubio whose day job of Secretary of State exhausts his limited time, skills and authority. He is merely one of Trump many appointees, White House aides, family and pals who vie for the President's attention. Policy as free-form existential art. The National Security Strategy is the sort of pot-pourri you get when nobody oversees and coordinates the document's drafting.

This disorder suits the temper of Trump himself. For tidy procedure, disciplined logical thinking, action based on design – all are totally alien to his personality. They constitute restraint on impulse – on the freedom that his extreme narcissism demands. That need requires a license to superimpose his distorted impressions of reality on actuality – to contradict himself in order to sustain Trump's grandiose sense of self.

Ignorance follows – more precisely, perpetuating a condition wherein ignorance about the world outside the inflated ego's imaginary reality is Trump's narcissistic bliss.

The National Security Strategy, in these circumstances, bears all the earmarks of composition by multiple contributors, each of whom managed to squeeze in their pet ideas. Eldrige Colby, the 'brains' of the Defense Department in his official position as Assistant Secretary for Policy, seems to have had the largest input. He long has argued that the United States should focus on China as the greatest long-term threat to American hegemony. Resources of every kind should be concentrated there; anything else is secondary – not unimportant but given lower priority whenever tradeoff have to be made. Doubtless he was responsible for the insertion of language stressing that the present challenge is posed by China's formidable technological and commercial competition. The downplaying of the much discussed (publicly by senior officials and Pentagon chiefs) expectation of a military showdown within the decade made the supposed shift in focus a softer sell for those hesitant to put most of America's chips onto East Asia while also satisfying Treasury Secretary Bessent who is obsessed with conducting economic warfare on all fronts. Stephan Miller at the White House doubtless kept an eagle on the document's development so as to ensure that it contained nothing that could in any way diminish or qualify

American backing for Israel's plans to dominate the Middle East. Marco Rubio, for his part, was the author of the updated Monroe Doctrine that prominently commits the United States to the *status quo ante* when Washington intervened unreservedly – by multiple means – in Latin American politics with the aim of preserving the controlling coalition of staunchly pro-American white elites and corporate interests, both American and local. As for the Pentagon brass, nothing in the NSS' verbiage disturbs their eager expectation that shortly they will be popping the champagne in celebration of their budget hitting the 1 trillion-dollar mark.

The unprecedently crude disparagement of the European allies, the EU and their national societies feel more like the release of pent-up emotion than the conclusion of anything approximating a serious thought process. Likely, its inclusion was psychic raw meat served to satisfy Trump's appetite for insult and invective while tapping more widespread feelings of disparagement toward European leaders. ***Most likely, Trump himself never read a draft of the full document.*** We have the testimony of several insiders who have worked with Trump that his attention span is measured in minutes, that a paragraph is the maximum length of any reading that can hold his attention, that his communications are limited to short verbal exchanges and the nightly tweet fireworks. We can readily imagine that his instructions as to what the National Security Strategy should say amounted to little more than a short list of highlighted topics punctuated by remarks like: 'Play up my successes as peacemaker in addition to crushing our enemies in Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah and Syria. America has never been as safe and secure as it is now under my presidency. Compare with the mess left behind by the feeble Biden, Make sure you hit those European guys hard- they deserve it; nothing nasty about China that could upset Xi before we meet in April; lay out the economic benefits to the U.S. from refusing to play patsy with foreign countries." When the full draft arrived in the Oval Office, it probably came with highlighted sentences annotated by an aide (Miller? Kushner?) looking over his shoulder to explain how this bit or that conforms to Presidential slogans, pronouncements and obsessions. Trump nods, nods....he signs.

[Trump's literal mindless would be on full display were he subject to probing questions from a truly inquisitive press corps. "*Some commentators are claiming that the National Security Strategy points to an American retrenchment from its current strategy of global activism. Are we planning to pull back from some of our forward positions – if so, where?*" The reaction from Trump would be a typical outburst of disconnected catchwords and oaths rejecting the notion that the U.S. was in "retreat" and excoriating the usual suspects for raising doubts about the country's unmatched power and commitment to working for peace all around the world.]

Back to the central question: Does the NSS document represent a basic reorientation of official thinking about America's global strategy? To offer an answer we should examine the process that generated it, decipher the exact meaning of the document's many opaque passages, and compare what is written to recent actions.

A. PROCESS ***affects the authoritativeness of the product***. National Security Reviews can be placed on a continuum running from NSC 68 promulgated in 1948 to dreary boilerplate borrowed from vintage predecessors. This document cannot be located on that continuum. *It is* ***sui generis.*** **How could that** be otherwise in light of the process depicted above. There is no basis/justification for interpreting its contents as the outcome of a sober deliberative reassessment that will enshrine its ideas as the fundamental guideposts for an official American

worldview enduring into the future. *The New York Times*' exhaustive reconstruction of life among Trump's foreign policymakers over the past year attests to the disarray, incoherence, fractiousness and complacent ignorance that are its hallmarks.

B. WORDS: ***Let's scrutinize what specifically the NSS document says:***

CHINA: The NSS'; extended discussion of the China challenge can be boiled down to these points.

- The PRC is the one power in a position to threaten the maintenance of the United States' global supremacy.

- China's rise owes to the failures of previous Presidents to foresee the looming danger and to take appropriate steps to thwart it

- Therefore, it is imperative that all of America's resources – supplemented by those of partners – should be deployed to weaken China, slow its economic growth, undercut its technology programs, and deter it from coercing or intimidating Taiwan by securing our military dominance

- That is the way to avoid a war over Taiwan

- Accept that we are rivals in a game of unprecedentedly high stakes. Our aims should be to achieve ***modus vivendi*** on America's terms.

- There is little reason to expect that relations could be cordial or cooperation beyond short-term, specific issues. Our national interest does not require anything more.

RUSSIA: The NSS gives Russia short shrift compared to its preoccupation with China. The conflict over Ukraine is accorded a single paragraph which is a thinly veiled promo for the shelf-soiled 28-point plan long shown to be unviable. Its acceptance is declared the foundation stone for stabilizing relations with Russia that, in turn, ensures for stability across Europe.
Laying a heavy bet on the Kremlin's readiness to swallow terms of an accord that contradict its oft-stated "bottom lines" – accepted by Trump at Anchorage - is an extreme example of the low level of sophistication that marks the NSS generally. So, instead of sober diplomacy, we are treated to an endless reel of Trump-Zelensky get-togethers - repetitious palavers remindful of dreary soap opera reruns.

Moreover, the notion of 'stability' is liable to multiple meanings. One, a Russia content to settle for annexation of the Donbas while a sovereign Ukraine integrates into the EU and keeps an army of 800,000. Two, a Russia that exchanges a piecemeal easing of sanctions in return for opening its rich natural resources to American investment. Three, a Russia whose current leadership is replaced by a Western friendly, oligarch dominated government headed by a sober version of Boris Yeltsin. The odds on any of these daydreams coming to pass are obviously extremely low.

Elsewhere in the neighborhood, Washington has plotted the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Georgia following the Maiden coup method to a T.

GENERAL

The United States is the cynosure of all that is good and virtuous in world affairs

We have the resources – economic, military, technological to beat China in the competition to be global supremo and to contain the spread of Beijing's influence worldwide

- Combining the power resources of the collective West – including Japan, South Korea and Europe (evidently rescued from the brink of civilizational erasure by American tough love) - tips the balance heavily in the U.S.' favor

- The nation's economy will flourish as we end being a soft touch and take from dealings with others what is rightly ours; that boom will accelerate as the world's investors eagerly trigger a wave of capital investment

- Donald Trump's unique vision and hard-headedness is setting the country on the path to accomplish that which the preceding four presidents failed to do.

- We got it all of this wrong until Trump came along and set things right

Geographic Segmentation

The idea of prioritizing certain regions over others can be read into the NSS albeit nowhere is it made explicit. That ambiguity is understandable since such a strategic innovation is contradicted and overridden by the objective of securing the United States dominant position world-wide.

- Europe is written off as a hopeless lost cause. Yet, at a later point in the documentary, we are told that "Not only can we not afford to write Europe off—doing so would be self-defeating for what this strategy aims to achieve.' Consistency, it is said, is the hobgoblin of weak minds – or the ejaculation of infirmed minds. Of course, Washington has no intention of abandoning Europe. For one time, it is essential as an auxiliary in the economic war against Chins. For another, its network of military bases is critical to the projection of American military might throughout the greater Middle East and in Africa. (The Army's Africa Command is located in Stuttgart). We could not have supplied the Israelis with the weaponry and air power they needed for the annihilation of Gaza or the missile war with Iran without them.

- Much is written about the Rubio authored Monroe Doctrine II – the supposed tangible evidence of regional prioritization. Does it follow that Greenland is shifted by some tectonic slight-of-hand 24 degrees of longitude westward? How do you reconcile the principle of geographic segmentation with retreating from the Middle East? Where do air strikes in Nigeria and Sonalia, and Yemen fit in? It is a telling sign of the degeneration in American public discourse that this arrant nonsense is treated so widely as authoritative pronouncements from on high

- All of the above assertions could have been borrowed verbatim from *National Security Strategies* promulgated from every President from Clinton onwards. Historic reset? Retrenchment? Only in the eyes of the beholder.

- ***"What differentiates America from the rest of the world—our openness, transparency, trustworthiness, commitment to freedom and innovation, and free market capitalism—will continue to make us the global partner of first choice."***

  This last is a revealing indicator of the enduring conceits that underly American thinking about its exceptionalism and unique place in the world. Ridiculous on the face of it, yet pervasive among Washington elites. Today, post-Palestinian geocide, past tariff wars, past diplomacy as coercive bullying, past the aggression against Venezuela, past institutionalized. hypocrisy – the United States' standing in the world is at an all-time low Most of the world now sees us as the greatest threat to world peace. They fear us but do not respect us. Claims of moral authority are met with derision. The "global partner of first choice"? Ask India, ask Brazil, ask Indonesia, ask Malaysia, ask Colombia, ask South Africa, ask Mali, ask other BRIC members and applicants – not to mention the 'shit hole" countries. That proposition holds only for our vassal governments in the collective West led by feeble people whose abysmal popular standing reflects the scorn of their citizenry. Finally, nobody trusts the United States' leadership. We have now a demonstrable record of deceit, unilateral abrogation of contracts, treaties and understandings, arbitrary imposition of penalties on whomever is disobedient to Washington's will, threat and intimidation as standard practice– not to speak of Trump's erratic, deranged behavior. Yet., the NSS still insists on our referring to unrivaled "soft power." This is one of Trump's innumerable psychotic delusions – infecting his entire government.

C. DEEDS

As of January 1, 2026, the United States is doing the following:

- Continuing to conduct its undeclared war against Russia in and around Ukraine – by proxy, by complicity, by belligerency. It supplies arms (including state-of-the-art missilry), American military personnel on site direct the firing of HIMARS and ACADMS targeted on Russia proper – Ukrainian officers merely push the button, provides critical Intelligence of both a tactical battlefront nature and for guidance of drone and missile strikes, financed government operations, plans military operations. Direct tangible assistance has slowed but not stopped entirely, e.g. Congression authorization of the Defense budget allocated $800 million in aid to Kiev. In regard to weaponry, Washington no longer will donate arms but rather will sell them to the Europeans who have agreed to cover the cost and to transfer them to the Ukraine. The bulk of the payments will be recycled to American companies in the military-industrial complex.
- The U.S. has tightened economic sanctions on Russia – concentrating on its energy trade. The measures include backing European states that are interdicting non-Russian flagged vessels transporting oil.

- The U.S. is establishing a new set of bases in the Baltic countries. It also is adding to forward deployments in Poland and Romania.

- In East Asia, Washington has announced an $11 billion military aid package to Taiwan that includes the most sophisticated high-tech weaponry

- The project of ringing the PRC with friendly allies and partners is gathering new steam – including a high-pressure campaign to cajole India into joining the anti- China "Quad" in what was, and remains a futile cause (made all the more so by the knotting of new security ties with Pakistan).

- Washington has refrained for speaking a single word of caution to Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi over her inflammatory declaration in Parliament that Taiwan (Formosa) falls within Japan's vital security zone and, thus, prepared to defend it militarily against attack by the PRC. Whether those remarks were spontaneous or premeditated, it is reasonable to suppose that her attitude was well known in Washington policy circles, and that it was reinforced by contacts with like-minded persons there.

- In the Middle East, American co-belligerency with Israel on all fronts is unabated. At the moment, the partners are putting in place a plan for a possible second assault against Iran. They collaborated - with Turkey - to install as President of Syria Abu Mohammad al-Julani, former chief of al-Quadi/al Nusra, a designated terrorist with a price on his head of $10 million put there in 2017 by Trump I. Meanwhile, the U.S. is moving to implement its mandate to act as sovereign authority over Gaza with the stated intention of segregating the remnants of the Palestinian community into ghettos while commercially exploiting the territory. Palestine, like Ukraine, is being turned into a profit center for the U.S. and Trump favorites. This is what is passed off as a strategic reset in the region.

- In Latin America, there is no ambiguity as to American purposes. The aim is to subordinate sovereign states to the dependency status they suffered in times past – to do so via interventions of all types (economic coercion, subversion, coup, military intimidation). Active support for a "League of Autocrats" (Bolsonaro, Milei, Boric, Machado, Asfura *et al)* is a major element in this strategy.

So, what is the NSS document? A boastful account of Trump's wonderous achievements with a plan for even greater successes in shaping the world to American advantage based on fanciful premises? Or, a landmark statement of a strategic reset that prioritizes certain regions over others and backs away from strident forecasts of military confrontation with China or Russia? My opinion: it tilts sharply toward the former.

Michael Brenner
mbren@pitt.edu