

The U.S. Military's 2018 National Defense Strategy

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On January 19, 2018, United States Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis announced the *2018 National Defense Strategy* for the U.S. military. Mattis outlined several key tenets of the new strategy including commitments to improve efficiency in defense spending as well as simplify the process for defense procurements. The most significant part of the announcement, however, was that the new strategy will again make conventional warfare against other nation-states the military's principal mission. Mattis declared, "We will continue to prosecute the campaign against terrorists that we are engaged in today, but great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security."¹ The military's decision to switch its focus to conventional state versus state warfare is the most significant strategy revision in a decade and fits well with President Donald Trump's foreign policy. However, it risks strategically isolating the United States and creating a force that is less prepared for the kinds of conflicts it has most frequently fought over the past sixty years.

While the new *National Defense Strategy* also lists non-state militant groups such as ISIS, Lebanese Hezbollah, and al-Qaida, as enemies, it asserts that America's new focus is on the threat posed by the revisionist powers of China and Russia. The official unclassified summary of the strategy states these nations seek to create "a world consistent with their authoritarian model – gaining veto authority over other nations'

economic, diplomatic and security decisions."² The *2018 National Defense Strategy* also singles out North Korea and Iran, which, according to Mattis, "persist in taking outlaw actions that threaten regional and even global stability."³

The state threats identified in the new strategy challenge America's global vision and predominance, but labeling some of these powers as enemies contradicts the actions of some of America's strongest allies and trade partners. The official *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* published by the Pentagon accuses China of being a strategic competitor that uses "military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries."⁴ This comes less than a year after Germany and China committed to reducing bilateral trade restrictions, increasing business partnerships, and fighting climate change.⁵ Germany is America's most important ally on the European continent, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel's actions stand in stark contrast to recent American tariffs levied against China. Nor is Germany the only country that is expanding economic ties with China. Great Britain is also seeking a new free trade agreement with China ahead of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union.

Publicly branding Iran as an enemy is another potentially problematic decision. Iran's moderate President, Hassan Rouhani, as well as the signing of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015 have improved Iran's global image. Though Iran exercises considerable influence in Iraq and supplies weapons and advisers to various groups in the Middle East, it appears to be abiding by the international agreement on

its nuclear program.⁶ As a result, many nations are expanding economic ties with Iran. In February 2017, India, the world's largest democracy and second most populous nation, committed to a large trade deal as well as closer defense cooperation with Iran in fighting extremist groups in Afghanistan.⁷ If the United States decides to escalate tensions with Iran, it will put nations like India in a difficult position and may force them to choose sides. The United States also has over 10,000 troops still fighting terrorist groups in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, where Iran has significant strategic interests.⁸

To combat these state threats, the authors of the *2018 National Defense Strategy* assert the military needs to restore its lost competitive edge in all domains of warfare. The document reaffirms America's commitment to project its power anywhere in the world, a capability currently unrivaled by any other nation. Maintaining a premier military will allow the United States to fulfill the strategy's goals of protecting the American people, promoting American prosperity, and advancing American influence.⁹ As Mattis explained, the military does not just protect geography but rather "a realm of ideas."¹⁰ This statement alludes to one of the military's largest and most frequent missions since World War II: nation-building. As part of America's effort to spread democracy around the globe, since 1945 the United States military has undertaken the creation of new governments in Germany, Japan, Italy, South Korea, South Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.¹¹ Most American military leaders would undoubtedly rather fight conventional conflicts than engage in guerilla wars of attrition or nation-state building, but they have very

little choice in which missions American political leaders assign the military. Moreover, it does not seem far-fetched that the United States could again find itself engaged in nation-state building. The *2018 New Defense Strategy's* implied goal of changing the behavior of governments in the countries of North Korea, Iran, China, and Russia means that in any direct conflict or proxy war with these nations, nation building will likely be a key component of any long-term success.

The primacy of conventional forces in the past has at times diminished the United States military's effectiveness in other types of missions such as counterinsurgency, peacekeeping, and nation-building. Accordingly, a focus on clearly defined, politically safe, and morally preferable conventional warfare could diminish American capabilities to confront other types of threats. In Iraq, from 2003 to 2007, the U.S. military struggled to maintain order, restore basic services, and establish a functioning government after the end of major combat operations. In South Vietnam from 1964 to 1973, the U.S. military's focus on defeating North Vietnamese forces on the battlefield overlooked the causes of the war and hindered the establishment of a democratic government. Developing one force capability does not preclude performing others, but as the military shifts priorities to focus on conventional warfare, it will be imperative for service members of all ranks to also study and prepare for the many other types of missions they may have to perform. These missions are politically, morally, and professionally challenging, however their past frequency suggests the U.S. military may again have to perform them in the future.

Of course, conventional forces are a crucial part of any modern military, and strong conventional forces served the United States well in the Korean War (1950-1953), the Gulf War (1990-1991), and the invasion of Iraq (2003). Against nuclear-armed states, the effectiveness of a large conventional force is less evident. Some historians have argued that American conventional forces deployed in Western Europe during the Cold War helped deter Soviet aggression.¹² Since Western Europe was likely also a region that the United States was willing to use nuclear weapons to protect, however, it is possible these forces were less effective deterrents than commonly assumed. Moreover, it is doubtful that China, Russia, Iran, or North Korea will intentionally engage the United States in a conventional war, a type of conflict in which the United States has never been defeated.

In their efforts to assert their own strength and improve their strategic position, China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are instead focusing on relatively small, calculated actions as well as untraditional forms of warfare such as cyber warfare. Russia and China have so far limited their aggressive actions to places where they believed the United States would not risk an open confrontation. Russia's invasion of Crimea and China's construction of islands in the South China Sea, for example, were movements meant to assert Chinese and Russian regional power and gain small strategic advantages without provoking a significant American response. Expanded conventional American forces might deter similar future aggressive actions, but only with an increased American willingness to risk armed conflict with these nations.

The United States must be cautious in selecting its future enemies. America remains the world's only superpower, but as the *New Defense Strategy* states, China and Russia are revisionist powers seeking to change the global status quo. Together these nations encompass over 1.5 billion people, or nearly twenty percent of the world's population. In the past, American leaders have enormously underestimated the cost of armed conflicts against far smaller powers.

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* is policy document, and as a result, it is primarily a guide. It is significant because of the impact it will have on America's military leaders, who wield a growing influence on American foreign policy. Still, it is not a formal binding document, and President Trump's administration has previously made comments that contradict the document by calling into question the commitment of America's allies and threatening existing trade agreements. While America's new strategy will play a large role in shaping its force structure and soldiers' outlooks, it will also influence American allies and rivals alike. They will examine it carefully to see how America is prioritizing its existing partnerships and commitments.¹³ In this way, the document will influence developments outside the United States military as well. Strong relationships with American allies, trading partners, and influential international bodies will be essential to shaping an international order that benefits the United States and invests all nations in peace. Political and economic policies will be just as important as military power to ensuring future American prosperity. The new defense strategy takes a step toward aligning

these policies and hopefully prepares the U.S. military to accomplish future missions.

¹ Jim Garamone, “National Defense Strategy a ‘Good Fit for Our Times,’ Mattis Says,” U.S. Department of Defense, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1419671> (accessed March 29, 2018).

² “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge,” U.S. Department of Defense, p. 2, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> (accessed March 29, 2018).

³ James N. Mattis, “Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy,” U.S. Department of Defense Press Operations, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1420042> (accessed March 29, 2018).

⁴ “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge,” U.S. Department of Defense, p. 2, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> (accessed March 29, 2018).

⁵ “Germany and China vow to deepen ties amid Trump concerns,” *Reuters*, June 1, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-china/germany-and-china-vow-to-deepen-ties-amid-trump-concerns-idUSKBN18S4CC> (accessed March 19, 2018).

⁶ For Iran’s influence in Iraq see: Tim Arango, “Iran Dominates in Iraq after U.S. ‘Handed the Country Over,’” *The New York Times*, July 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/world/mid>

<dleast/iran-iraq-iranian-power.html> (accessed March 29, 2018).

⁷ “India, Iran to step up cooperation on Afghanistan,” *The Seattle Times*, Feb. 17, 2018, <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/india-iran-to-work-for-stability-in-afghanistan/> (accessed March 29, 2018).

⁸ Tara Coop, “The Pentagon Keeps a daily count of troops in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria – but won’t publicly disclose it,” *Military Times*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2017/08/24/the-pentagon-keeps-a-daily-count-of-troops-in-iraq-afghanistan-and-syria-but-wont-publicly-disclose-it/> (accessed March 29, 2018).

⁹ “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge,” U.S. Department of Defense, p. 4, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> (accessed March 29, 2018).

¹⁰ James N. Mattis, “Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy,” U.S. Department of Defense Press Operations, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1420042/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-on-the-national-defense-strategy/> (accessed March 29, 2018).

¹¹ On America’s efforts to spread democracy see: Susan Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹² Ingo Trauschweizer, *The Cold War U.S. Army: Building Deterrence for Limited War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

¹³ Charlotte Gao, “China Reprimands US Over 2018 National Defense Strategy” *The Diplomat*, January 23, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/china->

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