An Analytical Essay

Analyzing the 2015 U.S. NSS

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by

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In the 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS), the United States is reaffirming its national interests, which revolve around the promotion of security, prosperity, values, as well as international order. These, for America, are vital. Therefore, the U.S. is determined to leverage all instruments of national power to assure that no credible threats will undermine those vital interests. Although the U.S. still enjoys its global leadership, the 21st century world is witnessing the (re)-emergence of geopolitical powers, some with unpredictable, irresponsible, and unfriendly behaviors. At the same time, Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" within an increasingly interconnectedness appears to be the new norm. All these pose some degree of challenges to America. The 2015 NSS discusses major security threats against the U.S. and the world today, ranging from the potential use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by rogue states or terrorist groups to the catastrophic impact of climate change, and from the savage ISIL to the deadly Ebola virus. Addressing such issues, the U.S. fully recognizes the importance of strengthening cooperation with allies and partners, from Western Europe to East Asia, and from the Middle East to Sub-Saharan Africa. The current NSS also highlights America's commitment to be on the forefront of advancing the international peace, stability, and prosperity. The U.S. overarching strategy is largely influenced by Joseph Nye's conception of power. This essay aims to examine the strengths of the NSS, as well as identify some areas that need proper alteration. Striking a dynamic balance in the employment of hard and soft powers is key for the U.S. as it persistently strives to protect its interests, and preserve its hegemony in the world affairs.

To use power effectively, a state must first understand the nature of power. According to Nye, power is the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants, and there are three ways to do that: by coercion (sticks); by payments (carrots); and by attraction or persuasion (Nye, p.3). The first two are considered as hard power, while the latter is soft power. Despite the rise of

China, the U.S. remains a country with the greatest hard power resources in the world. Although some areas still need to be improved, the U.S. economy has recovered from the 2008 financial crisis. The U.S. has demonstrated a significant growth, where it largely benefits from a young workforce, and the progress in science, technology, and innovation (NSS 2015, President Obama's Remarks). Militarily, the U.S. is unmatched. Despite the recent sequestration, the U.S. military is still the most expeditious fighting force, which enjoys technological superiority, and has credible presence around the world.

The NSS reveals a number of key strengths. First, the it suggests that the economic and military powers will continue to serve as the foundation of America's national security, as well as critical sources of its influence abroad (NSS 2015, President Obama's Remarks). They are the primary means for the U.S. to engage with different actors, state or non-state, and influence or force them to behave in line with the U.S. interests, and act upon the universally accepted values. For example, targeted economic sanctions will prevent the proliferation of WMD, as well as deter and dismantle state-sponsor terrorism and transnational criminal groups. Financial and technological supports will incentivize developing countries to reduce CO_2 emissions, thus drive them to be an integral part of the global campaign of saving the environment. Additionally, through credible maritime forces, the U.S. will be able to deter any threats upon, and secure, the international sea lines of communication (SLOCs). This will allow the free flow of commerce, as well as freedom of navigation for troops deployment, from and to forward-bases, in support of the U.S. allies. On the other hand, they can be effectively utilized to blockade hostile nations from gaining access to those SLOCs.

The second strength of the NSS is related to America's appreciation on the limit of hard power. The NSS correctly asserts that in today's complex security environment, hard power

alone will either be insufficient or irrelevant. The U.S. will need to devise a comprehensive strategy, which encompasses various elements of soft power: a "Smart NSS" (NSS 2015, President Obama's Remarks). In fact, the U.S. must restrain its military forces only when other means to protect its vital interests have been exhausted, or only when there is a genuine call to fight a war of necessity, such as in Afghanistan (2001), as opposed to a war of choice, such as in Iraq (2003). Learning from its recent past, through the NSS, the U.S. attempts to alter the way it employs its hard power. In this regard, the U.S. will better prioritize its efforts, and allocate its finite resources more judiciously. It will not project its military forces without a clear end state, or without feasible strategic calculations and operational plans. The costs of ambiguity and miscalculation are just too high.

The NSS acknowledges the consequences of relying too much on hard power. Therefore, the NSS implicitly calls for a greater emphasis on soft power. Unlike hard power, soft power is more difficult to measure, and requires more time to develop and take effect. Yet, the U.S. cannot afford to undervalue the importance of soft power. According to Nye, a country's soft power rests upon three resources: its culture, its political values, and its foreign policies (Nye, p.84). He also argues that soft power is seductive in nature, and seduction is always more effective than coercion (Nye, p.x). Many of the U.S. values, such as democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities, are highly seductive. This suggests that the U.S. may obtain the outcomes it desires in international politics because other nations, which admire its values, emulate its example, or aspire to its level of prosperity and openness, want to follow it (Nye, p.5).

Using Nye's logic, the NSS indicates that the U.S. may change other's behaviors by showing all the great prospects of the change itself. Instead of using military force to support a

regime change, and export the American system of democracy into a society that for thousand of years has embraced different way of life, it will be more effective for the U.S. to focus on two related parts. First, live, and consistently abide the values at home. Credibility and integrity are critical for the U.S. global leadership, and directly relate to its ability in extending influence to persuade others to follow. The U.S. must set the example, where the deeds match the words. For example, the U.S. must prohibit the practice of torture or the so-called enhanced interrogation technique since it contradicts its very value of civil liberties and the rule of law (NSS 2015, p.19) Only then the U.S. can focus on the second part: promoting the American and universal values abroad. How to promote those values is inherently another big challenge. To be effective, the U.S. must understand the various cultural aspects of the targeted society, nation, or region. It must be cognizant that there is no one-fits-all formula. Every effort must be tailored to fit in the unique environment. For example, although some shared basic principles exist, the way the U.S. supports a newly democratic nation in Southeast Asia may not be applicable to one in North Africa. To work accordingly, democracy must be homegrown in nature.

Aside from all the above strengths of the NSS, the document reveals several weaknesses, and leaves room for improvement. First, there is only little discussion on the information instrument of national power in support of the employment of both hard and soft powers. Like in the military domain of power, the U.S. possesses unrivaled information and communication technology (ICT) and assets, which can be leveraged as an integral part, and a multiplying factor, of its efforts in promoting America's national interests at home and abroad. The deepening of globalization, and the revolution of ICT at the outset of the 21st century, has made the world far more connected and integrated than ever before. This in itself presents both opportunities and challenges. As witnessed in the Arab Springs, social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, was

so powerful, the effective use of which could actually move the masses, and ultimately drive dramatic political reforms. More recently, the ISIL has been able to use media to recruit fighters and supporters globally. Understanding such a reality, in the NSS, the U.S. must incorporate the broad capabilities that the information power can offer. This will signify that the U.S. fully appreciates the current security environment. Yet, at the same time, it will send a clear message to the world, especially to its adversaries, that the U.S. will use its information power to deter potential threats to America's national security. Additionally, in line with Nye's idea on soft power, information power will enable the U.S. to extend its attractive culture and values, while correcting some false perceptions on America's foreign policies. A concerted strategic information campaign will allow the U.S. to reach out more societies, nations, and organizations around the world. Such a campaign will change some of their false perspectives or unfriendly behaviors towards America; it will also drive them to find common interests and shared challenges, and eventually embrace the same values that the U.S. stands for.

Another weakness found in the NSS is related to the U.S. efforts in supporting its allies and partners, as well as various regional architectures around the world. While the NSS correctly highlights the value of working and operating with allies and partners in resolving various security challenges, the U.S. does not clearly define the prerequisite of such coalition. The U.S. will always need the so-called coalition of the willing. However, in today's complex security environment, willingness alone is not enough. The U.S. will require reliable allies and partners, the coalition of the able. Without credible capabilities, at least, to guarantee their own basic protection and sustainment, they will only become a burden for the U.S. in achieving a common end state. The U.S. should avoid "free-riding" behaviors, especially given the recent U.S. defense budget cuts. Therefore, the NSS must clearly communicate this message to America's

allies and partners. This will make them act more responsibly, especially in allocating their resources to modernize and equip themselves. To achieve this outcome, the U.S. will need to use its soft power effectively. Through bilateral diplomatic engagement with allies and partner, or through NATO forums, the U.S. should be able to present the narrative that will persuade all parties to always build their capacity to maintain their relevance in the coalition's effort. This does not mean that the U.S. will walk away from its commitment to lead, and support its allies and partners, including financially. However, all must understand that everyone must bring something meaningful to the coalition. Trough soft power, the U.S. will drive its allies and partners to want what the U.S. wants: coalition of the willing and able.

The 2015 NSS sets out the principles and priorities that guide the use of American power in the world in pursuance of the U.S. national interests. Several key strengths found in the document reflect that the U.S. has learned from its recent history. Despite its unmatched military capability, the U.S. still had to endure multiple strategic losses. Having a robust military posture is desirable; yet, the U.S. must also appreciate the limit of hard power, and at the same time, the value of soft power in winning the war and making peace. Hard power and soft power will complement, and leverage each other. Only by maintaining a good balance between the two, the U.S. will be able to protect and promote its national interest at home or abroad, and preserve its global leadership in the 21st century.