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Strategic Insights: Making Good on the NSS and NDS: Competing with Russia in Europe and Beyond

March 20, 2018 | Dr. John R. Deni

In January, the Trump administration released its first *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), which closely followed the December 2017 release of the new *National Security Strategy* (NSS).¹ Both of these documents call for a fundamental shift in the U.S. approach to security, emphasizing competition against Russia and China at the expense of what some may argue has been a myopic focus on eradicating transnational terrorism. What the NSS and NDS are less clear about is how the United States will compete against Russia. Instead, an array of arguably vague policy objectives are all these documents seem to muster. There may be good reasons why these documents provide us little in the way of substantive ways and means, but that shouldn't prevent a public debate about the many tools Washington can and should employ in competition with Russia in order to generate potentially novel policy options for decision-makers, clearly signal Washington's intent and reassurance to allies, and convey a stronger deterrent message to Moscow.

The 2017 NSS outlines in the broadest possible terms the U.S. Government's national security goals. In addition to defining the strategic ends, it also lays out some of the ways and means of how the Government will go about protecting the American people and promoting U.S. prosperity.

Released just a month after the NSS, the 2018 NDS takes the place of what was known as the *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) report. At first glance, the 2018 NDS is quite different from the last QDR—for one thing, it is much shorter. The last QDR, released in 2014, was nearly 90 pages in length. In contrast, the new NDS is only about 11 pages of unclassified material—the Pentagon has been quite clear that the NDS released in January is just a summary of the full report, which is classified and presumably much longer.

What is most striking about both the new NDS and the new NSS is the dominant theme of strategic competition with Russia and China evident in each. Iran, North Korea, and transnational terrorism are described and assessed as threats, but they are clearly seen as less important than—certainly not as existential as—the challenges posed by Russia and China. This shift in rhetoric is a necessary departure from the strategic shortsightedness of the last 17 years, one in which counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and rogue states dominated the thinking of Washington policymakers.

Ideally, the NSS and NDS—like all good strategies—should provide a multi-dimensional roadmap of sorts that helps the U.S. Government navigate among and mediate between ends, ways, and means. To some degree, these documents do that, providing at least some indication of the ways. For example, in order to rejuvenate the U.S. economy and promote prosperity, the NSS calls for major improvements in domestic infrastructure and increased support for apprenticeships and workforce development efforts. Elsewhere, the NSS proposes increased energy exports and investments in energy technology, in order to prevent others from using energy as a weapon while maintaining American energy independence. These policy “ways” may not comprise precise

guidance to the vast U.S. Government bureaucracy, but they at least provide enough specificity to shape and guide the primary lines of effort decision-makers throughout the executive branch should pursue.

In contrast, when it comes to competing with Russia, the NSS and NDS are remarkably elusive. The NSS calls for deepening collaboration with European allies, strengthening deterrence, and modernizing defense capabilities—all things any NSS might say and, in fact, have said.² Although competition with Russia requires a whole-of-government approach, it is reasonable to think that the new NDS might address the defense-related modalities in greater detail. However, the NDS likewise provides little insight beyond the need to modernize military hardware and employ a nebulous “Global Operating Model” to compete below the level of armed conflict.

There may be good reasons why the new NSS and NDS do not provide greater insights into what policies may underpin a more competitive approach toward Russia. For example, the administration may prefer to avoid showing its cards at this stage of the “competition,” hoping instead to keep Moscow in the dark.

Nonetheless, it may be useful to contemplate what policies might comprise a more competitive strategy, including the reasons outlined in the first paragraph of this article. Before outlining those policy elements, some important caveats are necessary. First, it’s vital to recognize that a competitive strategy must employ all elements of American power, not simply the military, which it seems is increasingly the tool of first resort on the part of the White House and Congress.

Second, in designing a set of competitive policies, it is necessary to remain focused on the objective. That is, in crafting and choosing specific policies, decision-makers must ask themselves whether a given policy will ultimately reduce Russia’s power—broadly defined—to threaten the United States and its allies or hold Western interests at risk. Competition for its own sake is pointless, and a collapsed Russia is in no state’s interests. However, a less powerful Russia may be less likely to invade a neighbor, prop up a weapon of mass destruction (WMD)-wielding dictatorship, stage massive no-notice military exercises, use energy as a weapon, or sabotage the critical infrastructure of the United States or an ally.

Third, a competitive set of policies does not necessarily amount to containment, isolation, or confrontation. Pursuing any of these would only fulfill Russia’s false narrative, allowing it to continue demonizing the West. Of course, Moscow is likely to attempt to do so in any case, but by avoiding direct containment, isolation, and confrontation, the United States can more effectively avoid playing into the Kremlin’s hands, while also keeping fiscal and other costs manageable.

With these important factors in mind, what might a more competitive set of policies look like? For example, in terms of diplomatic efforts, the United States should end bilateral summits and state visits with Russia. Russia’s President Putin clearly savors opportunities to appear on the world stage next to American presidents. These opportunities provide tangible evidence within Russia that its leaders matter and are respected. Instead, the United States should engage the Kremlin through foreign ministers or only on the margins of multilateral gatherings, and away from the media whenever possible. Moreover, most engagement with Russian counterparts should occur at the many levels below that of head of state. Ending high-visibility summits and state visits would help to diminish Russia’s soft power—domestically and internationally—without unduly affecting the ability of governments to talk with each other.

Additionally, the United States should seek to keep Russia permanently out of the Group of Seven advanced industrial economies. Permanently excluding Russia from the group would have the effect of further reducing Russian soft power, both domestically and internationally.

In addition to diplomatic efforts, there are also some critical military policies that the United States should implement in order to better compete with Russia and thereby reduce Russian power. For instance, the United States should make permanent its embargo on the export of specific military and dual-use goods to Russia. Enabling Russian military capability and capacity and transferring advanced military technology to Russia only strengthens its ability to project power beyond its borders and intimidate its neighbors.

The United States should work within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to dramatically limit Russian military observers at exercises in Europe while expanding media access to and coverage of the same. This would have the effect of reducing the intelligence gathered by Russian military officials attending U.S. and NATO military exercises, while still achieving a deterrent effect vis-à-vis Russia. The United States should also continue its moratorium on military-to-military engagement with Russia, except for those activities that provide a demonstrable intelligence benefit, or for the purposes of deconfliction when U.S. and Russian military forces are operating in close proximity (such as in Syria).

Finally, when considering how to use posture and force structure to compete with Russia, U.S. military decision-makers need to think beyond institutional biases. For instance, much of the discussion over the last year on whether and how to increase U.S. forward stationed forces in Europe centered largely on the disposition of American tank units, in part, because highly lethal, highly mobile maneuver warfare is how the U.S. Army historically has preferred to conceptualize conflict.³ Locating an armored brigade in Europe, especially in Poland, is a necessary step to more effectively compete with Russia, but it alone is utterly insufficient.⁴ An American armored brigade stationed in Poland has great deterrent and operational value vis-à-vis an overt Russian military incursion in Northeastern Europe, but it has very little utility against far more likely—and, to date, more prevalent—Russian efforts to conduct so-called gray zone activities in the electromagnetic spectrum, in the cyber realm, in the information space, and elsewhere.

While military and diplomatic policies, like those outlined earlier, can play important roles in reducing Russia's ability to hold U.S. interests at risk, more competitive economic policies are perhaps the most important. Typically, economic strength underwrites a country's military might, political influence, and other measures of power. Taking steps to frustrate or even hinder development of the Russian economy could eventually have a profound impact on Moscow's ability to wield military, political, and other tools against the United States. The most important economic policy Washington could pursue in this regard would be to keep the price of oil low, since Russia's economy remains almost entirely driven by resource extraction and roughly 40 percent of the Russian Government's budget revenue comes from oil sales. There are several ways to do this, from promoting faster development of the liquefied natural gas (LNG) trade and renewable energy infrastructure, to utilizing American energy dominance and the excess capacity of other key supplier states to increase production at certain price thresholds. The objective is to keep oil prices low through a combination of tactical supply increases and demand substitution.

Additionally, the United States should resuscitate negotiations toward a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP) as a means of strengthening its own economy and that of European allies. T-TIP would remove the remaining barriers to trade and investment between the United States and most of Europe, boosting the European Union's economy by \$147 billion per year and the U.S. economy by \$116 billion per year.⁵ Strengthening Europe's economy relative to Russia will serve to promote U.S. interests in a stable, secure Europe and make the continent less susceptible to Russian predations.

In sum, a more competitive strategy toward Russia requires a full panoply of supporting competitive policies, all aimed at reducing Moscow's ability to hold U.S. interests and those of our allies at risk. The NSS and NDS provide the proper framework, if not necessarily offering sufficient detail on the more specific ways and means. Whether Washington can escape the centripetal force of Middle Eastern chaos and the headline-grabbing attacks of transnational Islamic terrorists remains to be seen, but if it can, the United States will be on a firmer strategic footing than at any time in the last 25 years.

ENDNOTES

1. Jim Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 2018, available from <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>, Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017, available from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

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