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Analysis of the Obama Administration's "National Security Strategy 2010"

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In December 2009, the *National Strategy Forum Review* (NSFR) theme was "U.S. National Security Strategy 2010," and was written by the editorial board of the *Review*. This was done in anticipation of the U.S. government's congressionally mandated "National Security Strategy," which is presented to the American public and international observers approximately every two to four years. The U.S. government publication was distributed on May 27, 2010, five months after the NSFR publication.

A comparison of these two documents shows a number of similarities and differences.

Similarities:

- Both documents emphasize an unsustainable federal budget that must be reigned in to create long term economic security. The U.S. cannot afford to do everything; America must carefully choose our priorities and do without in other non-vital spending areas.
- The NSFR document emphasized *complementary strategy*; the government's document also stressed the need to work with and understand our friend's and allies' interests to achieve common goals. Unilateralism is not off the table, but multilateralism should be pursued as much as possible.
- Energy security is listed in both documents as a long-term national security priority.
- Improving education to increase U.S. competitiveness is a clear commonality between both documents. Investing in America's human capital, both educational and entrepreneurial, is the key piece in developing sustainable economic security.
- Cybersecurity, a more recent national security threat, was listed as a priority in both documents.
- Both documents stress the importance of U.S. leadership on the world stage. American leadership will be required for achieving complementary strategic international objectives.

- Both documents extol the virtues of the American ethos as the foundation upon which to build a stronger, more secure nation.

Differences:

- The NSFR document was published for an educated audience that is well-read in national security matters. The government's document is primarily aimed at domestic and international audiences that are interested in U.S. national security policy but not necessarily experts in it.
- A major difference is that the government's document is heavy on stating strategic objectives, while the NSFR document addresses U.S. strategic objectives with more concision, and focuses on how strategy is developed to meet strategic objectives.
- The NSFR strategy presented a pared down list of security challenges and solutions. The government's document was far more inclusive of security challenges.
- The NSFR document presented a method for improving public diplomacy. The government's document listed public diplomacy as an important priority for achieving cooperation, but did not address how to improve its implementation.
- The NSFR document emphasized the need to listen before acting. The government's document emphasized cooperation, but did not emphasize the fact that America must first understand our partners before effective, beneficial cooperation is possible.
- The NSFR document focuses on the management component of national strategy.
- The government's document lists health care as a national security priority.

Critique:¹

The government's national security strategy lists numerous challenges and priorities, and promises to either "strengthen" or "improve" existing security priorities, activities, and programs. In very few places was there an indication given that the government was cutting out wasteful and unnecessary policy goals. This is a problem for national security analysts hoping for a clear direction on the government's critical thinking and national strategy. If everything is a priority, then nothing is.

A contradiction was apparent in the document's stated goal of achieving economic security through minimizing expenditures and decreasing America's list of commitments abroad, but then promising to work with America's friends and allies to achieve a series of international security, economic, and foreign aid goals. For example, if the U.S. wants to cut back on items such as military and defense spending, but then passes legislation to purchase aircraft engines that the Pentagon does not want, this is contrary to the budget-cutting/wise-spending priorities in the government's document. Moreover, it is vague how the U.S. can decrease expenditures on foreign projects and conflicts while simultaneously promising to increase foreign aid and

¹ Several other excellent critiques of the 2010 NSS include: "[Snoozing Through the National Security Strategy](#)," by Stephen A. Walt; "[Costs of War: National Security Strategy Tug-of-War](#)," by Shaun Waterman; "[The National Security Strategy of 2010. Or 2006. Whatever](#)," by Max Boot; and "[The Promise of National Security, With a Straight Face](#)," by Michael Gerson.

cooperative activities on existing foreign policy programs. The answer is unclear, which bodes poorly for strategic thinking and successful implementation.

The Obama administration's national security strategy is well written, but it is difficult to foresee how the President will apply clear strategic approaches to the numerous challenges that he promises to overcome. In the months ahead, the administration must begin to put flesh on the bones of this national security strategy. We will then see what this document really means.

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