

The NATIONAL STRATEGY FORUM REVIEW

An Online National Security Journal Published by the National Strategy Forum

Chapter 2: What is U.S. National Security Strategy?

Strategy should be consistent with American ethos and congruent with informed public opinion. If not, attempts by the presidential administration to take the American public where it does not want to go will lack the necessary public support to succeed.

Strategy begins with identification of clear objectives that are agreed upon, in large measure, by the public, Congress, and the Administration. This sequence appears counterintuitive, but the administration policymaker must recognize that public and congressional support is essential to achieving strategic objectives. Policymakers can lead only by following.

Domestic politics is a dominant factor in strategy setting. In this context, a major strategic decision is whether to wage war. In 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt correctly perceived that the U.S. must assist Britain and France against Nazi Germany. There was substantial public opposition, expressed initially as “avoidance of foreign entanglements,” championed by the Isolationists and America Firsters. FDR deliberately and skillfully maneuvered public opinion towards war, which was galvanized by the attack on Pearl Harbor.

There are constitutional checks and balances on national security strategy. For example, there is a continuing tension between the executive branch and Congress regarding the exercise of war powers. Congress has clear responsibility to supply or withhold funds for war. The Supreme Court is the referee between the competing interests of the executive branch and Congress. An additional player is needed – the informed public. This cadre of people and private institutions has the potential to lead public opinion, notwithstanding the president’s “bully pulpit.” The appropriate role for the informed public and private sectors is to bore into major issues, surmount partisan politics, and make its case clearly to the general American public by using all means of communication. Parenthetically, this is what the National Strategy Forum (NSF) has been doing since 1983.

The NSF frames issues, asks relevant questions, and presents the views of qualified experts, often in a point/counterpoint format. The NSF touchstone is complementary strategy: listen to other states, friend and foe; determine their strategic objectives; and fold these objectives into

U.S. national security strategic objectives to the degree possible. In essence, the U.S. needs to listen more and transmit less.

One of the highest priorities for the U.S. may be to restore domestic optimism. The foundation for optimism is common sense, trust, respect, and confidence that political leaders will abandon partisan politics and make critical decisions that will benefit all Americans. Strategy requires a recognition of what Americans want and need, and what they dislike. Without this, public support for the strategy will be lacking.

The basic component of strategy is to gauge correctly the consequences of action or inaction. Given the realities of the election cycle, a presidential time horizon for a strategic objective is approximately eight years. Year one: the candidate's presidential campaign and the election, followed by the first year's presidential rush to achieve something great. However, the president and policymaking staff may have difficulty getting up to speed. Years two and three are governed by political maneuvering for the mid-term Congressional elections and preparations for the president's second election campaign. The president's second term is largely spent dealing with the consequences of the actions initiated in the first term. The last year of the president's second term focuses on legacy.

Actionable intelligence is needed to assist policymakers. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) was established in 2004 to marshal the intelligence assets of the sixteen federal national security agencies. The scope and authority of the ODNI is a work in progress. The CIA is not trusted by some policymakers and is struggling to retain its influence in the face of past blunders and miscalculations.

America is a land of no secrets and many mysteries. In contrast, Russia has many secrets but no mysteries. The U.S. is approaching a time when there will be virtually no secrets – everything will be out in the open. A highly transparent society will require innovative, adaptive ways to compete, survive, and flourish. Secrecy will no longer be the keystone of strategic advantage. If secrecy is lost, a strategy that is based on secrecy will become increasingly more fragile and at risk. A vision is needed that will enable the U.S. to make an effective transition from rapidly eroding secrecy to a vastly more transparent world.

U.S. national security requires sensitivity to the need to modify, make mid-course corrections, or abandon strategic objectives if there is not a critical mass of public support, and if support for measures of the project or campaign is low. Thus, an exit strategy must be defined at the beginning of the strategy process. The strategic process requires skilled government internal management at every step.

Tactics are the final phase of the strategic process – the implementation of strategic objectives. A strategy checklist includes:

- Deciding which objectives are vital, non-vital, or discretionary.

- Gauging public support and public opposition before the objective is announced and implemented.
- An awareness that Congressional support or opposition is heavily influenced by partisan political perspectives. Strategy must be developed with this in mind.
- Examination of the media regarding the objective and its consequences, because the media frequently forms public opinion, which, in turn, leads Congressional policy on basic issues.
- Co-optation of public support and momentum, if possible. There are issues in which the public is proactive, rather than passive, and in which the public leads, the media reports, and the media pundits analyze.
- A clear message regarding the objective for the public, including affordability, consequences, and what constitutes victory.

There are two ongoing errors often made by policymakers. One is the failure to address the considerations summarized above. Even if these are fulfilled, the objective may require modifications which would enhance the likelihood of building and retaining broad public support. The objective may be abandoned because of anticipated lack of support. The second error is to confuse tactics with strategy. Strategy is the dominant factor: identification of strategic objectives and a plan for implementation. Tactics are subordinate: how are the elements of the grand strategy implemented?