Muscle Bound

By Jon B. Alterman

A lot has changed in the Middle East and around the world in the last 15 years. A lot has happened in the United States as well. Reading President Trump’s new National Security Strategy, almost all of the emphasis is on the latter. The country would have been better served if more of the emphasis were on the former.

The biggest issue facing the United States today is not that it has fallen into decline. Instead, it is that its institutions are being tested in a rapidly changing environment. It often seems like our adversaries are innovating faster than we are. They are small and fast and willing to fail often, in the hopes of occasional victories. The U.S. government is big and slow and intolerant of failure. The president’s new strategy prioritizes building strength rather than agility, but given the strength we already have and the world that we are facing, greater agility is the more urgent need.

It is not surprising that after a campaign that stressed “America First,” the new strategy would be largely focused on the United States and its supposed weakness. Still, the most fundamental security changes are occurring outside the United States.

An obvious change is in cyber, where the president’s strategy is refreshingly—and surprisingly—open about how hostile and low-cost disinformation campaigns “with a troubling degree of deniability…can undermine faith and confidence in democratic institutions.” The Trump administration is still discovering the extent of Russian meddling in U.S. domestic politics, it is unclear how much it knows about the influence Russia had on the United Kingdom’s vote to leave the European Union, and efforts elsewhere remain an even greater mystery.

While the president’s strategy notes the importance of cyber, it is vague on what safeguards the United States needs to put in place, let alone what offensive capabilities of its own the United States should seek to develop. The problem is clear, but it requires agility and direction to confront.

Another obvious change, left less clear in the document, is the rising capacity of non-state actors to shape what used to be known as “international relations.” One no longer has to be a nation to play on a globalized marketplace has threatened traditional gem miners and cutters with cheap—and sometimes fake—imports. Jewelry from China, Thailand, and India has recently flooded Middle Eastern markets, piquing concerns that mislabeled or even synthetic gems are passing for pricey local specimens.

In some markets, merchants are accused of selling painted glass from China, undercutting the price of gemstones. Yemeni jewelers complain that profiteers are importing cheap stones from overseas and re-exporting them as coveted “Yemeni agates.”

Jewelry wearers who fall prey to bad luck or ill health can increasingly argue that the fault lies not in their superstitions, but in the provenance of the gems that they purchased. Even scrupulously honest jewelers will be facing a new challenge.

MAGHREB SECURITY CONFERENCE

On December 4, 2017, the CSIS Middle East Program hosted a full-day conference examining security in North Africa. The conference featured senior Maghreb government officials, current and former U.S. government officials, and leading scholars. Over the course of the day, speakers and participants engaged in conversations on evolving threat environments in the Maghreb, regional governments’ counterterrorism strategies, and potential markers for success in fighting terrorism. Congressman Gerry Connolly (VA-11) delivered the closing keynote address, calling for greater U.S. attention and resources to the Maghreb region. You can watch videos from the conference HERE. We will release a report distilling key takeaways from the conference in early 2018.
that field. The document mentions “jihadist terrorists” 31 times, but it limits discussion of international criminal syndicates to drug cartels, and never confronts the sway that businesses have on the conduct of diplomacy. The average American is far more likely to feel the impact of the latter two than the former. Most terrorist groups are small and poor. A number of criminal networks and several companies have economies that exceed those of many countries. All three groups have their diplomats, they have their intelligence services, and they have their armed forces. They can wage war and make peace. Alongside these groups, peer-to-peer networks are using communications technology to shape politics within countries and between them. They can spread ideas but have no clear leadership and no return address.

The United States became the predominant power in the world in the last 75 years largely through prioritizing bilateral relations with other states and investing in a rules-based international order. In the years to come, nation-state relations will be important, but relations with groups other than states will be more important than ever before. We have hundreds of years of experience doing the former, and we’re much worse at doing the latter. Thinking of non-state actors principally as a problem of terrorism both misjudges the issue and leads toward heavy-handed responses that treat the problems but don’t do much to solve them.

Crucially, the document also glosses over the ways in which Americans spread what we consider to be universal values around the world—through private voluntary organizations, through welcoming foreign students here and sending our own abroad, and through tourism that exposes foreign visitors to American society. The so-called “soft power” of the United States has been a tremendous boon to U.S. national security, but the new strategy is more oriented toward keeping people out than letting them in, and shoehorns the positive side of the U.S. agenda into the work of the State Department—while current policy seeks to decimate the department’s budget.

Where the document does see external change is among U.S. adversaries—not in what they do, but in the administration’s resolve to confront them. Iran appears 12 times, yet the strategy is virtually silent on strategies to change Iranian behavior. In point of fact, despite its oil wealth and its tentacles to non-state actors around the Middle East, Iran’s gross domestic product (GDP) is somewhere in the neighborhood of Maryland’s. The country is not a near peer of the United States. There are many signs that Iran is hostile but few that it is irrational, and a more robust strategy would have included more ideas about how to change Iranian behavior rather than promise to confront it.

Russia and China also feature strongly in the document, as “revisionist powers” that “[aim] to weaken U.S. influence in the world and divide us from our allies,” and have “expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others,” respectively. The strategy seeks to overwhelm these countries with military strength, yet their own strategies anticipate this. We are playing precisely the game their strategies are designed to defeat.

The document is almost backward-looking, and it is natural to want to return to approaches that won the United States dominance in the twentieth century. Yet, they seem unlikely to deliver the same results in the twenty-first. The world was much neater, the threats were more finite, and the interests were easier to assess. A more effective strategy would have concentrated on how the world has changed, not how we have returned. It would have set new goals. It would have been designed to defeat. The so-called “soft power” of the United States has been a tremendous boon to U.S. national security, but the new strategy is more oriented toward keeping people out than letting them in, and shoehorns the positive side of the U.S. agenda into the work of the State Department—while current policy seeks to decimate the department’s budget.

Where the document does see external change is among U.S. adversaries—not in what they do, but in the administration’s resolve to confront them. Iran appears 12 times, yet the strategy is virtually silent on strategies to change Iranian behavior. In point of fact, despite its oil wealth and its tentacles to non-state actors around the Middle East, Iran’s gross domestic product (GDP) is somewhere in the neighborhood of Maryland’s. The country is not a near peer of the United States. There are many signs that Iran is hostile but few that it is irrational, and a more robust strategy would have included more ideas about how to change Iranian behavior rather than promise to confront it.

Russia and China also feature strongly in the document, as “revisionist powers” that “[aim] to weaken U.S. influence in the world and divide us from our allies,” and have “expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others,” respectively. The strategy seeks to overwhelm these countries with military strength, yet their own strategies anticipate this. We are playing precisely the game their strategies are designed to defeat.

The document is almost backward-looking, and it is natural to want to return to approaches that won the United States dominance in the twentieth century. Yet, they seem unlikely to deliver the same results in the twenty-first. The world was much neater, the threats were more finite, and the interests were easier to assess. A more effective strategy would have concentrated on how the world has changed, not how we have returned. It would have set new goals. It would have been designed to defeat. The so-called “soft power” of the United States has been a tremendous boon to U.S. national security, but the new strategy is more oriented toward keeping people out than letting them in, and shoehorns the positive side of the U.S. agenda into the work of the State Department—while current policy seeks to decimate the department’s budget.