The Ukraine War and U.S. National Strategy: The Need for a Credible Global Force Posture and Real Plans, Programs, and Budgets

By Anthony H. Cordesman

May 5, 2022

Please provide comments to acordesman@gmail.com

Photo: ED JONES/AFP via Getty Images.
The Ukraine War and U.S. National Strategy: The Need for a Credible Global Force Posture and Real Plans, Programs, and Budgets

Anthony H. Cordesman

It is one of the many ironies of the Ukraine War that it began at a time when the U.S. was on the edge of committing an act of bipartisan stupidity. If Russia had not invaded Ukraine, the Biden administration would have almost certainly issued a more detailed unclassified version of the Interim National Defense Strategy provided to Congress on March 28, 2022.1

One can only guess at the level of detail the Biden administration might have released regarding the nature and cost of the changes such a strategy would call for in reshaping the size, nature, and location of U.S. forces and the desired changes in strategic partnerships. It seems all too likely, however, that those changes would not have gone all that far beyond the vacuous generalities of the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance that the White House issued in March 2021.2

The new document would almost certainly have still focused on China and paid little more than lip service to meeting the threats from Iran and North Korea without defining a credible regional approach to either of these threats or dealing in any serious way with the rest of the world. Looking at the lack of any detailed strategic content in the administration’s proposed FY2023 defense budget, however, it seems all too likely that it would have remained as vacuous as the Trump administration’s National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy documents.3

In fact, the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance that the Biden administration issued in March 2021 and the FY2023 defense budget submission issued in March 2022 had a strangely bipartisan character and were remarkably similar to the Trump administration’s strategies and budget submissions. They did not provide any detailed plans, programs, and projected budgets. They did not provide any hint that the full strategy would have any supporting net assessments nor were there any indications that the U.S. has new plans for reshaping its global strategic partnerships.

In fairness, it does seem likely that if the Biden administration had issued a more detailed unclassified version of its strategy, it would have made a stronger call for maintaining strategic partnerships in NATO and Asia. At the same time, it would not yet have had a clear reason to call for new efforts at rebuilding U.S. force posture in Europe in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It also seems likely that it would have singled out China without containing practical plans, programs, and budgets to deal with the longer-term aspects of competition—much less any detailed strategies, force plans, and longer-term goals to deal with the rest of the world.

If the draft strategy followed the path of the FY2023 budget submission, it also would not have defined or costed a credible Future Years Defense Program (FYDP). There would have been no clear plans for reshaping U.S. forces. It would not have addressed the gross problems in each U.S. military service’s procurement programs documented by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), Government Accountability Office (GAO), and Congressional Research Service (CRS). It would have supported funding more research and development but done so without really addressing priorities for action and the key challenges like implementing a capability for joint all-domain operations (JADO).
It would have largely ignored the need to define a clear longer-term strategy for each major regional command – especially for the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) and Central Command (CENTCOM). It is equally uncertain that it would have looked beyond the relatively narrow regional focus the U.S. military and the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) now have on a possible conflict with China over Taiwan.

It would not have addressed the scale or nature of the overall patterns in the future competition with China in any detail, and it would have failed look in depth at all of Asia. It would not have properly recognized that rebalancing to Taiwan is not “rebalancing to Asia” – and rebalancing to Asia is not a strategy for adequately providing global power presence and projection capabilities for the rest of the world.

It is equally questionable that such a strategy document by the Biden administration would have addressed the nuclear issues highlighted by the Russian threats to Ukraine. These issues are critical because Russia and China have reopened a major global competition in nuclear arms, and they will soon compete in long-range precision conventional strike capabilities. It is clear that the U.S. needs to implement its current nuclear modernization program, but much of this program is focused on updating U.S. strategic forces. It does not address the need to update both theater conventional and nuclear forces, to shore up air and missile defenses, to provide new forms of extended deterrence, and to help strategic partners create their own deterrents.

Moreover, a military strategy document is only a military, not a national strategy, document. The Ukraine War has shown all too clearly that U.S. competition with China and Russia – and any major confrontation or conflict with Russia that follows the fighting in Ukraine – will involve competition and confrontation in economic strength and soft power as much as it does in military power.

In short, both the Biden administration and Congress now need to come to grips with the challenge of restructuring U.S. strategy in ways that go far beyond simply responding to the war in Ukraine and in trying to create a more effective deterrent to any war over Taiwan. They also need to go beyond simply singling out two specific lesser threats: Iran and North Korea. The U.S. must define a global strategy and one that proposes real plans and budgets for the future.

At the same time, the U.S. must define a strategy that will support a global approach to competing with China and Russia that not only includes deterrence and the capability to fight major wars but that engages in gray area/hybrid warfare. It must also define how the U.S. proposes to revitalize arms control.

A real national strategy must also fully address the civil side of national security. This means planning for at least a decade of active competition in almost every aspect of trade and economic influence overseas, control of critical materials and exports, and efforts at arms control. The administration must recognize that there is no clear dividing line between civil and military emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs).

As part of this effort, such a strategy must also recognize that competition and conflict in space and cyber involves both civil and military strategic challenges, as does the security of world energy exports like oil and gas. Given the lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as Ukraine, it must also address the fact that the U.S. will have to compete in security assistance, civil aid, and “nation building” on a global level far more often than preparing to become directly involved in a given conflict.
Above all, a real-world U.S. strategy must recognize the need to allocate the resources that are actually needed to meet U.S. security needs. The Ukraine War and the rise of China have shown that both the U.S. and its partners cannot continue to take a “peace dividend” for a world that does not actually exist. The U.S. spent some 7% to 9% of its GDP on national security during the peak of the Cold War when it was dealing with one much smaller competitor – the former Soviet Union (FSU). It now only plans to spend somewhere around 3% of GDP on security at a time when it must compete with two major powers and at least two additional serious regional threats.

No strategy can survive the failure to honestly address the real-world cost of adequate security. The U.S. cannot afford to advance a strategy without annual defense budget proposals that are based on real-world plans for future spending. The U.S. must budget effectively to compete over time and in the face of an ongoing revolution in many aspects of military affairs, as well as world trade, manufacturing, and services. A strategy that is not tied to a budget or plans that are constantly updated to look forward at least 5 to 10 years in terms of spending and resources – and that does not examine the spending and actions of both our two major competitors and our strategic partners – is no strategy at all.

As part of this effort, the U.S. must examine the need to create an adequate defense industrial base. This is partly a matter of preserving an edge in deployed technology, but it is also a matter of capacity. The speed with which the U.S. exhausted any of its key war reserves in aiding Ukraine – and the grim estimates of the replacement times involved – show that U.S. strategy must address the credibility of the U.S. defense industrial base. The U.S. is scarcely an “arsenal of democracy” when it takes years to replace the weapons it has sent to Ukraine. If anything, it is China that is becoming the “arsenal of autocracy.”

In short, the United States needs to react to the Ukraine War in ways that fully address the reality that “globalism” and the “end of history” have proved to be dangerous illusions. It must go beyond simply addressing the weaknesses of NATO – important as modernizing and reshaping NATO have now proved to be. The U.S. cannot afford a strategy that focuses on only one major threat or region. It cannot afford to ignore or lose its major strategic partners in any part of the world. It cannot continue to substitute rhetoric for net assessments and realistic plans, programs, and budgets. It must plan to remain a global power where its peacetime actions throughout the world will be critical in achieving deterrence and its overall strategic objectives, rather than rebalancing to one region or one small part of that region.
