



CENTRE FOR SECURITY STUDIES

# DEFENCE WHITE PAPER PROJECT

## UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: COMMON DEFENCE

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## About the Author

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In response to the National Defence Strategy 2018 (NDS) released by the Department of Defence (DoD), the National Defence Strategy Commission of the United States Congress came up with a critical report of the NDS 2018 called, “Providing for the Common Defence”. The commission’s report agrees with NDS 2018 in its candid assessment that the world has returned to major-power competition and conflict and therefore, the U.S and its allies must appropriately prepare for an unfolding hostile strategic environment.

However, the report criticises the NDS for not properly and adequately answering how Washington will meet the challenges of a more dangerous world. The report alleges that the NDS has failed to consider that to meet the challenges of great power competition, the US desperately needs wholesale upgrades and improvements to its military capabilities. NDS is also flagged for not coming up with relevant warfighting concepts at the operational level of war to link strategic goals with capabilities.

The report harmonises with the NDS that the US must maintain a favourable balance of power with both China in Asia and Russia in Europe. At the same time, the report criticises the NDS for believing that America only needs to maintain a force posture to engage militarily with China. “A two-war force sizing construct makes more strategic sense today than at any previous point in the post-Cold War era, yet the NDS adopts what is functionally a one-war force sizing construct”, the report states.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the commission feels more confident about the US’ ability to finance many military engagements across the world. It even recommended that the U.S. military posture must not be scaled down dramatically in the Middle East.

To maintain multiple force posture across theatres, the report recommends:

*“The United States needs a larger force than it has today if it is to meet the objectives of the strategy. The Air Force, Navy, and Army will all need capacity enhancements in addition to—not in place of—the capability and posture changes this Commission recommends. The Army will need more armour, long-range fires, engineering and air-defensive units, as well as additional air defense and logistical forces. The Navy must expand its submarine fleet and dramatically*

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<sup>1</sup> Edelman, E., Roughead, G., Fox, C. et al (2018). “Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission,” *Commission on the National Defense Strategy*, p. 66.

*recapitalize and expand its military sealift forces. The Air Force will need more stealthy long-range fighters and bombers, tankers, lift capacity, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms. Finally, the United States must maintain the Marine Corps at no less than its current size”.*<sup>2</sup>

The above-mentioned capabilities, however, require huge funding. To engage militarily across many theatres, the NDS states that the U.S. defence investments and spending must significantly go up to meet a future two-pronged warfare with China and Russia. The report suggests that there is a need for the U.S. to maintain a forward-deployed defence-in-depth posture to deter aggression in the Western Pacific. However, with a rising China, U.S’ forward deployment will need more teeth for deterrence which will automatically require more defence investments. As far as revanchist Russia is concerned, the report recommends that the US and its NATO allies must boost their conventional power to protect the eastern flank of NATO boundaries in Europe. Again, sufficient funding is the key, states the Commission. However, according to the report, the current level of defence funding is not adequate for the U.S. “to fight one major-power rival while still maintaining deterrence and stability in other regions”.<sup>3</sup> The report recommends that an average of 3 to 5 percent real growth per annum of defence investment is required for having a two-pronged war-fighting posture. This figure is recommended also with nuclear modernisation in mind. The report urgently calls on the US defence establishment to modernise its nuclear force and supporting infrastructure to cover for America’s aging deterrence structure even as its adversaries have undertaken serious aggressive nuclear modernisation programs.

The report is also alarmed by NDS’ lack of focus on the declining civilian voices on issues at the centre of U.S. defence and national security policy. It claims that there is an imbalance in civil-military relations on critical issues of strategy development and implementation.<sup>4</sup> An increased civilian role is crucial in allocating forces across theatres because it is an inherently political-military task.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 66.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 70.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 70.

It also raps on the DOD to come up with new operational concepts to achieve strategic advantage vis-à-vis both China and Russia in order to prevail in competitions short of war. The report argues that higher funding and new operational concepts are necessary to corner strategic goals in key theatres to avoid military conflict and control potential escalation.

The report also makes it clear that the United States must better protect and strengthen its National Security Innovation Base by considering, “whether it should increase investment in threatened industries that produce vital technology and components, and whether some selective disintegration with rivals—namely China—is necessary to avoid dangerous dependencies”.<sup>6</sup>

The report lauds NDS for giving appropriate attention to cyber warfare. However, the report states that the NDS does not offer solutions to how America can respond to these kinds of vulnerabilities. Hamstrung by debates over authorities and jurisdictional boundaries, the report asks Congress to appoint a high-level commission to review the U.S. cyber policy so that there is synergy between decision-making and bureaucratic processes, while protecting civil liberties and leading efforts to establish international cyber norms.<sup>7</sup>

A critical look at the Commission’s report gives an indication that it is a liberal internationalist in its grand strategic outlook. It wants to preserve American hegemony even as the world is becoming more multipolar. Explaining why this is problematic, Christopher Layne wrote 20 years ago in his celebrated journal article “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing, America's Future Grand Strategy”:

*The changing distribution of power in the international system - specifically, the relative decline of U.S power and the corresponding rise of new great powers - will render the strategy untenable. The strategy also is being undermined because the robustness of America’s extended deterrence strategy is eroding rapidly. Over time, the costs and risks of the strategy of preponderance will rise to unacceptably high levels. The time to think about alternative grand strategies is now - before the United States is overtaken by events.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 67.

<sup>8</sup> Layne, C. (1997). “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing, America's Future Grand Strategy,” *International Security*, 22 (1), p. 88. Available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/43144>

The strategy that he is referring to is the United States’ “grand strategy of Preponderance” – a strategy aimed at creating and maintaining the “U.S.-led world order based on preeminent U.S. political, military, and economic power, and on American values; maximization of U.S. control over the international system by preventing the emergence of rival great powers in Europe and East Asia; and maintenance of economic interdependence as a vital U.S. security interest”.<sup>9</sup> While Layne, a neorealist, preferred to use the term “Preponderance” in 1997, it was “Hegemony” that ultimately got canonised in intellectual discourse to describe the overarching grand strategy of United States. Now, the hegemonic grand strategy is called the liberal internationalist grand strategy for America has pursued hegemony to achieve strategic goals that promote liberal world order in order to protect American liberalism at home. Nomenclatures aside, Layne was farsighted when he observed that “*the costs and risks of the strategy of preponderance will rise to unacceptably high levels*”.<sup>10</sup> Bear in mind Layne was writing this when the WTO Centre was still standing!

Now 24 years after, the US is wading out strains of two major wars, economic depression and an ongoing Covid-19-induced health crisis to find herself in a state that Layne had accurately predicted long ago. America is a declining power, having failed to check the rise of a new competitor across the Pacific, failing to check Russian aggression in Europe and failing to promote sustainable democracy in the Middle East and Afghanistan even though her resources were overstretched to achieve all these through hegemonic grand strategy. The burden of this overstretch was felt most by average Americans who were tired of this grand strategy. Yet, it is alarming to think that the US legislative organs have not learnt their lessons with the Commission’s report being a testimony to that fact.

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, United States’ Grand Strategy shifted from “balance” to “hegemony.” In the absence of an adversary worth her size, realist principles like “Balance of Power” became a thing of the cold war and liberal internationalists in Washington pressed harder for intervention in other sovereign states to pursue liberal objectives (promotion of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 88.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 87.

democracy, protection of civil rights and liberties, free trade, globalisation, etc). These objectives were to be achieved either by military invasion or humanitarian aid or both.

With support from multilateral institutions like the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and NATO, the U.S intervened in Kuwait (1991), Kosovo (1998), Afghanistan (2001) and Libya (2011); while went to Iraq (2004) with a truncated NATO support. On the economic front, Reaganites promoted globalisation with a jealous belief that the free market could easily co-opt major illiberal states such as China and Russia fully into the global system.<sup>11</sup> They had hoped that the liberal world order will minimise differences between the United States and her adversaries. Thus, internationalists were now guided by a strong sense of Idealism. However, an idealist foreign policy pursuing a liberal internationalist grand strategy (from here on liberal hegemony will be interchangeably used with liberal internationalist grand strategy) didn't really give the results that the US had hoped for notwithstanding that it did ensure US hegemony in the world.

But hegemony came at the cost of a fiscally draining American power and international standing. Post the 2008 economic crisis, it was increasingly felt inside the United States that its allies and competitors were profiting from the American sustained liberal order and security structure – the very order with its globalisation and trade deals that nearly decimated the American middle class from Chinese competition and the very structure whose sustenance had put an enormous pile of burdens on Americans at home.

In a remarkable admission now, Jack Sullivan, the current National Security Advisor who served as then-Vice President Biden's national security advisor in the Obama administration, confessed: "...when the national-security team sat around the Situation Room table, we rarely posed the question - What will this mean for the middle class?".<sup>12</sup> There is truth in his introspection because questions about the constant presence of American land forces in Europe and Asia were often met with a tone-deaf attitude by successive administrations. Liberal internationalists in Washington continued to behave like apologists for liberal order, believing it is the only way to facilitate cooperation and stability through multilateral treaties and institutions. Liberal international

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<sup>11</sup> Hirsh, M. (2020) "Why liberal internationalism is still indispensable – and fixable," *Foreign Policy*, December 5. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/05/liberal-internationalism-still-indispensable-fixable-john-ikenberry-book-review/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

relations theorists like Gilford John Ikenberry kept advocating for a *liberal internationalist grand strategy* for America.<sup>13</sup> However, realist thinkers could sense the public mood back then. Stephen Walt wrote, “the United States today needs much more cost-efficient ways to influence geopolitics... than keeping troops there indefinitely. We need to better leverage the natural competitions in this region to our ends. There is more than one way to play the Great Game, and we need to learn it”.<sup>14</sup>

On the domestic front, hegemonic grand strategy has proved to be fiscally imprudent with wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Pakistan having cost American taxpayers \$6.4 trillion since their commencement in 2001.<sup>15</sup> In March 2019, the Pentagon estimated that the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria have cost each taxpayer \$7,623 through fiscal 2018.<sup>16</sup> Realists argue that an overarching presence has financially drained America and made overseas engagements hugely unpopular among average Americans.

The major pitfall of a hegemonic grand strategy is that when it tries to solve all problems under the sun it also inevitably fails to prioritise the problem that needs immediate attention for optimal utilisation of resources. Is it worth picking up fights with both Russia and China simultaneously? Or does the perception of threat between the two merits a prioritisation of threat? National Security Strategy 2017 laid out that the United States’ primary interest is to deny any other state hegemony over Asia, Europe, or the Persian Gulf.<sup>17</sup> According to Elbridge Colby’s testimony before the House Armed Services Committee hearing on the role of Allies and Partners in U.S military strategy and operation: “a state that could gain predominance over one or more of these regions could exclude the United States from fair trade with these enormous markets, severely weakening

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<sup>13</sup> Ikenberry, G. J. (2011) *Liberal Leviathan: The Origin, Crisis, and the Transformation of the American World Order*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Walt, S. M. (2011) “Offshore Balancing: An idea whose time has come,” *Foreign Policy*, November 2. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/11/02/offshore-balancing-an-idea-whose-time-has-come/>

<sup>15</sup> Macias, A. (2019) “America has spent \$6.4 trillion on wars in the Middle East and Asia since 2001, a new study says,” *CNBC News*, November 20. Available at <https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/20/us-spent-6point4-trillion-on-middle-east-wars-since-2001-study.html>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Colby, E. (2020) “Hearing on the role of allies and partners in US military strategy and operations,” *HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE*, September 23, p. 2. Available at <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20200923/110884/HHRG-116-AS00-Wstate-ColbyE-20200923.pdf.p>

our economy, and use the ensuing power advantage it would gain over us to coerce us over our domestic affairs – or worse”.<sup>18</sup>

China has already surpassed the US in terms of purchasing power parity metrics and there is a strong likelihood that its economy will soon eclipse that of the US in terms of market exchange in the coming decades. China is on the cusp of becoming a superpower. Its meteoric rise also signifies the rise of Asia which is now the world’s largest market with its share of the global GDP being at an all-time high. In addition, it is here in ever-more strategically important Asia that China is trying to stamp its hegemony and use its coercive power for strategic ends. Indeed, Beijing is now even more willing to dictate, with countries like Australia, Canada, India, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and other states reeling under Chinese aggression. Therefore, the threat of a future Chinese hegemony over Asia must be the primary geopolitical challenge for the United States due to Beijing’s unique power in a region that is now the world’s largest market.

On the other hand, Russia, the US’ other nemesis, is one-tenth the GDP of China. Europe itself has a bigger GDP than Russia, unlike Asia where Beijing has indisputable sway over its neighbours. Therefore, the American defence policymakers must understand that China is a much bigger threat than Russia as it has the means to establish regional hegemony. Therefore, the US needs to prioritise its enemies.

While China’s ascent has been rapid, the United States has found itself no longer as powerful as it was in the past relative to other countries. Its share in world GDP has shrunk massively to stand at one-fifth of global GDP. China is now increasingly threatening its tag as the largest economy. The United States, therefore, cannot do everything on its own. A two-pronged war with Russia and China is not an option for the declining US in a growing multipolar world. Therefore, as argued by Elbridge Colby, denying Russia control of Europe should be America’s secondary strategic goal. After all, a shrinking American power will also be reflected in its defence capabilities. It cannot allocate resources for both Russia and China. Explaining more on it, Colby says:

*“...many of the things our forces would need to defeat Russia or China are needed in both theaters—like heavy penetrating bombers, attack submarines, advanced munitions, air defenses,*

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

*and survivable intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems. Even certain assets once thought most appropriate or necessary for Europe may well play a critical role in a fight against China, such as Army long-range missiles and artillery. These and other capabilities like them would be just as vital for beating back a Russian assault as they would be for denying a Chinese fait accompli against Taiwan—and are already in short supply.”<sup>19</sup>*

Accordingly, the United States must focus on what really matters. It must prioritise China over Russia.

## Conclusion

The clock is ticking, and America has to soon confront the question of whether they really have the capacity to police the world anymore. The more they live in denial, the greater is the scope of missing geopolitical as well as domestic realities. The Commission’s report is a study of self-denial of changing realities.

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<sup>19</sup> Colby, E. (2022). “The U.S. must support Ukraine, but China must be our priority,” *Time*, February 27. Available at <https://time.com/6152096/us-support-ukraine-china-priority/>

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