Essential Elements Missing in the National Security Strategy of 2002

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In the immediate post-Cold War period it appeared as though the UN Security Council would become the routine sanctioning agency for military interventions by Western nations. Yet by 1998 the Clinton administration chose to by-pass the U.N. and led NATO out of area and into war in the former Yugoslavia. In the course of a single decade the U.S. has moved from a preference for inclusive multilateralism to exclusive multilateralism and then to the present proposal for a coalition of the willing as small as two to attack Iraq.

During the same decade we saw a progression toward more ambitious military objectives -- notably, *offensive counter-proliferation* and *regime removal*. The Clinton administration sought the capability to undertake offensive counterproliferation strikes and in the 1993 Bottom Up Review < http://www.fas.org/man/docs/bur/index.html > called for "Improvements in the ability of both our general purpose and special operations forces to seize, disable, or destroy arsenals of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons and their delivery systems." The new Bush administration has promoted a revival of the Reagan doctrine of regime change, but rather than pursuing that objective covertly or through proxy forces as before, it now pursues it overtly and through direct military action.

At the end of his term President Bush the Elder announced a relaxation of the Cold War's *presumption against war*, instead adopting a narrower utilitarian calculus to govern the use of force. President Bush the Younger's new strategy takes us further down the road toward normalizing war as an instrument of choice for achieving valued ends.

For an official document of the U.S. government (in accordance with the Goldwater - Nichols Defense Department Reorganization Act of 1986), the Bush National Security Strategy of 2002 < http://www.comw.org/qdr/fulltext/nss2002.pdf > is disturbingly insubstantial, ideological, and, at times, disingenuous. All together, it betrays a remarkably casual attitude toward matters of grave concern to Americans and many people around the globe.

In the category of "ideology" there are a few outstanding examples:

"The U.S. national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better." (p.3)

Prototypically, a national security strategy is a place to spell out national interests, threats to those interests, and the organization and allocation of national resources to pursue and defend those interests. In neorealist international relations theory nation states are seen a "amoral" units which are expected to pursue their national interests internationally. National cultural values are seen as subordinate components of national interests. What is outstanding in the new national strategy is the notion that American values stand outside of American national interests *and* that this quality is a distinctive American virtue.

How do these values stand outside American national interests? In the Preface President Bush puts it this way: **"These values of freedom are right and true for every person, in every society…"** and represent a **"single sustainable model for national success."** Later the document says: **"…this path is not America's alone. It is open to all."** (p. 1) This is an invitation open to all who will follow the path laid out by the United States! It pays no heed to the reality that other states will have different interests. By giving little consideration to the national interests of other states the Bush administration risks being ineffective in the pursuit of U.S. national interests.

Strategy by Obsolete Analogy

"While we recognize that our best defense is a good offense we are also strengthening America's homeland security to protect against and deter attack." (p. 6)

"The best defense is a good offense" is a popular football strategy slogan that I first remember hearing in the 1960s at a time when there was an explosion of the passing game in professional football. Not only do football analogies have no place in a national security document, but this football slogan simply doesn't fit the modern game which would require a less paradoxical slogan such as *"The best defense is a good defense and the best offense is a good offense*." As an American citizen and a football fan, I find it offensive that our national leaders reach for football slogans to describe their national security strategy and troubling that they choose obsolete ones.

And what about disingenuousness? I find several examples:

”In the Cold War, weapons of mass destruction were considered weapons of last resort whose use risked the destruction of those who used them. Today, our enemies see weapons of mass destruction as weapons of choice. For rogue states these weapons are tools of intimidation and military aggression against their neighbors. These weapons may also allow these states to attempt to blackmail the United States and our allies to prevent us from deterring or repelling the aggressive behavior of rogue states." (p. 15)

This is a page right out of the Bush administration's brief for invading Iraq. There are three instances of deceptive assertion or phrasing in this paragraph:

1. WMDs are not a weapon of choice for "rogue states" against the U.S. because rogue states face the very same risk of destruction as was operative in the Cold War;

2. The Bush administration is, itself, pursuing development of new nuclear weapons that could well be "weapons of choice" for disarming other nations or for striking devastating blows to the leadership and their command and control; the administration is developing these weapons precisely because in many imagined scenarios the U.S. is no longer deterred by potential retaliation; and

3. The use of the pejorative word "blackmail" in place of "deter" in the sentence "**These weapons may allow these states to attempt to blackmail the United States and our allies…"** "Deterring" is mentioned later in the same sentence as a legitimate aim for the U.S. A more straight forward version of this sentence would read: "These weapons may also allow these states to deter the United States and our allies…" Full honesty in this case would require something like this: "*We don't want these states to have what we have and we think we are powerful enough to coercively disarm them*."

Another case is found in this key sentence: **"The great strength of this nation must be used to promote a balance of power that favors freedom."** (p. 1)

"Balance of power" is, of course, a central aspect of realist and neorealist international relations theory. Kenneth Waltz has written that "**Balances of power tend to form whether some or all states consciously aim to establish and maintain a balance, or whether some or all states aim for universal domination**." (Waltz, *Theory of International Politics,* in Keohane, p.118)

The new national security strategy modifies the notion of a balance of power with the addition of the phrase **"that favors freedom."** This has the effect, surely understood by the authors, of completely changing the meaning of "balance of

power." In Waltz's terms it is a "distortion" or "reification" of the theory. (Keohane, p.119)

It is also a rather transparent effort by the authors to attach the new strategy to the traditional notions of power balancing and the popular (if not uncontroversial) association of a balance of power *with sustained peace and stability*. In fact, "imbalance" or "preponderance" of power would be much closer to the true ambition expressed here, the ambition of a state that seeks to extend and deepen its primacy. Later in the document the authors are more forthright: the Strategy reiterates the strategic goal that Wolfowitz and Cheney first articulated in the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance: **"Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States."** (p. 30)

Although the Strategy document seeks to associate itself with "balance of power" it gives no attention to the problem of seeking to extend a preponderance of power indefinitely, including the obvious prediction drawn from *balance of power theory* that some states will find compelling reason to counter-balance against U.S. domination. Furthermore, counter-balancing will be stimulated in direct proportion to the lack of restraint in the exercise of U.S. military power. An emphasis on exploiting military primacy invites the very competition it seeks to forestall and risks eventual re-polarization of the world. *Failure to discuss this problem is a very significant omission from the strategy.*

In sum, the document disingenuously appropriates the term "balance of power", then distorts its meaning, and finally fails to deal with balance of power theory's most important implications for the strategy.

Earlier I asserted that the new national strategy document is "insubstantial" in important respects. I will make this case by comparing this document with its predecessor (Caveat: I am not a great admirer of the Clinton era strategies; I am very critical of many things in them; and if one looks closely at them they contain many precursors to the new Bush policies.)

Regarding "national interests", the 1999 document < http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/other_pubs/nssr99.pdf > provides three levels of national interest and then provides six types of threats to national interests ranging from state-centered threats to environmental and health threats. This provides an analytical structure from which to begin the strategic *labor of allocating resources and setting priorities -- which, after all, is the central point in doing strategy*. The Bush strategy jettisons this structure and instead leads with the goal of promoting its value agenda in the world. By and large, the document avoids detailing that part of strategy that has to do with priority setting and allocation of resources. Of course, one can *infer* the priorities by the space given, the order of presentation, and by the items that get little or no attention. Outstanding among those that get significantly less attention in 2002 than in

1999 are: arms control, environmental and health threats, and major theater wars.

The problem of terrorism, of course, has much greater weight in 2002, but almost nothing is said about the extent or variations of this complex threat. We are told what we surely know, that "shadowy networks of individuals can bring great chaos and suffering to our shores", and the manifest threat from terrorists is invoked to justify numerous policy particulars. But once again, this administration does not feel obligated to American citizens to explain and justify with analysis their priorities. Rather it simply asserts them.

The section of the new strategy that is most innovative also suffers from being both insubstantial and disingenuous. The key sentences here are:

"Legal scholars and international jurists often conditioned the legitimacy of preemption on the existence of an immanent threat -- most often a visible mobilization of armies, navies, and air forces preparing to attack. We must *adapt* the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries." (p. 15)

First I will address what is disingenuous here. You *can not adapt the concept of imminent threat* -- it is something that has actual definition and real meaning. What is going on here is the administration announcing a policy of *preventive war* without using that term. Instead they are trying to stretch the meaning of preemptive action to such an extent that it renders meaningless the distinction between preemptive and preventive. By invoking the views of legal scholars and international jurists regarding preemption they try to cover the fact that they fail to mention that *preventive war is considered to be illegal* by most such scholars and jurists.

But let's say they were daring enough to say, "We will work to change international legal conventions to make preventive war legal. Indeed, we believe our very actions will constitute a new legal precedent. Preventive war is a necessary means to secure our nation and its interests in the world." They'd still need to spend some serious space addressing the obvious problems of preventive war.

They do mention one of these problems. They say, **"nations [should not] use preemption as a pretext for aggression"** and they add as a sort of reassurance **"the reasons for our actions will be clear, the force measured, and the cause just."** (p. 16)

But this is completely inadequate! To deliberately set a radically new course for the norms of international behavior and to then suggest that nations that might follow the lead of the U.S. toward preventive warfare will relate to it as "a pretext for aggression" is, frankly, obtuse. India, when it launches preventive war

against Pakistan, will think of the Bush doctrine as "a pretext for aggression"? Israel, when it launches preventive war against Syria or Iran, will think of the Bush doctrine as "a pretext for aggression"? Of course not! In every case they will convince themselves that (to quote the new Strategy) **"the purpose of our actions is to eliminate a specific threat…"** As a matter of course, all nations whether they engage in aggression or not, think their cause is just! Even Hitler and the Germans marched to a perceived "just cause" in World War II ! Are our leaders so naïve that they think they have a corner on righteous warring?

In the end this document reflects a Hobbesian assumption that "might makes right" wrapped in a sort of right-wing idealism about forcefully leading the world toward the rewards of "freedom". It reflects a return to the notions of classical realism; in particular the emphasis on the centrality of power politics. It represents a move away from the more nuanced and complex structures of neorealism that have been influential in American international relations thought for the past thirty years or more. This may explain why so many leading neorealists have publicly stated that the administration's war on Iraq is not in the national interest.

Oddly, the Bush strategy also seems to invoke a distinctly *non*-realist element of what Alexander Wendt has called "the Kantian culture of friendship." (Wendt, pp. 298-307). I find this in the language of **"lasting alliances [among] civilized nations [that] share a commitment to protecting basic human rights and guaranteeing political and economic freedom."** What seems to be suggested here *is a future regime of collective security for right-thinking, right-acting nations*.

Wendt discusses several degrees of internalization of the norms of collective security. If the norms are internalized only by reason of self-interest calculations, then international friendships are an instrumentality with no identification of self with other, no equating national interests with international interests, and no inclination to sacrifice for the group. If, however, states internalize *as legitimate* the claims that the culture of friendship makes on their behavior, then **"states [will] identify with each other, seeing each other's security not just as instrumentally related to their own, but as literally their own."** (Wendt, p. 305)

To the extent that the Bush strategists are attracted to a culture of friendship among select nations *their approach seems immature at best*. In practice they seem loathe to identify with others or to equate their interests with international interests, while at the same time they explicitly call on their friends to adopt U.S. security interests as their own. These characteristics remind me of the behavior of children in their earliest friendships. At an older age they are characteristics of the phony friendships of a bully.

Finally, I will offer a comment that may seem paradoxical given that I have made liberal use of mainstream international relations theory in much of my criticism.

I actually like the fact that the Bush Strategy surfaces the importance of values. I have long thought that international relations theorizing and international relations in practice are inseparable from culture and values.

Wendt finds three elements in the structure of any social system: material conditions, interests, and ideas. He writes:

"…[M]aterial structure, structure of interests, [and] ideational structure are always articulated and equally necessary to explain social outcomes. Without ideas there are no interests, without interests the are no meaningful material conditions, without material conditions there is no reality at all." (p. 139)

In the final analysis my problem with this value-laden national security document is not the inclusion of a discourse of values. A values discourse can easily be misguided, but a discourse that avoids the discussion of values and moves directly to declare "national interests" may be based on nothing more than a pretense of knowledge. How can a leader or government *know* with certainty what is in "the national interest"? I don't think so. A self-evident, self-constituting "national interest" is a reified concept if there ever was one.

I will illustrate this problem from current events. Thirty-three prominent international relations and security policy specialists recently signed a letter in the *New York Times* (26 September 2002) stating that "War with Iraq is not in America's national interest" < http://www.bear-left.com/archive/2002/0926oped.html >. Surely a similar number of prominent counterparts associated with the administration would testify that war is in the national interest. A few votes counted differently in Florida two years ago and many of these same people might sit on the other side of the power equation. *This existential situation allows us to understand what is different in this case regarding the construction of the official national interest.* We can rule out material conditions -- they are the same no matter who is in power. The only variables are found in the ideational structure where values come to the fore.

So a fully articulated national security strategy *must* address values and this document doesn't shy away from mentioning them. Nonetheless, the document ultimately fails in several important respects:

- *The statement of values and the review of material conditions is far too generalized to build a coherent set of interest statements or guidelines for allocation decisions;*

- *The authors do not provide an analytical structure for their proscriptions that would allow for reasoned discussion of objectives, priorities, and allocation decisions -- those being the essential elements of an articulated strategy.*

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