



# THE INTERIM NSS: A TOUCHSTONE

By Jacqueline Whitt and Ron Granieri March 16, 2021

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**Ron Granieri:** Welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. I'm **Ron Granieri**, Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. In early March, the Biden administration released its interim National Security Strategic Guidance, a so-called “skinny version” of a national security strategy. The full strategy is not due until the start of next year, but it is noteworthy that the administration felt the need to issue this 20-odd page long document within two months of Inauguration Day. That speed is not accidental. As President Biden concluded in his introductory letter: “We have no time to waste. The simple truth is, America cannot afford to be absent any longer on the world stage, and under the Biden-Harris administration, America is back. Diplomacy is back. Alliances are back. But we are not looking back. We are looking irrevocably toward the future and all that we can achieve for the American people together.” Bold words, but back from where? Their meaning depends on drawing specific contrasts with the 2017 National Security Strategy issued by the Trump administration. What are those contrasts? What does this document tell us about the Biden administration's plans? And how will those plans look once they collide with the global realities of the 2020s? To help us better understand this interim guidance, we are delighted to have with us today, **Dr. Jacqueline Whitt**, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Chair of National Security at the U.S. Army War College, and more importantly for us, Editor-in-Chief of the War Room. Dr. Whitt, thank you for joining us today.

**Jacqueline Whitt:** Oh, it's so nice to join you today, Ron, thanks.

**RG:** So Jackie, what's the point of documents like this?

**JW:** I think it's a great question and I think this is something that we have to talk about with our students every year because the national security strategy has become, within just the past few decades, a real touchstone for thinking about strategy and national security. They don't go back for forever. George Washington did not have a national security strategy. National security itself is a more modern concept, a more recent concept, and these are really artifacts of the late-Cold War and the post-Cold War period. And they, of course, continued by congressional mandate.

And so I think they are an opportunity for administrations to set out a vision, just like the President submits a budget that's really an aspiration. Just like a president might set out a domestic policy vision. This is a president's foreign policy and national security vision. For me, I think about them as rhetorical documents. They are political documents. They are historical in the sense that they're formed in a particular moment in time that matters. And so if we think about them as serving different functions with different audiences, we can start to make more sense of them, because if you think of them as strategy—ends, ways, means, resources all of that—they are no such thing.

**RG:** Right.

**JW:** They're not actually strategic at all. Often, they're a list of things that we think are good ideas.

**RG:** Well and I went out of my way to quote that rhetorical flourish at the end of the introduction, because if there is a single theme in this document, it is that America is back, that everything is back. What does it mean to be back, and can we go back? The fact that the President even recognizes that it's a bad idea to talk about going back by saying that we are still looking irrevocably toward the future, whatever that's supposed to mean.

**JW:** I'm going to have to put the disclaimer right in the middle of the podcast, which is that these views are my own and do not represent the views of the Department of Defense, the Army War College, or any other organization that I'm affiliated with because at an instinctual, gut level, I really, really hate the phrase America is back. Because it sounds jingoistic and egoistic and self-centered, and all sorts of things that sort of give me pause as an academic and as a citizen. But this contrast that President Biden is shaping in this document is so clear. We're going back to something, pre-2016 and pre-2017, when the Trump national security strategy came out. And this has been a theme throughout his campaign on foreign policy, on domestic policy, the idea of a rewind, a reset, and I think that's important. It's not anything that you wouldn't expect. Joe Biden did not run on the idea that he was going to be innovative and do all sorts of new things. He is and was a candidate and I think will be a president who is... He's a politician. He does what he does. He's in the middle. He's been in the middle of the Democratic Party for his entire career, and so to expect wild swings from him would actually be quite unusual. So we're going to go back to Obama era officials. We're going to go back to Obama era policies in many cases. Back to Obama era emphasis on alliances, international organizations, things like that. So I think that's where we get it from. But I'm not a huge fan of the phrase of the America is back rhetoric.

**RG:** Whatever one thinks about what's happened the past four years, the past four years happened and it's not as though you can pretend, they didn't happen.

**JW:** You can't just like rewind. We don't get a mulligan. There's no do over and you can't cross the same river twice. You have to deal with foreign policy choices and strategic choices where you are and where you are is after four years of a Trump administration.

**RG:** Right, and one could make the argument that if everything that was being done four years ago was so perfect, then the administration maybe would not have been repudiated by the American people electing somebody to do the exact opposite. Clearly there are some things that need to change. I'm going to say the most academic thing I'm going to say in this whole conversation. Jackie let's unpack this document for the moment. I just had to. I had to say it, but let's unpack this for a second. It's only about a third the length of the 2017 National Security Strategy and it's a very different document. But let's start by saying what's not in this document that was in the 2017 National Security Strategy?

**JW:** So I think one of the things that's striking about the 2017 National Security Strategy—and we did a War Room podcast on it when it came out—is actually how much continuity there was between the 2017 version and previous national security strategies. These are a particular genre. with a couple of exceptions in the George W. Bush era. They have a similar feel and even the Trump administration 2017 version didn't feel like a departure from the genre. It's in part because of who wrote it and how it came out, and all sorts of things. Whether it actually matched U.S. foreign policy at the time is a different question. What is striking to me about this one is that it's structured around the global security landscape and around priorities. What it doesn't do is lay out an explicit list of threats to the United States, and there's been different formulations of that: 4 + 1, 2 and 2 and 1, and all sorts of different combinations, but it's been pretty stable around Russia, China, Iran, North Korea and violent extremism in some form or fashion for the past almost two decades and we don't see that formulation here. Instead, what we see is an outline of truly global ideas. You might call them threats or vulnerabilities, but they're positioned in this document as opportunities. So an opportunity to change the course on climate change, an opportunity to think strategically about competition (note: competition, not conflict with China), an opportunity to counter misinformation and disinformation globally with China and Russia being called out on that. And so I think this positioning of global issues and the positioning of opportunity rather than threats is quite notable. The other thing that is very noticeable to me or was noticeable when I read it is the explicit calling out of diplomacy as the option of first resort. If we've watched what President Biden has done in terms of the order that he named cabinet officials, who has had the lead on different things, where different pieces of expertise are positioned throughout the U.S. government right now, I think that's been another clear signal that yes, military strength is important, readiness, all of that matters, but diplomacy and the full span of American statecraft is going to be a focus.

**RG:** Yeah, I did notice that. It's both a sentence in the text and it's also made sure to be given a text box on page 13. It says we will make smart and disciplined choices regarding our national defense and the responsible use of our military while elevating diplomacy as our tool of first resort. That whole sentence, who's going to disagree with that? To be smart and disciplined, good. Responsible use of our military, yes. Elevate diplomacy as a tool of first resort, sure. I will note that one of the critiques that I read of this document from the Heritage Foundation, unsurprisingly, not huge fans, they call this “virtue signaling” on the part of the Biden administration. And I am curious when we think about this, the fact that the Biden administration feels that it's necessary—I notice that the word diplomacy appears at least a dozen times in the text, the phrase great power competition does not appear once, even though the 2017 NSS specifically framed a lot of things in terms of great power competition. And virtue signaling is a disdainful term, but so much of this document is clearly signaling something.

**JW:** But we go back to the first part, all of national security strategies are virtue signaling in the sense that they are expressions, rhetorical, political, cultural, historical expressions of a moment in time and of an administration's orientation to the world. And so the fact that the phrase “virtue signaling” has become a sort of catch phrase to itself signal a sort of cultural critique of a certain American political party, it doesn't follow that the 2017 National Security Strategy didn't also signal in important ways, the Trump administration's priorities, and orientation to the world. So my flip response of course is what did you expect? And the more analytical response is of course, what did you expect? Let's look at all of the ways that as a genre of document these national security strategies tell us about the world that we live in and tell us about the administration's priorities and orientation. And it's a separate and different but really important question then to look at how the administration's actions line up with the words and the rhetoric. I was reading a report this morning, I'm going to forget who it was from, but it basically says the most important thing that the United States does in terms of its foreign policy is what it does in the world. You can't just talk about it in nice ways if it's inconsistent with what your actions are.

**RG:** And this is a very good segway into another point that struck me reading it that I'd love to get your feelings about and that is, one term that shows up an awful lot in this document—according to my quick search here, 23 times—is the word democracy and there's a lot of talk about the need for the United States to strengthen its democracy at home as part of credibility abroad. And I don't remember that being... whereas previous versions of the national security strategy talk about the need for the United States to be strong and prosperous and to defend that prosperity, but the idea that the United States needs to demonstrate the strength or shore up its own democracy at home as a part of its national security strategy, that strikes me as a reflection of particular concern, circa 2021, but it also it strikes me as a little unusual in a document of this kind to have so many references to American democracy at home. What do you think about that?

**JW:** I think you're exactly right and not only references to American democracy at home, but explicit references to domestic political events and the domestic situation in the United States. It explicitly talks about the killing of George Floyd. It specifically talks about racial strife and unrest at home. We would call it democratic backsliding in the United States, as evidenced in the 2020 election through the inauguration in 2021. And so I think this is another statement that has been made I think in one of the Secretary of State's early speeches, about the relationship between domestic policy and foreign policy. The connection in this document between the American domestic economy and American foreign policy related to economics and trade is quite clear, and the Biden administration wants to make those links explicit that foreign policy isn't an esoteric or disconnected piece of the American political arena, that it has clear and direct impact on Americans' lives. And so the reverse might also be true. If the United States is supposed to, in the exceptionalist formulation, be a city on a hill, if it's supposed to be an exemplar, then it needs to live out its highest ideals, its democratic values, respect for human rights, respect for civil rights. And again, this disconnect between what the United States says and what it does. How can you support democratization overseas if it appears that you're backsliding at home? How can you support civil rights and religious freedom and so on and so forth overseas if it seems constrained at home? And I think in a globalized age, in a global environment where media, social media, all of the things are crossing boundaries and borders all the time, it's not that there is no distinction between foreign policy and domestic policy, but they are closely linked together, and I think this document, much more explicitly than previous ones, makes that point quite clear.

**RG:** Well, and that gets to a central paradox for me when I think about American foreign policy, especially a lot of the current discourse around American foreign policy. This NSS talks about restoring alliances and bringing back relationships. And yet if we're talking about relationships with other democratic states which also have their own interests, their own structures, their own political pressures, it's not just a matter of the United States turning on or turning off our engagement with our allies. The idea of actually respecting the fact that our allies may have moved on in some places or may not do exactly what we want. How should we imagine revitalizing American democracies if we're not really sure that our allies are going to want to do exactly the things that we want them to do?

**JW:** Well, this is the difficult part and you can make quad charts all day long about go it alone or lead from behind or the coalition of the willing and all of that, but I think one of the things that we see from this document is a requirement to listen to what people are saying to us in a real and meaningful way and to try to find the areas where values and interests align, where there is room for that persuasion and negotiation to happen. I don't see in the document a sense that if the Biden administration can't get allies on board, their unwilling to act, but I think this is a place where, especially toward our European partners in particular, and probably also within East and Southeast Asia as well, that there are very important signals being sent about how the United

States sees its interest, how it sees its partnerships with others. And I do think that is a place where the rhetoric and reality of the last four years, there's demonstrable damage when you look at U.S. reputation abroad, when you look at public opinion polling that talks about, do you trust America as a security partner? Do you trust them as an economic partner? Those sort of measures have declined pretty demonstrably in the last four years, and so if you think that's important, then that's something that you need to put energy toward. And I think again, we have an administration who thinks that's important and so we should expect them to put time and energy toward restoring that relationship.

**RG:** But even so, the idea that in those first couple of weeks after November, while the expressions of joy and relief rolled in from various allied capitals, this did not stop the Europeans from striking a deal with China on trade that the Biden administration said hey guys, can you wait until after? And it's not as though the Germans said, oh we're so glad you're President, Joe Biden, we don't need Nord Stream 2 anymore. So I guess this gets back to that idea, clearly this document, the full strategy will probably have more detailed sections on the different regions, the way that the full strategies do. But how does one, if you phrase all this in terms of America's back, diplomacy's back, diplomacy matters—diplomacy is a process, diplomacy is not a result. And if you don't like the results of diplomacy, how do you imagine an administration is going to explain why they're just happy to be talking to our friends again, even if we still don't get what we want, even if relations maybe continue to drift apart?

**JW:** Yeah, I think this is really important as well and it gets back to what these documents do and what they don't do. This one lays out very few specific aims or objectives or goals because I think that it is valuing process and all sorts of things, but my hunch is all of that has to be renegotiated because you can't undo the last four years, you can't undo the last twelve years. You can't travel back in time and undo... you can't travel back in time and undo 9/11. You can't undo Iraq. You can't undo Afghanistan. You can't undo the refugee crisis and the migrant flows from the Middle East into Europe. And you know our European partners have changed political contexts as well. The things that we talk about in a domestic, American context at home, these aren't necessarily anomalous when you look at populism, nationalism, violent extremism. They have different flavors in all of these different places, and so I think part of the message here is that we can reset some of the some of the relationships, rebuild some of that, but the goals still seem quite nebulous. When we look at the top line formulations of security, prosperity and values, those are big nouns, and they all have different meanings. And so what we mean by security? What provides security? What we mean by prosperity? Prosperity for whom? What we mean by values? Whose values? Whose interests? All of those are questions that have to be asked and they have to be asked with our allies and partners as well as at home.

**RG:** One last thing that I'm curious about is when the 2017 strategy came out, there was a lot made of specifically naming the person who wrote it, in part because the Trump administration I

think wanted to signal in both directions. They wanted to signal to the establishment that they had a very smart member of the establishment, Nadia Schadlow wrote it, which was so that people would see that this was a responsible person writing it.

**JW:** An adult in the room...

**RG:** An adult in the room as it were. My understanding with this particular document is I have not heard word one. Nobody is going around and saying this was written by Jake Sullivan. This was written by Tony Blinken. Should we make anything of that?

**JW:** It's interesting. I've also heard not a peep and I'm also not super surprised. My guess is when we get the full one, we'll have a better sense of who's writing it and I'm sure there's probably some textual analysis AI thing that someone is running somewhere to figure out who wrote the thing. I think in a document that's of this length, I think the most important thing was that it got out fast, that it signals a change, it signals different priorities, it signals of different sort of orientation, and so I'm not surprised that we haven't heard who had the pen. But I also think in the fullness of time, when we see the full NSS, my guess is we'll have a better sense of who's contributing to that.

**RG:** And I guess that's something we need to watch about the Biden administration anyway. If people are policy, the way that the different appointees work with each other, the decisions that have already been made, that the idea that Tony Blinken as Secretary of State has been much more visible and public than Lloyd Austin has been as Secretary of Defense. That can't be accidental I think in the way the Biden administration has gone about talking about the United States' international role.

**JW:** For sure and at the same time, we still have slews of political appointments to go at State, at Defense, at Aid, across the board of agencies and departments that deal in the foreign policy realm. The Biden administration is behind in that regard. They're thinking about after Easter before they get some of the assistance in. That's a long time, and so you do have these top line folks at State, some at Defense, and they're on social media, they're making some of the rounds and it's becoming clear, but I think we're still a little ways off from having a full picture of how Biden administration foreign policy is going to down.

**RG:** It's tough. I guess if you're trying to come back, sometimes you have to huff and puff to catch up. I am afraid to say that we have just about run out of time. We could talk about a lot more and I tell you what, I'm going to say the second most academic thing, I'm going to say we're going to pin this conversation so that you will come back and we will talk about the full national security strategy when it comes out later on, and we will see how many of the things we talked about today are either intensified or contradicted by the next version. But I want to say

thank you, Dr. Jacqueline Whitt, for joining us today to talk about the National Security Strategy on A Better Peace.

**JW:** Great, thanks so much. It's been a lot of fun.

**RG:** Thanks to all of you for tuning in. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs on A Better Peace and send us suggestions for future programs. And please, after you have subscribed to A Better Peace because, of course you want to subscribe to A Better Peace, please rate and review this podcast on your pod-catcher of choice so that other people can find us as well and be part of this community. We're always interested in having you with us and hearing from you. But until next time, from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.