

# US National Defence Strategy: Implications for India

by Arun Sahgal and Lalit Kapur



### Introduction

The new US National Defence Strategy (NDS) was released on January 18, 2018. The document lays out the Trump administration's defence policies and priorities in pursuit of the broader strategic objectives outlined in the National Security Strategy (NSS) unveiled on December 18, 2017.

Taken together, the two documents (NSS and NDS) highlight a major shift in America's strategic objectives, including a shift in focus from fighting terror to dealing with conventional challenges posed by China and Russia. They acknowledge that in the changing global strategic environment, the central challenge to US security is long term strategic competition from so-called 'revisionist' powers, namely China and Russia. Both represent an "authoritarian" model and possess a growing capacity to undermine the "international order by exploiting its benefits while simultaneously undercutting its rules and norms".

The NDS underscores that the narrow strategic objectives pursued by preceding US administrations, targeted primarily on terrorism and transnational threats, were flawed, allowing potential competitors to gain a conventional and strategic military edge.



*The Union Minister of Defence, Smt. Nirmala Sitharaman and the US Secretary of Defence, Mr. James Norman Mattis during their media interaction in New Delhi on September 26, 2017. Photo credit: Press Information Bureau, Government of India.*

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**Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh**  
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The NDS emphasises the need for “increased and sustained investment” for “long-term strategic competition specifically with China and Russia”, and goes on to identify three main sets of challenges to international peace and security as seen from the American perspective:

- Revisionist powers of China and Russia.
- Rogue states of Iran and North Korea.
- Transnational threats, particularly jihadist terrorist organisations<sup>1</sup>.

### NDS – Strategic Approach

The NDS identifies three theatres of primary competition for the US: the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East. In a clear break from the past, it singles out China as the aspiring hegemon in the Indo-Pacific region in stark terms:

“As China continues its economic and military ascendance, asserting power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy, it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global pre-eminence in the future”.

The Russian challenge is seen as relatively more circumscribed and Eurocentric in nature: intimidating neighbours through territorial infringements and pursuing economic, diplomatic and security policies that impact regional stability, pose challenges to NATO and undermine US interests. The Middle East, in particular Syria, is also recognised as an area of potential competition and challenges below the conventional threshold emanating from Russia.

In tune with the NSS, the NDS underlines the destabilizing role of the so-called rogue states, North Korea and Iran. Terrorism, violent extremism, cyber-attacks, non-state actors, technological advances and the changing nature of war are further seen as asymmetric challenges to US military power.

The Trump administration’s NDS forcefully makes the case that while the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations pursued strategies that focused on smaller states or non-state threats, “other actors steadily implemented their long-term plans to challenge America”. As a consequence, the United States today faces an “increasingly global disorder,” and a “security environment more complex and volatile than it has ever faced in its recent memory”, which is decidedly unfavourable to US security interests.

To deal with long term strategic competition, the NDS outlines the necessity to build comprehensive US national power through seamless integration of all elements, especially concerted economic and military initiatives and technological innovation.

The overall objective of the US NDS is to create favourable regional power balances in all theatres. Towards that end, an important element of the NDS is focus on alliances and partnerships and their role in the advancement of long term US strategic interests. The NDS calls for leveraging ally and partner capabilities, regional perspectives and regional access as central to advancing its overall security objectives.

### NDS-Analysis

In the American perspective as defined by the NDS, ongoing geopolitical competition is essentially between “free” and “repressive” visions of world order, with the Indo-Pacific region central to this competition and China the main protagonist.

The NDS defines the Indo-Pacific region as stretching from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States, representing “the most populous and economically dynamic part of the world”. This alignment corresponds to the operational area of the US Pacific Command (PACOM) and includes the Pacific Ocean, the East and South China Seas and the Bay of Bengal overlooking the Malacca Straits. The balance of the Indian Ocean falls off on the margins. This can hardly reassure India, not least as its strategic challenges emanate from the Af-Pak region as well as China’s incursions into the Western Indian Ocean, which comes under US Centcom and Africom jurisdiction.

Insofar as the US is concerned, maritime East Asia has been the focus since the cold war and still remains the fulcrum of its alliance system in the Asia-Pacific. The idea behind the previous US administration’s “rebalancing” strategy was to reconnect with Asia. The NDS merely reaffirms US commitment to the PACOM’s area of responsibility without offering further policy definition. At the heart of India’s evolving maritime security relationship with the US, there is thus a significant gap in perceptions about the Indo-Pacific.

The centrality of the China challenge reflected in the NDS implies that geo-strategic competition between the

US and China is likely to increase in the Indo-Pacific arena, from the First Island Chain to South East Asia and into the adjoining Indian Ocean littoral. This jockeying for influence adds to existing regional tensions in the Indo-Pacific.



*Malabar exercises in the Indian Ocean, 14 to 17 July, 2017. Photo Credit: Flickr/US Pacific Command.*

This NDS gives rise to questions about the efficacy of conventional and strategic deterrence that the US wishes to deploy in simultaneously dealing with two strong military contenders i.e. China and Russia, with signs of ever increasing convergence of interests among them. This concern might lead US allies and partners to adopt hedging strategies, a trend that is in fact already evident.

### The Indian Perspective

As the NSS indicates, India is increasingly being acknowledged as a credible strategic and defence partner by the US which, acting in concert with maritime democracies and US allies such as Japan and Australia, has the potential to help create a stable regional balance.

Despite this growing strategic congruence, India's security concerns are not limited to the Indo-Pacific as defined by the NDS, even though it remains an important area of India's maritime security interest. For India, the wider Indian Ocean is where China is making deep inroads, by way of a military base in Djibouti, port infrastructure in Gwadar and potentially dual use logistic facilities being built in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives, East Africa and Seychelles. In the absence of a mutually binding India-US security partnership across the wider Indian Ocean, this Chinese push for bases and places constitutes a major unaddressed security challenge for India.

The NDS divides the region to India's west into three parts: the Middle East; South and Central Asia; and Europe. The first, being the primary source of India's energy imports, a major

market for India's exports and home for large numbers of the Indian diaspora, is of vital interest for India. The second, spanning as it does India's traditional hinterland as well as the source of externally sponsored terror, is also a vital interest, more so as it includes India's connectivity links through Iran with Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and Europe, bypassing the Pakistani wall.

The NDS focus on Iran, identified as "the world's leading sponsor of state terrorism and proliferator of missile and nuclear technologies", calls in question India's continued development of Chabahar as an alternate route to Afghanistan and beyond.



*Left to right: Admiral Katsutoshi Kawano, Chief of Staff, Joint Staff, Japan; Vice Admiral Tim Barrett, Chief of Navy, Australia; Admiral Sunil Lanba, Chief of Naval Staff, India; Admiral Harry Harris, Jr., Commander, U.S. Pacific Command, at the Raisina Dialogue 2018, 17 January, 2018. Photo Credit: Twitter/Raisina 2018*

Instability arising from the Af-Pak region remains India's primary security concern. The NDS is ambiguous about US strategy for the region beyond what it outlined in its South Asia policy, centred around American concerns on transnational terrorism, prospects for an Indo-Pak nuclear exchange and preventing nuclear weapons technology and materials from falling into the hands of terrorists. The NSS seeks a "Pakistan which is not engaged in destabilizing behaviour together with a stable and self-reliant Afghanistan", as well as Central Asian states that are resilient against domination by rival powers. There is little acknowledgment of India's concerns or interests beyond encouraging India to "increase its economic assistance in the region". It is

obvious that while calling upon Pakistan to desist from sponsoring cross-border terror and holding it responsible for the rise of ISIS, there are limits to American influence over Pakistan. With its growing strategic convergence and strong economic links with China, Pakistan has once again proved to be adept in leveraging its geostrategic location to advantage.

Finally, another area of major interest for India is its long-standing relationship with Russia. Much of India's existing military capability derives from supplies made by Russia over the past decades. India's ability to maintain a vast amount of legacy equipment, as well as continued access to cutting edge technology, including leasing of nuclear submarines, is dependent on Russia, which the US NDS unequivocally identifies as a primary challenge. India will have its task cut out to manage its traditional relations with Russia while developing its growing defence and security ties with America.

### Conclusions

It remains to be seen what concrete policies the US will deploy in furtherance of the NSS and NDS. However, it can be assumed that if the US pursues robust initiatives to craft favourable balances of power across the Indo-Pacific, we will witness a new phase of great power competition and regional turbulence.

Growing antagonism and adversarial relations between the US and Russia will further strengthen the Russia-China nexus and thus have an adverse impact on Indian security concerns.

India will need to invest in calibrated efforts to manage its relations with both the US and China, while remaining prepared for increased coercive pressures from China in both continental and maritime domains.

The US NDS does not cover the full arc of India's security concerns, thus possibly limiting the scope of strategic convergences with the US. It remains to be seen how India and the US will bridge these gaps while building on opportunities.

Finally, while India's major security challenges are spread across its western arc of crisis, its breakout strategies lie towards the east. India must carefully balance the pursuit of its core interests in both directions, making the most of growing convergences with the US to the east without jeopardising its interests elsewhere.

Realist, pragmatic, interest-based and multi-dimensional engagement with all major powers should continue to guide Indian foreign and security policy.

#### **Endnote:**

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<sup>1</sup> Page 26, NSS 2017

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