



ISSUE BRIEF

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SUMMARY: A PREFACE TO STRATEGY

The Foundations of American National Security

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KEY POINT

- ≡ The premises that dominate US national security strategy, structures, and processes were largely shaped in the aftermath of victory in World War II and reinforced by triumph in the Cold War. These premises are at best debatable, and many clearly no longer apply in a world in which US economic and military dominance has receded as wealth and power are more normally dispersed. This rethinking of premises shifts the focus from typical strategic emphasis on assessments of threats and instead identifies and traces the strategic implications of American strengths.

PREMISES FROM OUR PREDECESSORS

Premises that have animated past strategies, processes, and institutions include:

- Premises about the international security environment, such as risks primarily from militaries in the land, sea, and air domains, and confined to defined geographic areas
- Premises about America, such as the preeminence of the American economy, productivity, and growth, and, despite any domestic differences, unity and vigorous defense if attacked
- Premises about American power, such as nuclear weapons strategy and counter-proliferation, the resilience to respond to attack, and the quality and utility of alliances

UNDERMINING PREVIOUS PREMISES

Tectonic changes that should force modification of our premises include:

- The advent of continuous and pervasive warfare
- Erosion of America's economic supremacy—we are moving to a “more normal world”
- Growth beyond all expectation in international trade, finance, and economic interdependence
- Autocatalytic, exponential technology innovation and diffusion
- An expansion of the geography and domains of warfare
- Decline in the power of militaries

- Deterioration of domestic consensus and effective governance
- Confusion about the purpose of our national security strategies, even while maintaining commitment to our global primacy

SEVEN STRENGTHS

Analyses of threats are useful and relevant to the evolution of an American national security strategy, but our strategy should start by focusing on what endures and empowers America. America's foundational strengths include:

1. America's values: These include freedom, a commitment that government should reflect the will of the people, the "rule of law, a culture of tolerance, a decentralized distribution of economic and political power," and equality and opportunity.
2. America's settled system of governance: "It is a safe bet that the US government will be belated, inefficient, and often misdirected as it comes to grips with essential problems. Nonetheless, it is important to observe how advantaged Americans are because we have had a continuous system of government for two and a quarter centuries and sustain consensus (however rough) about essential rules and boundaries that regulate this system."
3. The human capital of the United States: "Americans have been remarkably courageous, committed, disciplined, honest, educated, adaptive, and innovative. One by one, these attributes are not unique to Americans, but the combination permeates US forces and indeed American society. This yields substantial advantages."
4. America's physical advantages: "America's size and variety . . . cushion it from effects of disasters, both natural and human-made, that might be disabling for other nations."
5. The economic engine of the United States: "American productivity, trade, and capital markets give Americans access to, insight into, and expertise about technologies that have both civilian and military applications. These are remaking warfare . . . at an accelerating pace."
6. America's position in a favorable international order: "Institutions, relationships, norms, and principles of international law have commonly (though not invariably) furthered America interests, proliferated American values, and amplified American power."
7. America's military forces and intelligence agencies: "American military forces protect this country against existential threats by making it apparent that our opponents cannot be advantaged by waging nuclear or conventional warfare against the United States."

IMPLICATIONS

Considering changed premises and foundational strengths, there are three categories of implications for future strategies: first, adjusting America's national security objectives; second, responding to the economic and technological environment; and third, positioning for the "likely contexts of conflict, competition, and cooperation." Appendices further explore these implications for innovation in national security, cyber defense, and cooperation with rivals.