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Burnette, Anne.; Kraemer, Wayne L.; Boogaart, Ronny; Garssen, Bart; Jansen, Henrike; Van Leeuwen, Maarten; ... ; Reuneker, Alex

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## The 2022 US National Security Strategy *Responding to new threats in an evolving world*

ANN E. BURNETTE & WAYNE L. KRAEMER

*Department of Communication Studies*  
*Texas State University*  
*San Marcos, Texas, USA 78666*  
*Ab11@txstate.edu*

*Department of Communication Studies*  
*Texas State University*  
*San Marcos, Texas, USA 78666*  
*Wk02@txstate.edu*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the National Security Strategy (NSS) of US President Joseph R. Biden to analyze how the president frames his vision of imperial righteousness and sets the agenda for US foreign policy. Biden identifies the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia as primary adversaries. He also emphasizes the need to cooperate on transnational issues and the need to combat both international and domestic terrorism.

**KEYWORDS:** Biden rhetoric, National Security Strategy, rhetoric of imperial righteousness, US foreign policy rhetoric, US presidential rhetoric

### 1. INTRODUCTION

On October 12, 2022, the Biden White House released its National Security Strategy (NSS). The strategy had been delayed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The NSS aims to shape US policy abroad and domestically including the military ambitions of Russia and growing competition with China, as well American economic competitiveness, influential coalitions, and a host of other concerns. The NSS, written by a team of advisors and strategists, represents the aspirations of the Biden administration, so we will be using Biden and NSS interchangeably in this paper.

The NSS of the United States is a document mandated by Congress that communicates the priorities of a US presidential administration regarding national security of America and its people. Congress directs that the NSS be published annually; however, that is rarely the case. The NSS includes discussions of US international interests along with defense capabilities that are necessary to counter domestic and international threats, providing an aspiration of what the US desires the world to be and how the US intends to achieve that goal. It must also seek to "satisfy the bureaucratic interests of countless departments, agencies, and bureaus in the sprawling US national security apparatus" (Patrick, 2015). Kroenig (2022) notes however, that in practice, there are diverse audiences. The National Security Strategy communicates priorities "to the rest of the US government, and is also read closely by allies and enemies, so the document is trying to serve several

purposes and balance several competing interests” (Kroenig 2022). Fontaine observes, the word “strategy” in the NSS is something of a misnomer—anyone looking for an articulation of objectives and how to achieve them may be disappointed. Rather, as Fontaine notes, the NSS is a “very long foreign policy speech, a snapshot of how a particular administration understands its global security and economic environment .... [I]ts chief value is [as] a signaling device” (as cited in Dhanani & McBrien, 2022). Preble (2022) clarifies the nature of the NSS by noting:

And, let’s be clear, this is a *very* ambitious document. It aims to “proactively shape the international order” asserting that the United States can only be prosperous and secure when the rest of the world is moving in that same direction—a debatable proposition, at best. Other countries manage to enjoy relative peace and prosperity without aspiring to change the entire planet.

The NSS advocates for American leadership which hinges on the willingness of other nations to be in agreement with diverse US goals such as arms control, global health, and climate concerns. This paper will analyze the 2022 NSS through the lens of the rhetoric of imperial righteousness and its themes of national security, the nature of the enemy, democracy and freedom, and American morality.

## 2. THE RHETORIC OF IMPERIAL RIGHTEOUSNESS

Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, US presidents who have advocated for war have used the rhetoric of imperial righteousness (Burnette & Kraemer, 2007). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, American presidents justified war in terms of “militant decency” (Friedenburg, 1990). The rhetoric of militant decency extolled the themes of US power, US character, and American assumption of social responsibility (Friedenberg, 1990). George W. Bush, in the aftermath of 9/11, “defined the US role in international conflict as preemptive” (Burnette & Kraemer, 2011, 171). This shift marked an imperial stance: the US had the prerogative to impose their will on other countries. This rhetoric based this imperial stance on the premise of righteousness: the US would do the right thing for itself and for other countries in the international community (Burnette & Kraemer 2011).

There are four themes of imperial righteousness (Burnette & Kraemer 2011). The first theme of imperial righteousness is the importance of national security, which concerns examining the nature of threats and activities necessary to defend against the threat. The second theme of imperial righteousness is characterizing the nature of the enemy by creating and personifying an enemy that threatens US values. The third theme is the celebration and defense of democracy and freedom. This involves spreading the cause of democracy and freedom at home and abroad. The fourth theme of imperial righteousness is commending American morality by arguing that what is good and socially responsible is an obligation of empire.

We have examined the rhetorical expressions of imperial righteousness in the rhetoric of George W. Bush 2002 (Burnette & Kraemer, 2003). We have also analyzed and compared Bush’s 2002 and 2006 NSS documents and Barack Obama’s 2010 NSS. We found that American foreign policy as expressed in the Bush and Obama presidencies conveyed the importance of the American imperium. In the case of the Biden

administration, one of the primary tasks of the Biden NSS is to counter the threat to the American imperium posed by Russia and China.

### 3. NATIONAL SECURITY

The national security theme of the rhetoric of imperial righteousness contains four categories: military might, domestic and international security, cooperative security strategies to meet transnational challenges, and American leadership.

The 2022 NSS, like its predecessors, begins with the idea that the American military is the best in the world. Biden notes that “The American military is the strongest fighting force the world has ever known” (NSS, 2022, p. 20) and that the US will not “hesitate to use force when necessary to defend our national interests” (NSS, 2022, p. 20). This strategy is qualified by noting that the US will only resort to the use of force to achieve clear objectives that are consistent with American values and laws. A strong military:

helps advance and safeguard vital US national interests by backstopping diplomacy, confronting aggression, deterring conflict, projecting strength, and protecting the American people and their economic interests. (NSS, 2022, p. 20)

Biden calls this integrated deterrence, which is the combination of US capabilities, including military might, “to convince potential adversaries that the costs of their hostile activities outweigh their benefits” (NSS, 2022, p. 22). According to the document, the use of the military should be strategic. The NSS states:

We will make disciplined choices regarding our national defense and focus our attention on the military’s primary responsibilities: to defend the homeland, and deter attacks and aggression against the United States, our allies and partners, while being prepared to fight and win the Nation’s wars should diplomacy and deterrence fail. (NSS, 2022, p. 20)

In this way, the NSS is able to state that “a combat-credible military is the foundation of deterrence and America’s ability to prevail in a conflict” (NSS, 2022, p. 21).

Biden’s NSS reduces distinctions between domestic and international security concerns noting that “we have broken down the dividing line between foreign policy and domestic policy” (NSS, 2022, p. 11). Biden makes it clear that the US will “invest in our innovation and industrial strength and build resilience at home” but he also argues that this requires the US to “advance shared prosperity domestically” while proactively shaping “the international order in line with our interests and values” (NSS, 2022, p. 11). The NSS argues, “In an interconnected world, there is no bright line between foreign and domestic policy. The future of America’s success in the world depends upon our strength and resilience at home” (NSS, 2022, p. 14). Biden also advocates that US “success at home requires robust and strategic engagement in the world in line with our interests and values to make life better, safer, and fairer for the American people” (NSS, 2022, p. 14). Biden believes that the United States must work cooperatively with countries and people around the world to meet the challenges of “this decisive decade” (NSS, 2022, p. 37). He observes, “Our future and the world’s are interlinked. That is why our strategy is global” (NSS, 2022, p. 37).

Several issues provide an explanation for the confluence of domestic and international security. For example, with regard to international financial issues including World Bank and IMF, the NSS argues that “more stable growth abroad means a stronger economy here at home. As other economies prosper, demand for US exports of goods and services increases, creating US jobs.” (20) In this way international concerns become domestic concerns and necessitate a concentrated dual approach to security issues.

As the line between domestic and international security disappears, significant world issues begin to influence strategic security strategies. The NSS argues that “The actions we take now will shape whether this period is known as an age of conflict and discord or the beginning of a more stable and prosperous future” (NSS, 2022, p. 6). Competition between the major players on the global stage pit democracies against autocracies and while this competition exists, governments must also deal with “shared challenges – or what some call transnational challenges – that do not respect borders and affect all nations” (NSS, 2022, p. 8). Climate disasters, food insecurity, pandemics and health issues, as well as other issues summon the United States to “prioritize leading the international response to these transnational challenges” (NSS, 2022, p. 1). which the NSS indicates “are at the very core of national and international security and must be treated as such” (NSS, 2022, p. 6). The NSS maintains that “of all the shared problems we face, climate change is the greatest...for all nations” (NSS, 2022, p. 8) causing “catastrophic impacts” that “will be irreversible” (NSS, 2022, p. 9). The test for national security emerges when countries “compete for resources and energy advantage—increasing humanitarian need, food insecurity and health threats, as well as the potential for instability, conflict, and mass migration” (NSS, 2022, p. 9). Biden argues that “The climate crisis is the existential challenge of our time” (NSS, 2022, p. 27). He warns, “A warming planet endangers Americans and people around the world—risking food and water supplies, public health, and infrastructure and our national security” (NSS, 2022, p. 27).

A second world issue affecting security is the risk of another global pandemic. The NSS asserts that “We have a narrow window of opportunity to take steps nationally and internationally to prepare for the next pandemic and to strengthen our biodefense” (NSS, p. 28).

Pandemics and global health are issues that will supersede global competition, for as the NSS maintains, “...we must engage with all countries on global public health, including those with whom we disagree, because pandemics know no borders” (NSS, 2022, p. 28). The 2022 NSS deems that “Incorporating allies and partners at every stage of defense planning is crucial to meaningful collaboration” (NSS, 2022, p. 21). The NSS posits:

Our strategy is rooted in our national interests: to protect the security of the American people; to expand economic prosperity and opportunity; and to realize and defend the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life. We can do none of this alone and we do not have to. (7)

To build these coalitions to address global issues Biden suggests that “the key...is to recognize that the core of our inclusive coalition are those partners who most closely share our interests” (NSS, 2022, p. 16). Biden recognizes that:

America's treaty alliances with other democratic countries are foundational to our strategy and central to almost everything we do to make the world more peaceful and prosperous. (NSS, 2022, pp. 16-17).

The NSS posits that the United States' allies and partners are key components of its security strategies in advancing a "world that is free, open, prosperous, and secure" (NSS, 2022, p. 16).

In the introductory letter to the NSS, Biden declares that "Around the world, the need for American leadership is as great as it has ever been. We are in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order" (NSS, 2022, p. 1). Later in the NSS, Biden affirms that declaration by stating "Although the international environment has become more contested, the United States remains the world's leading power" (NSS, 2022, p. 7). Biden also gives a realistic look at the dynamics between domestic integrity and legitimacy abroad:

The quality of our democracy at home affects the strength and credibility of our leadership abroad—just as the character of the world we inhabit affects our ability to enjoy security, prosperity, and freedom at home. (NSS, 2022, p. 7)

The NSS clarifies that the goal of the US as a global leader is a "free, open, prosperous, and secure international order" that can allow "people to enjoy their basic, universal rights and freedoms" (NSS, 2022, p. 10).

#### 4. THE NATURE OF THE ENEMY

Defining a nation's enemies serves not only security purposes but rhetorical purposes. Edelman (1988) contended that enemies in political rhetoric can "give the political spectacle its power to arouse passions, fears, and hope" in audiences (p. 66). The US enemies in the NSS are authoritarian autocracies. As Biden notes, "The most pressing strategic challenge facing our vision is from powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy" (NSS, 2022, p. 8). He enumerates the threats that authoritarian nations pose to:

international peace and stability—especially waging or preparing for wars of aggression, actively undermining the democratic political processes of other countries, leveraging technology and supply chains for coercion and repression, and exporting an illiberal model of international order. (NSS, 2022, p. 8).

According to the NSS, the biggest threat to the US is posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia. These are authoritarian autocracies that contrast with American democracy. The NSS notes, "In their own ways, they now seek to remake the international order to create a world conducive to their personalized and repressive type of autocracy" (NSS, 2022, pp. 8-9). The Biden administration makes a distinction between the threat posed by the PRC and Russia. The NSS notes:

The PRC and Russia are increasingly aligned with each other but the challenges they pose are, in important ways, distinct. We will prioritize maintaining an enduring competitive edge over the PRC while constraining a still profoundly dangerous Russia. (NSS, 2022, p. 23)

The difference between the countries necessitates different strategies for dealing with these enemies.

Throughout the NSS, Biden identifies the PRC as the “most consequential geopolitical challenge” (NSS, p. 11). The NSS argues that the PRC is “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it” (NSS, 2022, p. 23). Biden warns, “Beijing has ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world’s leading power” (NSS, 2022, p. 23). The document also builds its case against the PRC by noting that the PRC commits human rights abuses in Xinjiang, Tibet, and even Hong Kong.

The other autocratic enemy that looms as a serious concern in the NSS is Russia. Biden argues, “Russia poses an immediate and ongoing threat to the regional security order in Europe and it is a source of disruption and instability globally” (NSS, 2022, p. 11). The NSS notes, however, that Russia “lacks the across the spectrum capabilities of the PRC” (NSS, 2022, p. 11). One of the most egregious acts by Russia is its invasion of Ukraine. The NSS places the invasion in the context of ongoing Russian foreign policy: “Over the past decade, the Russian government has chosen to pursue an imperialist foreign policy with the goal of overturning key elements of the international order” (NSS, 2022, p. 25). The NSS characterizes Russia’s involvement in Ukraine as “a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in an attempt to topple its government and bring it under Russian control” (NSS, 2022, p. 25).

The NSS names other autocracies who “are also acting in aggressive and destabilizing ways” (NSS, p. 11). These include Iran and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) (NSS, pp. 11-12). In addition to naming enemies that are nation states, the NSS also identifies terrorists as enemies. Some of the terrorists are external to the United States. The NSS names, “Al-Qa’ida, ISIS, and associated forces [that] have expanded from Afghanistan and the Middle East into Africa and Southeast Asia” (NSS, 2022, p. 30). The NSS argues, “Today’s terrorist threat is more ideologically diverse and geographically diffuse than that of two decades ago” (NSS, 2022, p. 30), and that Syria, Yemen, and Somalia “remain terrorist sanctuaries” (NSS, 2022, p. 30).

In addition to threats from outside, there is also an enemy within. The NSS identifies “a range of domestic violent extremists here in the United States” (NSS, 2022, P. 30). Biden defines domestic terrorists as “a range of domestic violent extremists, including those motivated by racial or ethnic prejudice, as well as anti-government or anti-authority sentiment” (NSS, 2022, p. 31).

Enemies are not only defined by who they are (such as countries and terrorists), they are defined by what they do. One thing that enemies do is pose threats to cybersecurity. The NSS notes that contemporary societies are:

increasingly digital and vulnerable to disruption or destruction via cyber attacks. Such attacks have been used by countries, such as Russia, to undermine countries’ ability to deliver services to citizens and coerce populations. (NSS, 2022, p. 34)

Another category of enemy actions is taking hostages and holding wrongful detainees. “Using human beings as pawns is antithetical to American values and to the global order to which we aspire,” argues the NSS, warning, “Yet, that is what governments, regimes,

and non-state actors do when they hold Americans against their will as hostages and wrongful detainees” (NSS, 2022, p. 35).

When a nation defines its enemies, it also defines itself. Where the enemies outlined in the NSS are autocratic and committed to dismantling democracy, the US is committed to upholding the philosophy and laws that constitute democracy.

## 5. DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM

Celebrating and upholding the values of democracy and freedom is the third major theme of imperial righteousness that the NSS upholds. Burnette and Kraemer (2011) argue, “Staunchly supporting democracy . . . has been a continuing theme for American presidents” (p. 175). Biden’s NSS continues in the tradition of describing democracy as one of the highest American values. The NSS observes, “Our democracy is at the core of who we are” (NSS, 2022, p. 16). Moreover, according to the NSS, American democracy serves as a model for other countries: “America’s democratic experiment has long been a source of inspiration for people around the world” (NSS, 2022, p. 16). This is because the US “system of government enshrines the rule of law and strives to protect the equality and dignity of all individuals” (NSS, 2022, p. 16).

The 2022 NSS contends that American democracy has been the target of attacks by enemies within and outside the US and the US will defend democracy against all attacks. One alarming internal threat, according to the NSS, is multiple unfounded challenges to election results. The NSS warns, “As Americans, we must all agree that the people’s verdict, as expressed in elections, must be respected and protected” (NSS, 2022, p. 16). This marks a departure from recent NSS documents; the Bush and Obama NSS’s did not discuss internal threats to American democracy. In addition to defending the American democratic system against internal enemies, the US must also defend its democracy against external enemies. Biden’s NSS declares, “America will not tolerate foreign interference in our elections. We will act decisively to defend, and deter disruptions to our democratic processes” (NSS, 2022, p. 16).

According to the Biden administration, democracy is not just good for Americans—it benefits everyone. This is consistent with previous NSS documents, which have promulgated the narrative that the US must defend democracy around the world not only for the sake of American security, but for the promotion of safety and security around the globe. Biden promises, “we will take steps to show that democracies deliver” (NSS, 2022, p. 8). The NSS specifies that the US will ensure:

the United States and its democratic partners lead on the hardest challenges of our time, but by working with other democratic governments and the private sector to help emerging democracies show tangible benefits to their own populations. (NSS, 2022, p. 8)

Although democracy is hailed as an absolute good, the NSS seeks to reassure other countries that the US will not try to force democracies on others. It maintains “We do not, however, believe that governments and societies everywhere must be made in America’s image for us to be secure” (NSS, 2022, p. 8).

## 6. AMERICAN MORALITY

The final rhetorical theme of imperial righteousness is the power of American morality. In their NSS documents, George W. Bush and Barack Obama praised the innate moral purpose of American citizens. Furthermore, they argued that this morality served as a justification for US foreign policy. In Biden's NSS, there is less discussion of American morality, and that discussion centers on notions of leadership. Biden posits that Americans are the people who are poised to defend democracy and peace in the aftermath of world crises. He notes:

As the world continues to navigate the lingering impacts of the pandemic and global economic uncertainty, there is no nation better positioned to lead with strength and purpose than the United States of America. (NSS, 2022, p. 1)

In a thinly veiled warning, the Biden also says, "We will not leave our future vulnerable to the whims of those who do not share our vision for a world that is free, open, prosperous, and secure" (NSS, 2022, p. 1). The 2022 NSS also offers sharp words for competitors who "mistakenly believe democracy is weaker than autocracy because they fail to understand that a nation's power springs from its people" (NSS, 2022, p. 2). The document states, "Our people are resilient and creative And it is our democracy that enables us to continually reimagine ourselves and renew our strength" (NSS, 2022, p. 2).

## 7. CONCLUSION

In analyzing Biden's 2022 NSS, we see powerful similarities and a noteworthy difference between Biden's rhetoric of imperial righteousness and that of Bush and Obama. The 2022 NSS, like those in 2002, 2006, and 2010, still features a heavy emphasis on national security and the necessity of preserving it. Biden's NSS also still defines sinister enemies and, in the process, defines Americans as their opposite. In the 2022 NSS, Americans are the noble leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and caretakers of the world order. In a continuation of the arguments of previous NSS documents, the 2022 NSS promotes democracy as a cornerstone of the articulation of American foreign policy. The Biden NSS characterizes the US as one of the most venerable and stable democracies in the world. Even in the wake of the domestic terrorist attacks of January 6, 2021, the US defends its ability to protect democracy in the international community.

In addition to these similarities, however, we also see a notable shift in the rhetoric of imperial righteousness. While there is still a discursive framing of American character in Biden's NSS, we see less of an emphasis on the moral dimension of American character than in other NSS documents. In our previous studies of Bush and Obama rhetoric, we argued that their rhetoric suggested that Americans "look to what is good and socially responsible as an obligation of empire" (Burnette & Kraemer, 2007, p. 197). Biden's NSS places much less emphasis on the morality of the American people as a rationale for foreign policy. We believe that Biden's NSS is responding to a different national and international set of circumstances and that, as a result, he has adjusted his rhetoric to the exigences the US faces. Our study of Bush's rhetoric looked at his statements as he was making a case for war. Like all leaders who want to justify war, Bush had to use the language of morality. Obama, in his NSS, also spent significant time making the argument that American security

was not merely a matter of survival, but of upholding precepts of right and wrong. Biden's NSS upholds American morality as a hedge against the PRC and Russia, but the document emphasizes the need for the US to work with allies and be clear-eyed about the nature of the threat from our enemies. Biden posits that the US is facing transnational challenges, and the NSS focuses more on a pragmatic approach of working with other countries in cooperative ventures to meet those challenges. In the Biden NSS, we see a shift from a philosophical perspective to a more pragmatic perspective in meeting the challenges facing the world.

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