

# Applying Critical Elements of NSC-68 to Contemporary United States Security Strategies

A Monograph

by

LTC Gerald M. O'Dowd  
US Army



School of Advanced Military Studies  
US Army Command and General Staff College  
Fort Leavenworth, KS  
2021

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| <b>REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE</b>  |                    |  | <i>Form Approved</i><br><i>OMB No. 0704-0188</i> |   |  |
|---|--------------------|--|--|---|--|
| Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. <b>PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.</b>   |                    |  |  |   |  |
| <b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b><br>23-03-2021  |                    | <b>2. REPORT TYPE</b><br>MASTER'S THESIS |  | <b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b><br>JUNE 20-MAY 21 |  |
| <b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b><br>Applying Critical Elements of NSC-68 to Contemporary United States Security Strategies  |                    |  | <b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b>                       |   |  |
|   |                    |  | <b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b>                          |   |  |
|   |                    |  | <b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b>                |   |  |
| <b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b><br>LTC Gerald M. O'Dowd   |                    |  | <b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b>                        |   |  |
|   |                    |  | <b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b>                           |   |  |
|   |                    |  | <b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b>                      |   |  |
| <b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b><br>U.S. Army Command and General Staff College<br>ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD<br>Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301  |                    |  | <b>8. PERFORMING ORG REPORT NUMBER</b>           |   |  |
| <b>9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b><br>ADVANCED MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM   |                    |  | <b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b>          |   |  |
|   |                    |  | <b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b>    |   |  |
| <b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b><br>Approved for Public Release; Distribution is Unlimited  |                    |  |  |   |  |
| <b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b>  |                    |  |  |   |  |
| <b>14. ABSTRACT</b><br>NSC-68 provided the framework for how the United States would confront a shifting strategic environment created by the USSR. It demanded that the United States use all elements of national power, including the military, to support its European allies and contain the spread of Soviet-style communism throughout the Cold War. Similar to 1950, the strategic landscape is shifting. China is emerging as the most significant threat to achieving US strategic goals.<br><br>That stated, the United States can use three key aspects of NSC-68 in light of China's rise. First, the US security strategy should orient on a single adversary. Next, the security strategy should describe the risk associated with pursuing alternate US strategies instead of solely expressing the risk of inaction. Finally, the security strategy should inform the complementary options that the US can employ using the diplomatic, economic, informational, and military elements of national power. |                    |  |  |   |  |
| <b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b><br>China, National Security Strategy, NSC-68   |                    |  |  |   |  |
| <b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>  |                    |  | <b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>                | <b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>                            | <b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b>       |
| <b>a. REPORT</b>  | <b>b. ABSTRACT</b> | <b>c. THIS PAGE</b>                      |  |   | <b>19b. PHONE NUMBER (include area code)</b> |
| (U)   | (U)                | (U)                                      | (U)  | 40  | 913 758-3300                                 |

Monograph Approval Page

Name of Candidate: LTC Gerald M. O’Dowd

Monograph Title: Applying Critical Elements of NSC-68 to Contemporary United States Security Strategies

Approved by:

//signed/23 MAR 21/jmc//, Monograph Director  
John M. Curatola, PhD

//signed/23 MAR 21/jp//, Seminar Leader  
Juergen Prandtner, COL

//signed 20 APR 21/BAP//, Director, School of Advanced Military Studies  
Brian A. Payne, COL

Accepted this 20th day of May 2021 by:

\_\_\_\_\_, Acting Director, Office of Graduate Degree Programs  
and Research, CGSC  
Dale F. Spurlin, PhD

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## Abstract

Applying Critical Elements of NSC-68 to Contemporary United States Security Strategies, by LTC Gerald M. O'Dowd, 40 pages.

NSC-68 provided the framework for how the United States would confront a shifting strategic environment created by the USSR. It demanded that the United States use all elements of national power, including the military, to support its European allies and contain the spread of Soviet-style communism throughout the Cold War. Similar to 1950, the strategic landscape is shifting. China is emerging as the most significant threat to achieving US strategic goals.

That stated, the United States can use three key aspects of NSC-68 in light of China's rise. First, the US security strategy should orient on a single adversary. Next, the security strategy should describe the risk associated with pursuing alternate US strategies instead of solely expressing the risk of inaction. Finally, the security strategy should inform the complementary options that the US can employ using the diplomatic, economic, informational, and military elements of national power.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. John M. Curatola for helping me through the researching and writing of this monograph. His expertise on NSC-68 is staggering and I could not have completed this project without his patient help. To my wife, Erin, thank you for all of the love and support over these many years. I know it was not easy, but I could not have done this without you.

## Introduction

In April 1950, Paul H. Nitze estimated that, in four years, the Soviet Union would be capable of a surprise attack that could inflict such damage on the United States as to render it unable to defend the free world and contain the spread of communism.<sup>1</sup> This thinking marked 1954 as the year of "maximum danger."<sup>2</sup> The Soviets surprised the West by successfully testing an atomic bomb in August 1949, ending the US monopoly and sparking fear within the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).<sup>3</sup> In 1950, Nitze was the Department of State's director of the Policy Planning Staff and was responsible for leading a comprehensive review of the US strategy. Nitze chose 1954 as the critical year because, at that point, he estimated that the USSR would have 200 atomic bombs and the needed air forces that could reach the United States.

While much has changed in the past seventy years, the United States is anticipating a similar threat to that of 1954. According to the most recent Department of Defense estimates, China will possess 200 intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads to the United States by 2025.<sup>4</sup> Due to increases in nuclear technology, these weapons will be capable of inflicting more severe injury than the Soviets could have in 1954. Despite winning the Cold War, the past twenty years of conflict against Islamist terrorists has allowed the emergence of new threats to American primacy, in a manner similar to what Nitze predicted in 1950.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, *United States Objectives and Programs for National Security* (Washington, DC: Office of the White House, 1950), 38, accessed September 17, 2020, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/report-national-security-council-nsc-68>.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel F. Wells, Jr., "Sounding the Tocsin: NSC 68 and the Soviet Union," *International Security* 4, no. 2 (Fall, 1979): 157, accessed September 17, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2626746>.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest R. May, "Introduction: NSC 68: The Theory and Politics of Strategy," in *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68*, ed. Ernest R. May (Boston: Bedford Books, 1993), 3.

<sup>4</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2020), 55, accessed September 17, 2020, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

<sup>5</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 4.

In the post-Cold War era, the United States shifted its national security strategies several times to maintain its dominance as a global power. These shifts occurred as the United States searched for a coherent way to respond to a changing global environment and emerging security challenges. One of these changes included the People's Republic of China arriving on the world stage with new found power. China seeks to create an international system that promotes its interests. However, these interests are incompatible with the current global world order. Without a focused long-term strategy, China could gain relative advantages over the United States and eventually surpass US global power and influence.

Fortunately, the United States can use the Cold War as an example of how to create a long-lasting strategy. In April 1950, the Departments of State and Defense drafted a report to President Harry S. Truman's National Security Council entitled "United States Objectives and Programs for National Security," better known as NSC-68. This report expanded upon the 1948 strategy to reduce the USSR's power and influence, as laid out in the "US Objectives with Respect to the USSR to Counter Soviet Threats to US Security," NSC 20/4. The USSR's rapid development of the atomic bomb and the potential development of thermonuclear weapons that contributed to the urgency of NSC-68. It recognized that global power was shifting toward the USSR and the United States would face greater risk of war in the coming years if it did not change its strategic approach. NSC-68 recognized and made explicit the USSR threat laid out in the anecdote described at the beginning of this section.

NSC-68 established a long-term US Cold War strategy that remained consistent for over four decades. It expanded upon the conception that the USSR was incompatible with the United States. It also created a more aggressive military and economic containment policy, spurring the rapid expansion of US military funding. This funding broke the American tradition of a small peacetime military. Despite the adjustments to US strategy during the Cold War, NSC-68 established a framework for US action that lasted until the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991.



Acknowledging the United States' Cold War victory, NSC-68 can also serve as a useful model in developing a long-term strategy that advances US interests as it shifts toward strategic competition with China. NSC-68 focused the United States against the global Soviet threat, described the inadequacies of alternative strategic approaches, and prescribed complementary whole-of-government actions to advance US objectives. These three elements of NSC-68 can now help inform the development of a new US security strategy that maintains American global leadership as it shifts toward strategic competition.

First, much like NSC-68 did when drafted in 1950, the US security strategy should orient on a single adversary. Next, the security strategy should describe the risk associated with pursuing alternate US strategies instead of solely expressing the risk of inaction, similar to how NSC-68 explained the risks associated with four different courses of action. Finally, the security strategy should inform the complementary options that the US can employ using the diplomatic, economic, informational, and military elements of national power, which was one of the major achievements of NSC-68.

This monograph first reviews NSC-68. NSC-68 was a decisive document for the US Cold War strategy. Containment was already the United States policy toward Russia, as early as 1948.<sup>6</sup> However, these early policies focused on economic and diplomatic measures and limited the US military's role to small-scale deterrence of Soviet aggression.<sup>7</sup> NSC-68 changed this. The Soviet actions following V-E day, growing concerns over communist expansions, and the US no longer holding a monopoly on atomic weapons were rationales for NSC-68.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the United

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<sup>6</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC 20/4, *U.S. Objectives With Respect to the USSR to Counter Soviet Threats to U.S. Security* (Washington, DC: Office of the White House, 1948), accessed August 26, 2020, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v01p2/d60>.

<sup>7</sup> Paul H. Nitze, "Nitze's Commentary," in May, 104; US National Security Council Report, NSC 20/4.

<sup>8</sup> May, "Introduction: NSC 68," in May, 3.

States built large conventional and nuclear forces.<sup>9</sup> This large military deterred Soviet aggression and supported the diplomatic and economic efforts needed to contain the USSR.<sup>10</sup> Its implementation caused annual defense spending to quadruple by 1953.<sup>11</sup> Despite variations in each president's approach to national security, the defense budget was always at least three times that of 1950 and swelled to twenty-two times larger in 1989.<sup>12</sup> For the first time in its history, the United States had a political consensus to maintain and fund a large standing military.<sup>13</sup>

After reviewing the applicable tenets of NSC-68, this monograph will examine the current strategic environment, focusing on China. China is one of two strategic competitors the United States faces.<sup>14</sup> The other one is Russia. Unlike Russia, however, China's rapid economic growth, international assertiveness, and ongoing military modernization create the most considerable security challenge facing the United States.<sup>15</sup> China is taking deliberate action to achieve "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049 and regain its standing that it lost during its "century of humiliation."<sup>16</sup> This "century of humiliation" began with the First Opium War in 1839. It saw the fall of the "Middle Kingdom," in which China viewed itself as the

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph M. Siracusa, "NSC 68: A Reappraisal," in *Naval War College Review* 33, No. 6, (November-December 1980): 5, accessed August 26, 2020, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/44642129>.

<sup>10</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 54.

<sup>11</sup> US Office of Management and Budget, *Historical Tables FY 21* (Washington, DC: Office of the White House, 2020) 51, accessed September 23, 2020, [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/hist\\_fy21.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/hist_fy21.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Robert D. Worley, *Orchestrating the Instruments of Power: A Critical Examination of the U.S. National Security System* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), xxii.

<sup>14</sup> US Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2018), 4, accessed August 26, 2020, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 1, 4; Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (speech, 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Beijing, China, October 18, 2017), 11-12, accessed January 7, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi\\_Jinping's\\_report\\_at\\_19th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf).

cultural and political center of the known world.<sup>17</sup> The “century of humiliation” led to the loss of its territory to Western powers and Japan, the collapse of its imperial system, and massive rebellions.<sup>18</sup> The establishment of the PRC in 1949 brought this period to a close. Despite ending over eighty years ago, the “century of humiliation” helps to explain why China seeks a “great rejuvenation,” a leading role in a revised international system, and their reassertion of regional hegemony.<sup>19</sup>

China sees itself in a long-term competition with the United States over influence within its near-abroad and the future of the international system. According to the US 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), China wants “to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests. China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region...and reorder the region in its favor.”<sup>20</sup> If successful, China would eventually replace the rules-based international system with a multipolar world that favors Chinese socialist practices.<sup>21</sup> To achieve these aims, China uses all elements of national power, including economic coercion and an expanding role of its military in advancing its foreign policy.<sup>22</sup> This rapid and active rise of China on the world stage threatens US interests and makes it the United States primary strategic competitor.

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<sup>17</sup> Christopher B. Williams, “110 Years of Humiliation From 1839 to 1949: China’s Grand Strategy” (master’s thesis, Command and General Staff College, 2016), 35, 46, accessed March 10, 2020, <https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4013coll2/id/3498/rec/10>.

<sup>18</sup> *China’s Narratives Regarding National Security Policy: Hearing before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 112th Cong., 1st sess., March 10, 2011, Senate, 137-139, accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/transcripts/3.10.11HearingTranscript.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> *China’s Narratives Regarding National Security Policy*, 137-138; US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Office of the President of the United States, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2017), 25, accessed August 26, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*, 3, 7.

<sup>22</sup> US Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 2; US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*, 7.

This monograph will conclude by applying elements of NSC-68 to address the strategic environment. First, the US security strategy should focus on competition with China. Revising the US security strategy in this way would allow for the concentration of efforts to achieve US objectives, instead of having multiple threats competing for resources. Next, the security strategy should expose the risks associated with other strategic courses of action. This point recognizes that strategies must endure over the long-term. Finally, the strategy should allow for a range of options across the elements of national power. A revised strategy should describe how the military, diplomacy, economic policy, and information efforts fit together and can be flexibly applied to compete with China.

NSC-68 was the foundation of US Cold War strategy. Under this Cold War strategy, the United States ultimately prevailed against the USSR. By selectively applying key elements from NSC-68, the United States can tailor its security strategy to advance its interests in a world of emerging great-power competition. US security strategy should focus US efforts over a long period while providing presidents options to apply elements of national power to achieve consistent ends.

## Chapter 1: NSC-68 and the Cold War

NSC-68 established the security strategy backed by military strength that the United States used to successfully navigate the Cold War. Under NSC-68, the United States focused its strategic efforts to stop the USSR's spread of communism. It advanced US interests by pursuing a middle ground of strong deterrence that minimized the risks associated with more extreme options like isolation or war. Finally, NSC-68 leveraged all elements of national power in concert, including the development and peacetime employment of US military power.

The United States and the USSR emerged as the superpowers of a bipolar world after World War II. Each sought to increase its power; the United States by promoting freedom and

economic growth, and the USSR by spreading its control and influence across Europe.<sup>23</sup> The United States had to develop a new strategy to "protect [its] vital interests [and] to save Western civilization from Communism."<sup>24</sup> This strategy was containment. The initial containment strategy was first proposed in 1947 and argued for a "patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies."<sup>25</sup> Containment at this point, however, focused primarily on diplomacy and economic aid as a bulwark against Soviet communism.

NSC 20/4, "Report by the National Security Council on US Objectives with Respect to the USSR to Counter Soviet Threats to US Security," codified this approach to Soviet containment on November 23, 1948. This strategy maximized economic and diplomatic efforts to strengthen non-Soviet nations and to isolate Moscow.<sup>26</sup> The military, however, played only a minor role in deterrence and in assuring US allies and failed to spur defense spending.

In 1949, two events prompted the United States to assess its strategy and the underlying assumptions of NSC 20/4. On September 23, 1949, President Truman announced that the Soviet Union had successfully tested an atomic bomb.<sup>27</sup> This event fundamentally surprised the United States.<sup>28</sup> The USSR developed this capability approximately five years ahead of the NSC 20/4 estimates.<sup>29</sup> The second event was Mao Zedong's establishment of the People's Republic of China

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<sup>23</sup> Harry S. Truman, "Recommendation for Assistance to Greece and Turkey," President Truman's message to Congress, on March 12, 1947, to the joint session of the Senate and the House of Representative, 80th Cong., 1st sess., 1947, accessed September 18, 2020, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=81#>; NSC 20/4.

<sup>24</sup> Lamont Colucci, *The National Security Doctrines of the American Presidency: How They Shape Our Present and Future* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), 2:311.

<sup>25</sup> George F. Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, accessed October 7, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1947-07-01/sources-soviet-conduct>.

<sup>26</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC 20/4.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Alan Schwartz, *The Cold War Reference Guide* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997), 85.

<sup>28</sup> Zvi Lanir, *Fundamental Surprises*, (Ramat Aviv: Center for Strategic Studies University of Tel Aviv, 1983), 25, 31. Lanir states that fundamental surprises call into question the assumptions that an actor has about himself and may lead to fundamental learning.

<sup>29</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC 20/4.

on October 1, 1949.<sup>30</sup> In the view of conservatives, America had "lost China" to communism.<sup>31</sup> These two events, along with others, cast doubts on NSC 20/4's containment policy and called into question the US understanding of Soviet military capabilities and intent.

On January 31, 1950, President Harry S. Truman ordered the Departments of State and Defense to reexamine "[US] objectives in peace and war" due to these changes in the strategic environment and to investigate the implications of what would happen if the United States or USSR developed thermonuclear weapons.<sup>32</sup> This project allowed the hawkish lead author, Paul H. Nitze, to build the case for a more aggressive containment strategy. The resulting report was NSC-68. This report upheld the US containment objectives outlined in NSC 20/4.<sup>33</sup> NSC-68, however, justified the need for the rapid expansion of military, political, and economic strength to achieve these objectives, marking a drastic departure from NSC 20/4 in execution.

This more offensive version of containment formed the underlying foundation of US strategy during the Cold War.<sup>34</sup> Adjustments by each presidential administration notwithstanding, the United States was now a peacetime military power that actively sought to counter the USSR's actions to expand its influence. According to this policy, the expansion of Soviet-style communism was a threat to the United States. The United States had to maintain a capable military to deter and counter Soviet action, reassure allies, and allow longer-term political, economic, and informational activities to create a stable first world until the collapse of the Soviet Union forty-one years later in 1991.

Of the many unique and useful aspects of NSC-68 that contributed to US success during the Cold War, three stand out. First, it focused US efforts on containing a single adversary. While

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<sup>30</sup> Schwartz, *The Cold War Reference Guide*, 85.

<sup>31</sup> May, "Introduction: NSC 68," in May, 8.

<sup>32</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-63.

<sup>34</sup> Worley, *Orchestrating the Instruments of Power*, 114.

NSC 20/4 had focused on the USSR, NSC-68 made the need to contain Soviet expansion even more pressing due to its analysis of Soviet capabilities and intentions. Second, NSC-68 recommended a course of action only after exploring the risks associated with three other options. Finally, NSC-68 depended on all elements of national power working together. For the first time in US history, this strategy required the rapid development of a standing peacetime military to deter the USSR, manage the escalation of tensions, and advance US foreign policy.

The first of NSC-68's useful elements is that it focused US efforts. Strategies require enemies, and NSC-68 cast the Soviet Union and the United States in irreconcilable terms.<sup>35</sup> NSC-68 acknowledged the United States as the leader of the non-Soviet world, seeking a "free and democratic system."<sup>36</sup> The totalitarian nature of the Soviet regime, on the other hand, required the free and democratic nations within Eurasia to be replaced with national governments that were "subservient to and controlled from the Kremlin."<sup>37</sup> This looming "worldwide Soviet threat" provided a focus for US strategy.<sup>38</sup> NSC-68 described a bipolar world with the two superpowers on a collision course. It asserted that only the Soviet's lack of atomic capabilities had prevented this from occurring before 1950.<sup>39</sup> However, the USSR was developing the military power needed to pursue its goals: a sizable conventional force, newly acquired atomic bombs, and the potential development of thermonuclear devices in the near future. The United States could not be free of the Soviet threat unless it brought about a "fundamental change in the nature of the Soviet system" over the long-term.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism*, (London: Routledge, 1979), 24, accessed March 6, 2021, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/carl-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1721077>.

<sup>36</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 5, 8.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Zara Steiner, "Steiner's Commentary," in May, 180.

<sup>39</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, "Gaddis's Commentary," in May, 144.

<sup>40</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 9.

This portrayal of a hostile USSR seeking to expand communism remained throughout the Cold War. US strategy under NSC-68 now focused on undermining the Kremlin's legitimacy, deterring Russian aggression, and preventing the Kremlin from gaining the additional satellite countries that it needed to expand its strength. All other unrelated security concerns were subordinate to the policy of containment. Other countries were important only in how they aided either the United States or the Soviet Union. The newly established People's Republic of China, for example, was only significant in its perceived relationship to the Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup> NSC-68's singular emphasis on the USSR allowed the United States to focus its strategic efforts to frustrate a single adversary's global ambitions.

The second characteristic of NSC-68 that stands out is that it explained the risks of multiple strategic courses of action. Doing this provided a framework for policy-makers to think about the differences between each approach. NSC-68 presented the fiscally conservative President Truman with four different strategic courses of action to address the Soviet threat early in the Cold War. In doing this, Nitze argued that the US should adopt one of these based on the risks associated with the competing courses of action that NSC-68 considered. NSC-68 succeeded in explaining why the United States needed to act against the USSR and described why the rapid build-up of military, diplomatic, and economic strength was the correct action despite the implications of ballooning defense expenditures.

Although academics have criticized these courses of action for their lack of analysis, NSC-68 presented options that ranged from isolationism to war with the Soviet Union.<sup>42</sup> The first course of action was to continue under Kennan's containment strategy, which focused on building US and Western European economic and political strength.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, this strategy was not

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<sup>41</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 30.

<sup>42</sup> Wells, "Sounding the Tocsin," 139.

<sup>43</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 48-51.



preventing communist expansion, as perceived in the United States with the emergence of the People's Republic of China in October 1949 and North Korea's invasion of the South in June 1950, shortly after Nitze drafted NSC-68. Under Kennan's course of action, the USSR would seize the strategic initiative and push the United States onto the defensive. The state of US and European military forces in 1950 would not enable the West to stop a Soviet offensive, despite the United States atomic superiority. The USSR's military development would continue tipping the balance of power toward the Kremlin. The second course of action was a foreign policy extreme, isolationism.<sup>44</sup> This course of action would allow Soviet Russia to conquer most of Europe unopposed, shift the balance of power, and use its newly acquired strength to threaten the United States. Even in isolation, the USSR would not accept the threat of a free United States. Therefore, the risk of a Soviet attack would remain. The third course of action was at the other extreme, war.<sup>45</sup> Nitze ruled out this as a deliberate US choice. As of 1950, the US could not force Soviet capitulation. Any attempt at military conflict with the Soviet Union would launch a long, expensive, and bloody war.

Therefore, after examining Kennan's containment strategy and two extreme options, NSC-68 recommended the rapid build-up of military, diplomatic, and economic strength to achieve a middle course.<sup>46</sup> If NSC-68's characterizations of the Soviet Union were correct, Truman could dismiss the first three courses of action based on their risks. Yet, this last course of action presented an option that minimized the risks associated with both extremes and with the earlier US versions of containment. It would allow for the best chances of victory while reducing the risk of war with Russia.

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<sup>44</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 51-52.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 54-59.

This revised form of containment sought to actively undermine the Soviet Union from the inside, separate it from its satellite countries, and strengthen non-Soviet nations.<sup>47</sup> The strategy aimed to make non-Soviet nations more resilient against Soviet actions and to allow them to become active partners in the anti-Soviet campaign.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the United States lacked the military might to deter Soviet aggression and reassure the free-world in 1950.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, it would have to build and use its military forces to globally advance its political objectives and defeat Soviet efforts.<sup>50</sup>

The exploration of these alternative courses of action enabled the longevity of US Cold War strategy. This longevity is evident from attempted US strategic shifts away from militarized containment in the 1970s. Coming out of Vietnam, the Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford administrations sought détente with the Soviet Union. While this strategy required a rough nuclear parity, it warmed US relations with the Soviet Union and China.<sup>51</sup> President Jimmy Carter evolved Nixon's and Ford's security strategy to focus on human rights and peaceful conflict resolution.<sup>52</sup> The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, however, caused Carter to shift back to an NSC-68 style build-up of military and diplomatic strength to counter Soviet expansion.<sup>53</sup> Even when the United States sought to move away from the prescribed course of action, emergent risks drove administrations to revert to NSC-68's precepts.

The third useful aspect of NSC-68 was that it leveraged all elements of national power. Most commentators focus on the military build-up that occurred because of NSC-68. NSC-68, however, saw the military as a necessary component, but not the decisive tool, for the downfall of

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<sup>47</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 54.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>51</sup> Worley, *Orchestrating the Instruments of Power*, 142-143, 150.

<sup>52</sup> Colucci, *The National Security Doctrines of the American Presidency*, 2:374.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:375.

the Soviet Union.<sup>54</sup> Instead, each element of national power had a critical role in supporting the collapse of the Soviet system.

Under NSC-68, the military would support US foreign policy and not just prepare for war with the Soviet Union. The document asserted that military forces in being would assure Western Europeans that, with US support, they could defeat a Soviet attack.<sup>55</sup> US military strength would give the free world the confidence to follow the United States diplomatic and economic policies, instead of turning toward the Kremlin out of concern for their security. Next, the expanded military power would deter Soviet aggression and provide time for diplomatic, economic, and informational efforts to bring about change in the Soviet system.<sup>56</sup> Finally, the military element of power was necessary for the United States to escalate its pressure on the Kremlin in response to Soviet expansion or aggression. The sizeable conventional force that NSC-68 recommended, along with the US nuclear arsenal, gave the United States options, short of total war, to counter and “roll-back” Soviet expansion. The United States would now be able to "defeat local Soviet moves with local action."<sup>57</sup>

Politically and economically, the United States sought to build and leverage a coalition to resist the USSR. NSC-68 noted that the combined economic and military potential of the free world dwarfed the Soviet Union's.<sup>58</sup> Still, much of this potential was unrealized in the aftermath of World War II.<sup>59</sup> In 1947, the United States acknowledged the importance of Europe's economic recovery and supported it through the Marshall Plan.<sup>60</sup> NSC-68 expanded on this idea, recognizing that the rapid build-up of financial strength, particularly through increased economic

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<sup>54</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 59.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29, 56.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>60</sup> May, “Introduction: NSC 68,” in May, 2.

assistance in Europe, was needed to keep countries aligned with the United States and frustrate the Kremlin's objectives.<sup>61</sup> Without US-led political and economic improvements, the free world may have been unable to support the United States and may have succumbed, willingly or unwillingly, to Soviet influence.<sup>62</sup>

Nitze wove an information strategy throughout NSC-68. These information efforts would expose and counter the Soviet's false narrative, reduce the Kremlin's influence within the Soviet Union and its satellite countries, and provide transparency to US domestic audiences.<sup>63</sup> While the United States diplomatic and economic measures would strengthen the free world, information efforts would develop the conditions inside the Soviet Union to foster fundamental change.<sup>64</sup> This internal change in the USSR was critical to the success of NSC-68.

All elements of national power worked together to support a coherent strategy designed to bring about the long-term change of the Soviet system and increase stability in the free world. Military strength would provide the umbrella for US action. Economic growth in the West would allow for the military build-up, strengthen the stability of US allies, and keep the free world tied to the United States. This economic growth would enable political actions to create a stable world order outside of the Soviet sphere.<sup>65</sup> All of this would prevent Soviet expansion, while the United States would leverage information campaigns to weaken the Kremlin's control over other communist states and even its people.

NSC-68 established a broadly consistent strategy that actively countered Soviet expansion. After forty-one years of pressure under this strategy, the USSR collapsed from the

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<sup>61</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 28-29, 56-57.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 56-57.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>65</sup> Richard Cabrey, "Resurrecting NSC-68 for the Global War on Terror" (Master's monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, 2007), 21-22, accessed October 7, 2020, <https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4013coll3/id/1265>.

inside in 1991. This strategy of seeking the eventual political disintegration of an adversary was the goal of containment since Kennan proposed it in 1947.<sup>66</sup> The United States, however, actively sought this through economic, diplomatic and information efforts, underpinned by US military strength, which was the legacy of NSC-68.

Despite the differences between the Cold War and today's strategic environment, the US can use elements that made NSC-68 successful as it transitions back to an era of great power competition. These elements include focusing strategic efforts to achieve effects against a single adversary, describing strategic risk with respect to multiple courses of action, and employing all elements of national power in a complementary manner.

## Chapter 2: The United States Current Strategic Environment

The 2017 NSS signals a return to great power competition. It seeks to place “America First,” and all US actions, under this strategy, will ensure its national safety, grow its economy, maintain peace through deterrence, and expand US influence internationally.<sup>67</sup> Using this approach, the United States seeks to advance in an environment where other global powers aim to influence the international order or undermine US interests through regional instability.<sup>68</sup> This is a strategic shift from US strategy since 2001, which sought to counter violent extremism and terrorism, primarily in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

The new strategy focuses on the threats posed by China and Russia. According to the NSS, China and Russia seek to erode US power and reshape the world in a manner favorable to themselves.<sup>69</sup> The NSS affords other threats second-tier status. These second-tier threats include Iran and North Korea, which are significant to the United States based on their nuclear ambitions

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<sup>66</sup> Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct.”

<sup>67</sup> Office of the President of the United States, *National Security Strategy*, 3-4. This is a paraphrase of the four pillars of the NSS: protect the American people, the homeland, and the American ways of life, promote American prosperity, preserve peace through strength, and advance American influence.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 25.

and because they can create regional instability harmful to US interests.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, countering violent extremism and terrorism remains important to the United States, but now the NSS deemphasizes these efforts.<sup>71</sup>

Of the threats listed in the NSS, China presents the most problematic challenge. It seeks a "rejuvenation," placing itself in a position of international leadership within the diplomatic, economic, and military realms.<sup>72</sup> It has set a course for expanded global influence, economic growth, and stability under a socialist model.<sup>73</sup> China will underpin these goals by developing a strong, "world-class" military.<sup>74</sup> Beijing's strategic goals seek to replace the rules and norms that allow a free and open international community to thrive, despite its claims of seeking global peace and stability.<sup>75</sup> This aspiration places China at odds with US security interests.<sup>76</sup> China's complimentary use of diplomatic, economic, and military efforts, however, is advancing its goal of reaching a position of "strength, prosperity, and leadership on the world stage."<sup>77</sup>

Diplomatically, China seeks evolutionary changes to the international order in a manner that supports their external security, promotes economic development, and builds a "community with a shared future for mankind" under a Chinese model.<sup>78</sup> Its foreign policy seeks a multipolar

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<sup>70</sup> Office of the President of the United States, *National Security Strategy*, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Office of the President of the United States, *National Security Strategy*, 2-3; US Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 16, 25. Jinping refers to China becoming "a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence." Given the rest of his speech, Jinping is referring to the growth of diplomatic, economic, and military strength of China as well as the strengthening of domestic stability through reforming aspects of Chinese governance.

<sup>73</sup> Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 6, 18, 22; US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 1-4.

<sup>74</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 3, 4, 8.

<sup>75</sup> Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 52.

<sup>76</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 3, 6-8.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>78</sup> Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 6, 9, 17; US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 4-5.

world with Chinese power in the lead and the relative decline of the United States.<sup>79</sup> In China's view, this new world order will contribute to mutual development among nations and counter what it sees as the instability and threats to security caused by US-led global competition.<sup>80</sup> This Chinese policy is at odds with the US "America First" strategy.

China seeks hegemony in the Indo-Pacific, despite its claims to the contrary.<sup>81</sup> China was the center of regional power during the "Middle Kingdom," and it is currently seeking to regain what it sees as its historic position after the "century of humiliation." In its near abroad, it seeks stable relations that are favorable to China.<sup>82</sup> In addition to diplomacy and economic engagement, China uses economic coercion and its strengthened military posture in the South and East China Seas to increase its power within the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>83</sup> These actions threaten free and open access to international shipping lanes and contest the territorial rights of regional states, like Japan.<sup>84</sup> China's actions also threaten to inhibit national free-will within the regions, forcing states to align with China. Finally, China's goal of reunification with Taiwan is increasing international tensions.<sup>85</sup> While US defense experts do not think that it will invade Taiwan in the near-term, China is isolating Taiwan diplomatically and preparing for multiple contingencies to

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<sup>79</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 5, 7.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 7.

<sup>81</sup> US Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 2; Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 53.

<sup>82</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 5.

<sup>83</sup> US Department of Defense, *The Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2019), 9, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>; US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 70; Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 2.

<sup>84</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 9.

<sup>85</sup> Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 21. Jinping's address to the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party reaffirms China's commitment to the reunification of Taiwan.

force reunification.<sup>86</sup> These actions threaten the United States recognition of Taiwan under the "One China Policy."<sup>87</sup>

Further abroad, China recognizes that it must improve its relations with developing states to meet its diplomatic goals.<sup>88</sup> It does this by supporting international organizations like the World Trade Organization, strong bilateral and multilateral agreements, and economic initiatives like the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative.<sup>89</sup> China claims that these measures promote economic globalization and benefit the global community by offering “option[s] for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence.”<sup>90</sup> In execution, these measures exemplify how China seeks to remake the international order by providing aid to other governments without insisting on the reform measures that the United States would require.<sup>91</sup>

China is also beginning to use its military might to support its strategic objectives.<sup>92</sup> The recognition of the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) foreign policy role is a departure from China’s previous military efforts, which focused primarily on deterring Taiwan’s independence.<sup>93</sup> Now the PLA will advance foreign policy goals by defending Chinese overseas interests and

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<sup>86</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*, 96; Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory,” 50, 51. China’s official statements call for the peaceful reunification of Taiwan to China, but China also reasserts that it will defeat any separatist movement advancing Taiwan’s independence.

<sup>87</sup> Office of the President of the United States, *National Security Strategy*, 47; US Department of Defense, *The Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 8, 9; US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*, 6, 25, 68.

<sup>88</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*, 3, 5, 6.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 6, 7.

<sup>90</sup> Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory,” 9, 18.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>92</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*, 7, 8.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



establishing strategic partnerships.<sup>94</sup> The sum of these actions supports China's aim to develop an international order favorable to itself, and that sees the decline of the United States power within the international community.

Economically, China seeks sustained growth to allow for development in other sectors like military modernization.<sup>95</sup> This economic growth is China's top priority in the near term.<sup>96</sup> The country's centralized economy has contributed to over 6 percent economic expansion per year from 1990 to 2019, compared to the average US growth of 2.4 percent per year.<sup>97</sup> China is expanding its state-led economic growth through continued emphasis on manufacturing, international efforts like the OBOR initiative, and predatory financial practices.<sup>98</sup> China's economic practices grow its wealth, build the infrastructure needed for military development, strengthen ties that it can use to advance its diplomatic objectives, and develop leverage that it can exploit over other nations. Its economic actions do not conform to international norms.

For example, China's disregard for intellectual property rights costs the US \$50 billion per year, and its economic espionage steals US military research and development.<sup>99</sup> Chinese international business practices also circumvent the free market, resulting in one-sided deals in

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<sup>94</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 7.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>96</sup> Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 25.

<sup>97</sup> "People's Republic of China," International Monetary Fund, accessed November 11, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/CHN#data>; "United States," International Monetary Fund, accessed November 11, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/USA#countrydata>.

<sup>98</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Biden Transition and U.S. Competition with China and Russia: The Crisis-Driven Need to Change U.S. Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic International Studies, 2021), 100, accessed March 15, 2021, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/2020811.Burke\\_Chair.AHC\\_GH9\\_.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/2020811.Burke_Chair.AHC_GH9_.pdf); US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 13-15; Office of the President of the United States, *United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China*, (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2020), 3, accessed November 11, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/U.S.-Strategic-Approach-to-The-Peoples-Republic-of-China-Report-5.24v1.pdf>.

<sup>99</sup> Cordesman, *The Biden Transition and U.S. Competition with China and Russia*, 138, 148; US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 13.

places like the Maldives and Sri Lanka.<sup>100</sup> These Chinese abuses can result in its trading partners assuming unsustainable debt, which China can exploit for future concessions.<sup>101</sup> Finally, China's economic growth is fueling military modernization and the development of a "world-class military" by 2049.<sup>102</sup> In total, China's policies strengthen its economy at the expense of other states, supports its foreign policy, and undermine the free and fair business practices championed by the United States.<sup>103</sup>

While China's economic policy supports its military development, the Chinese military assures its diplomatic and economic ventures. China sees its strategy as one of "active defense," but its military actions are becoming more assertive in its near abroad, and the PLA is seeking a global presence.<sup>104</sup> With the growth of the OBOR policy and its territorial claims in the South China Sea, the PLA has begun taking a more active role in China's international policy.<sup>105</sup> China's militarization of the South China Sea, patrols near the Japanese Senkaku Islands, joint operations near Taiwan, and patrols along the contested border with India escalate regional tensions and threaten the United States goal of a free and open Indo-Pacific.<sup>106</sup> Further abroad, China seeks a military presence to protect its citizens and its overseas development interests.<sup>107</sup> The PLA's protection of state-owned enterprises justifies China's military access and basing, like

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<sup>100</sup> US Department of Defense, *The Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 9.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 11.

<sup>103</sup> Office of the President of the United States, *National Security Strategy*, 19.

<sup>104</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 27; US Department of Defense, *The Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 8.

<sup>105</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 124; Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 2.

<sup>106</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 67, 96, 104; US Department of Defense, *The Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 8.

<sup>107</sup> Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 21.

the PLA's first overseas base in Djibouti. Overseas bases and military presence make competition from the United States more difficult and demonstrate China's ability to project power globally.

As noted earlier, China's economic policy also funds the development and modernization of its military. Beijing's goal is a "world-class" military by 2049 that can "fight and win" in the current environment.<sup>108</sup> While China has not fully defined what this military modernization will entail, US defense experts interpret this as "equal to—or in some cases superior to—the US military."<sup>109</sup> This will likely include multi-domain capabilities to engage in systems destruction warfare to paralyze or destroy functions, like decision-making, that are critical to an opponent while avoiding a large-scale, conventional fight.<sup>110</sup> In this context, China seeks to create and expand existing asymmetric advantages so that it can "fight and win" against a peer-military force and negate any edge that the US military possesses. Still, in the context of its military policy, China has not indicated how this new military force will be used.<sup>111</sup>

These diplomatic, economic, and military actions are rapidly strengthening China. However, to fully achieve its strategic goals, China will, and in many cases has already come into conflict with US interests within the Indo-Pacific and across the globe. Therefore, China represents the largest security challenge for the United States.

Despite the rise of an assertive China, which is at odds with US interests, there are differences between the current strategic environment and the Cold War conditions that NSC-68 addressed. China's rise will infringe on the international order, but it neither necessitates the overt global expansion of Chinese style socialist governance nor requires the United States collapse.

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<sup>108</sup> Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory," 21, 48.

<sup>109</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 31.

<sup>110</sup> Jeffrey Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and Systems Destruction Warfare: How the Chinese People's Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern Warfare* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018), iii, accessed March 18, 2021, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1708.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1708.html).

<sup>111</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 31.

These were the Soviet aims described in NSC-68. Instead, China has derived security and economic benefits from the current international system. Still, it sees itself at a point where it can assert its influence and, over time, create a more beneficial environment.<sup>112</sup> To achieve this, China uses a mix of cooperative diplomatic measures, international economic development, and coercion below the level of traditional armed conflict. Therefore, unlike the US perception of the USSR during the Cold War, the United States cannot assume that China directs all of its activities toward weakening the United States and creating instability.

Extending beyond China, the United States continues to face other secondary security competitors. The largest global competitor, behind China, is a post-Cold War Russian Federation; however, it is a waning power. Like China, Russia seeks a multipolar world with decreased US power.<sup>113</sup> It uses subversion and aggression to weaken NATO and gain authority over neighboring states.<sup>114</sup> Despite being a nuclear power, Russia cannot compete with the United States economically. This economic weakness impacts Russia's diplomatic influence and its ability to maintain a large, capable military. On the other hand, China's growth enables Beijing to both compete economically and sustain its military growth into the future.

The United States also faces regional competitors in North Korea and Iran. These countries seek regime survival and regional hegemony but cannot compete on the global stage.<sup>115</sup> While both states seek nuclear weapons, which would present valid security concerns, neither will be able to threaten the severe damage to the United States that the USSR pursued in the 1950s. Finally, the United States recognizes the threat posed by terrorists and non-state actors. These states can destabilize regions and might be able to carry out isolated attacks against the

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<sup>112</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, 7, 8.

<sup>113</sup> US Department of Defense, *The Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 12.

<sup>114</sup> US Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 2; Office of the President of the United States, *National Security Strategy* 25, 26.

<sup>115</sup> US Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 2.

United States. They do not, however, pose a threat to US power on a global scale. Therefore, China remains the most critical strategic competitor that the United States faces in the future.

The United States continues to maintain its Cold War alliance structure to promote a stable international order and ensure its security. During the Cold War, NATO deterred and stood ready to respond to Russian aggression in Europe. Since the Cold War, NATO has supported US-led operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq. It also contributes to other global missions, particularly in the Mediterranean and Africa, that support US security objectives.<sup>116</sup> NATO remains a vital advantage as the United States seeks its security interests. While NATO members do not share the same focus on China, they represent most European nations, some of the world's most advanced economies, and military capabilities that can meet multiple security challenges. The United States commitment to NATO allows the alliance to seek mutually beneficial security efforts without the cost falling solely on the United States.<sup>117</sup> Thus, the United States can focus a larger portion of its effort on pursuing its security aims concerning China, while mitigating threats from other areas.

Like 1950, the United States finds itself competing with a global power pursuing goals at odds with US security interests. But unlike 1950, the United States is operating in a multipolar world where the leading competitor, China, seeks to rise on its terms. China does not seek the eventual destruction of the United States; however, China does seek to change the international order in a way that reduces US power. Nevertheless, NSC-68 still provides a useful example of how the United States can address this security environment.

### Chapter 3: The Principles of NSC-68 in a Current Strategy

The United States can use NSC-68 as a guidepost to develop a long-lasting security strategy that advances US interests in the modern era. Although aspects of the current strategic

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<sup>116</sup> “Operations and missions: past and present,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last modified October 1, 2020, accessed March 18, 2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_52060.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52060.htm).

<sup>117</sup> Office of the President of the United States, *National Security Strategy*, 48.

environment are unique, there are similarities to that of the Cold War. The largest of these is the assertion that the United States is a global power that must compete with another state which wishes to unseat it. During the Cold War, this opposing state was the USSR. Today, China is the United States primary competitor because of its rapid rise and its ambitions to change the international order. Based on this similarity, the United States can use NSC-68 as a framework for a new security strategy as the country moves back into a period of competition with a rising global power.

In adapting key parts of NSC-68 to the current strategic environment, the United States should craft a security strategy that incorporates three elements. First, the strategy should focus US action on achieving effects against its largest competitor, China. Second, the strategy should explain the risks of alternative courses of action. Third, it should align all elements of national power, applied globally, to compete with and deter aggression from China. Taken together, these three elements of NSC-68 could structure US strategy in a manner that is useful in advancing national interests over the long-term.

First, to implement a security strategy modeled on NSC-68, the United States should focus its efforts on its largest competitor, China, while minimizing the focus on secondary threats. NSC-68 cast the US and USSR goals as mutually exclusive to each other. The USSR could not reach its strategic goals while the United States existed, and the United States could not do the same while the USSR remained an expansionist communist power.<sup>118</sup> Within NSC-68, other nations were significant based on their impact on the USSR. This single-minded focus colored US international relations throughout the Cold War. The United States made significant decisions with an outlook of how they would provide a US advantage over an expansionist USSR, beginning with the decision to enter the Korean War while NSC-68 was still under review.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 6, 9-10.

<sup>119</sup> Carl Kaysen, "Kaysen's Commentary," in May, 119.

This outlook kept the USSR foremost in the minds of policy-makers, diplomats, and defense officials and gave primacy to anything that related to this threat.

Today, China should be the focus of US strategy. China's rise, assertive territorial claims in the South and East China Seas, and its economic coercion threaten to erode and remake the rules-based international order. The United States benefits from and should defend this order. As stated in the previous section, China seeks a “great rejuvenation” by 2049 in which it will become a global leader in influence, economic strength, and military power.<sup>120</sup> If successful, China will have the composite strength to place itself at the head of a remade multipolar world and to challenge the United States in all domains.

China, in distinction from the USSR, however, is not seeking political and military conquest.<sup>121</sup> Its differences from the USSR do not weaken the need to focus on China, but success in any future strategy will require an accurate portrayal of the competitor. China’s global aspirations are expanded influence and economic growth, despite seeking hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. Unlike the Cold War, China is trying to take advantage of international stability while shaping a more advantageous world instead of using destabilizing tactics to create communist revolutions.<sup>122</sup> While China does have the world’s second strongest military, it will first use its soft power to advance its strategic aims. China will continue to utilize international business deals, develop beneficial relationships, and leverage economic and diplomatic coercion. That stated, China has not indicated how it will use its military other than that it will have an increased foreign policy role and protect Chinese interests. Left unchecked, the PLA will

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<sup>120</sup> US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*, 4.

<sup>121</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 6; US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*, 3.

<sup>122</sup> Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory,” 6, 22; US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*, 7-8.

continue to modernize until it can challenge the US and allied militaries, not just in the Indo-Pacific, but globally.

Other contemporary security concerns are secondary to China and do not merit the strategic focus that NSC-68 gave the USSR. The next largest competitor, today's Russian Federation, is in relative decline compared to China. Russia is a military threat trying to reassume its Cold War status as a great power, particularly in its near abroad.<sup>123</sup> Russia's economy, however, is only a fraction of that which the USSR had, and China's economy dwarfs it.<sup>124</sup> In the future, it will continue to take actions to weaken NATO, but due to its lagging economy, Russia will likely not pose the same threat that China will. Similarly, other states, like Iran and North Korea, and non-state actors can seek regional instability but are unlikely to cause irreparable harm to the United States.

Consequently, the United States should focus on China, as NSC-68 focused on the USSR. China can potentially destabilize the world order that the United States depends on for free trade and democratic practices. Ensuring that China does not do this is a US vital interest and should be afforded the majority of US security resources. There are, however, three significant caveats. First, US strategy should seek a change in China's goals, not necessarily a fundamental shift in its governance. A weak China would affect the world economy and create regional instability. Instead, the United States should continue to seek China's adherence to international norms and the assurance of a free and open Indo-Pacific. Next, the strategy should acknowledge that China does not direct all of its actions to challenge the United States. Therefore, US action should compete with China where it opposes US interest, remain inactive when it does not, and cooperate where Chinese activity is beneficial to the United States and the international order. Finally, the United States faces threats not related to China. Therefore, in peacetime, the US

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<sup>123</sup> Office of the President of the United States, *National Security Strategy*, 25.

<sup>124</sup> Cordesman, *The Biden Transition and U.S. Competition with China and Russia*, 108.



should divert resources toward other threats only if the potential gains outweigh those of competing with China. For example, US policy toward North Korea should focus primarily on creating a security environment needed to achieve effects on China. Similarly, the implementation of US strategy in Europe should address Chinese economic interests within the region.

The next way that the United States can implement measures from NSC-68 into a modern security strategy is to present the risks associated with a range of options. NSC-68 showed how shifting to other strategic options would allow the USSR to advance its design and impose costs on the United States. The current security strategy should do likewise. Doing this will provide a rationale for following the same broad strategy across a period spanning multiple presidential administrations.

Unlike NSC-68, the new strategy will have to justify the focus on China by exposing the risks that the United States assumes when it divides its efforts among other competitors. The United States must acknowledge that competing against four actors and a wide arrange of non-state violent extremist and criminal organizations spreads US assets too thinly to make a positive impact against any single one. US Cold War strategy took forty-one years of focus on a single adversary to bring about the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Even Cold War conflicts, like the Vietnam War, focused on preventing the spread of Soviet-style communism. In current times, nineteen years of almost singular focus against violent extremism has not demonstrated lasting success in establishing regional stability or ridding the world of non-state threats. Multiple areas around the globe, like Africa's Sahel region, see growth in violent radical Islam despite US efforts.<sup>125</sup> Spreading strategic efforts across multiple actors will divide US focus and create windows of opportunity for competitors to gain an advantage. Instead, focusing on China will

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<sup>125</sup> "The Complex and Growing Threat of Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, February 15, 2019, accessed March 18, 2021, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/the-complex-and-growing-threat-of-militant-islamist-groups-in-the-sahel/>.

allow the United States to prevent the largest competitor from inhibiting US goals while also allowing the development of capabilities needed to win in conflict against other adversaries if required.

Similarly, a strategy that focuses on anything else enables China's rise. Like NSC-68's examination of a return to strategic isolation, failing to compete with China will not alter its strategic goals or how it views the United States. Even if US strategy does not view China as a competitor, China will continue to seek hegemony in the Indo-Pacific and alter the international order in a way that inhibits US interests.

The risks listed above are not the only ones that a new US security strategy should address. The strategy would also need to show how alternative implementations of a China-focused strategy would create risks to US interest. Primarily, an over-aggressive strategy risks escalation that could lead to costly and prolonged conflict. This is particularly true in the Indo-Pacific region. In this region, both China and the United States have vital strategic interests and may be tempted to use more provocative actions. Direct conflict, however, would severely damage both the United States and China. Therefore, it is likely that China would avoid knowingly initiating actions that would precipitate war. The United States should do the same.

The risks of pursuing alternative options, however, need not be printed in the final strategic document. Published national security strategies communicate as much to external audiences as they direct US governmental actions. Publicly, refuting alternative strategies would display to competitors, other than China, that the United States might not respond to their malign activities. This may inspire other global actors to behave in a manner that creates instability, weakens US alliances, or creates crises that will require a United States response. Instead, the United States should publish the risks of alternative strategies in a classified government document. This will provide a venue to communicate risks across multiple administrations and explain the rationale for strategic consistency.

The final way that the United States can use NSC-68 in crafting a new security strategy is by explicitly linking all elements of national power to form a coherent, flexible, and executable strategy. The complementary use of all aspects of national power would, to paraphrase NSC-68, allow the United States to regain the strategic initiative from China.<sup>126</sup> It would also create conditions where China finds it expedient to adhere to the current rules-based international order. Unlike 1950, contemporary US leaders are accustomed to the idea of using multiple elements of national power and acknowledge the military's role in foreign policy.

Militarily, the United States should continue its modernization goals as outlined in the National Defense Strategy, emphasizing that the US military can protect the American homeland and overcome Chinese anti-access, area denial (A2AD) systems.<sup>127</sup> NSC-68 recognized that the United States could not maintain an absolute military advantage against the USSR in all areas. Therefore, the United States had to prioritize the development of military capabilities that could protect against air and land threats outside of the Soviet sphere for an indefinite period.<sup>128</sup> This protection would allow for the mobilization of military capabilities and the defense-industrial base. NSC-68 also called for a standing offensive capability able to keep the USSR off-balance in the early stages of a conflict.<sup>129</sup> Like 1950, the United States must maintain strategically defensive capabilities to protect America's allies and homeland in the event of a conflict with China. America's offensive military capabilities should allow the United States to win limited battles in the Indo-Pacific, and the ability to mobilize rapidly for a larger war.

As noted in NSC-68, the military also supports US foreign policy, primarily by deterring conflict and assuring the international community that it can defeat threats to the current rules-

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<sup>126</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 56.

<sup>127</sup> US Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 6-7.

<sup>128</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 55.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

based system.<sup>130</sup> A strong force “in being” that can be rapidly projected into areas of strategic tension, like the South China Sea, raise the potential costs of malign Chinese activities and signal US commitment to other nations. As stated above, China benefits from avoiding war and seeks to avoid costly military action. Therefore, while China will continue with provocative actions, continued US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific and countering Chinese malign activity globally should be enough to deter conflict.

Diplomatically and economically, the United States should strengthen and expand a coalition to oppose China’s assertive claims in the Indo-Pacific region and should build the economies of those countries at risk of Chinese coercion. These economic practices should include an increase in aid and the promotion of free and competitive trade instead of China’s opaque practices. NSC-68 noted that only a coalition of free states, led by US example, could counter the USSR.<sup>131</sup> Like NSC-68, the United States should seek commitments from other states to compete with China and encourage their resilience against China’s expanding influence.<sup>132</sup>

Unlike the USSR, China moves primarily through economic and diplomatic means, with the PLA supporting its foreign and economic policies, but not menacing other countries outside the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>133</sup> Because of this, diplomatic and economic measures should be the focus of US strategy. As mentioned above, the military will support these efforts by deterring conflict or winning if deterrence fails. While the United States cannot fail militarily, left unchallenged, China can achieve its goals using soft power, at the expense of US strategic aims. That stated, the Chinese and US economies are linked. US economic troubles will hinder the achievement of China’s strategic goals. Future strategies should capitalize on this to maintain and

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<sup>130</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 55-56.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Office of the President of the United States, *United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China*, 6; US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*, 3.

increase the US ability to compete with China. In execution, the United States should continue to improve economies within the developing world, increase the global economy's interconnectedness, and seek areas where the United States can frustrate China's economic aims that challenge a free and open world.<sup>134</sup>

Within the information realm, the United States should contest China's narrative and actively message when China violates international norms. NSC-68 called for an overt campaign to promote defections from the Soviet bloc.<sup>135</sup> In today's strategic environment, the United States and China compete for international influence. This influence relies largely on the perceptions of actors globally. Actively messaging the benefits of partnering with the United States and maintaining the rules-based order will advance US diplomatic and economic goals. Simultaneously, exposing areas where China does not live up to its explicit values, like the imprisonment of the Uighur minority, will frustrate the PRC's strategy. Taken together, positive US messaging and the exposure of Chinese malign activities will help the United States win the competition for influence.

These actions, spanning the elements of national power, will provoke a Chinese response. Risks arise with this strategy because no one can predict exactly how China will respond to the rapid build-up of diplomatic, economic, and military strength. Nonetheless, the risk of war remains regardless of the strategic option chosen. Chinese domination of the Indo-Pacific region is unacceptable to the United States, and US global influence will decrease if it fails to strengthen a free and open global order.<sup>136</sup> Therefore, the United States should implement these actions

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<sup>134</sup> Office of the President of the United States, *United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China*, 8-9; Office of the President of the United States, *National Security Strategy*, 18, 37-38, 40-41.

<sup>135</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 57.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61. This is a paraphrase of NSC 20/4's strategic objectives as reaffirmed by NSC-68 and applied to China.

because China will continue to challenge US interests and alter the international system without them.

If this more assertive approach against China is adopted, the US government must explain the strategy to its citizens. NSC-68 highlighted the importance of gaining legislative and popular support.<sup>137</sup> For the United States to maintain a strategy until its successful conclusion, the strategy must have broad support. Without this support, it is not likely to survive shifts in the environment or changes in presidential administrations.

A revised security strategy can advance US interests in the face of Chinese attempts to achieve regional hegemony and remold the international order. This requires that the United States focus its efforts across all elements of national power. Other security efforts would be of secondary concern if they do not contribute to US competition with China. The strategy must also fully explore the risks associated with different approaches. Describing risk this way establishes the argument against significant changes to US strategy, once adopted. This would promote the longevity and consistency required to compete with China. The current US strategy contains some of these necessary elements. It seeks to expand US diplomatic and economic strength, as well as modernize the military.<sup>138</sup> Unfortunately, the United States divides its focus across three other states and an expansive list of non-state actors. It also does not argue how this approach is better than different strategies, just how it is better than the previous one. A focused and well-argued approach, on the other hand, allows the United States the opportunity to advance its strategic goals in the face of the biggest potential security competitor.

## Chapter 4: Counterargument

Critics against incorporating elements of NSC-68 into a modern strategy can quickly turn to two types of arguments. The first argument asserts that NSC-68's impact on the outcome of the

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<sup>137</sup> US National Security Council Report, NSC-68, 57.

<sup>138</sup> Office of the President of the United States, *National Security Strategy*, 17, 26, 28-29, 38-39.

Cold War was not decisive. NSC-68 was only one of many Cold War policies, and it is difficult to trace the period's outcome back to that specific document. The second argument is that the current strategic environment presents the United States challenges dissimilar enough from the Cold War that drawing on NSC-68 will cause the United States to adopt a misguided security strategy. The merits of both of these arguments, however, are outweighed by the benefits of adopting a strategy along the points presented in the previous section of this paper.

Some critics argue that NSC-68 did not influence policy-makers. Carl Kaysen, Deputy Assistant to President John F. Kennedy for National Security Affairs, states that he had never heard of NSC-68 during his tenure. It did not affect Kennedy's security strategy.<sup>139</sup> Kaysen writes this despite Nitze, NSC-68's lead author, holding a critical position within the Kennedy administration as assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs. According to Kaysen and those who share his point of view, the Korean War, not NSC-68, was responsible for the 1950 shift in US strategy. Each presidential administration would pursue Cold War victory in its own manner.<sup>140</sup>

This line of argument is understandable but incorrect. There is no evidence any president studied NSC-68 after Eisenhower explored other strategic approaches in the "Solarium exercise" and the publication of his security strategy, NSC 162/2.<sup>141</sup> With this point acknowledged, NSC-68's underlying ideas had already imprinted themselves within the national security apparatus. These included the belief that the USSR was an expansionist threat that required a more militarized containment.<sup>142</sup> As described above, each president adjusted this approach to meet his particular style but ultimately abided by the logic outlined in NSC-68.

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<sup>139</sup> Kaysen, "Kaysen's Commentary," in May, 117-118.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>141</sup> Robert R. Bowie, "Bowie's Commentary," in May, 113-115; Robert D. Blackwill, "Blackwill's Commentary," in May, 121.

<sup>142</sup> Blackwill, "Blackwill's Commentary," in May, 122-123.

The next series of arguments highlight the dissimilarities between the Cold War and the current strategic environment. The Cold War was a struggle between two superpowers in a bipolar world. All other security concerns paled in comparison to containing the USSR. On the other hand, current US security strategy recognizes both China and Russia as global powers seeking a multipolar world, with Iran, North Korea, and non-state actors exerting regional influence and creating localized instability that is detrimental to US interests. According to this argument, focusing on one competitor would allow the rest a free pass to do as they please.

There are dissimilarities between the Cold War and today, but the argument that the United States cannot use lessons from NSC-68 to improve its current strategy is incorrect for two reasons. First, as stated above, each competitor that the United States considers within its security strategy creates competition for resources and effort. This competition divides US efforts and makes it challenging to achieve US strategic goals. Each additional competitor reduces the effectiveness of the United States against every competitor. The next reason is that the strategic responses to any particular competitor will have global effects. US competition with China will span the globe and create untold second and third-order effects. Focusing on one adversary will affect other international actors. Similarly, focusing on multiple strategic competitors may create counterproductive effects in US efforts against China. Along the same line, the tools and capabilities developed, particularly military capabilities to compete against China, can respond to emerging crises, if needed.

Despite arguments to the contrary, the United States can use elements of NSC-68 in framing a contemporary security strategy. The logic behind and the policy dictates of NSC-68 guided the United States to the Cold War's successful conclusion. The United States now faces a similar threat, with the global rise of an assertive China. No other current security challenge presents the risks to US strategic interests. As in 1950, NSC-68 can offer insight into how best to confront the challenge of China's rise.



## Conclusion

In 1949, President Truman recognized that the strategic landscape was changing faster than the experts had predicted. No longer did the United States possess a monopoly on atomic weapons, and progress toward developing thermonuclear weapons threatened to shift the military power balance. The United States adversary in a bipolar world, the USSR, was developing the military capabilities to expand its influence and challenge the international system, even if it could not match the combined military and economic power of the United States and its allies. In light of the challenges the United States faced, Truman ordered a study that resulted in one of the most influential Cold War documents, NSC-68.

This document provided the framework for how the United States would confront the challenges presented by the USSR. It demanded that the United States use all elements of national power, including the military, to support its European allies and contain the spread of Soviet-style communism. Despite variations based on presidential administration, the United States followed the framework put forth in NSC-68 from 1950 until the USSR's collapse in 1991.

Similar to 1950, the strategic landscape is shifting. Since 1991, the United States has sat atop a unipolar world and has focused on preventing instability spread by non-state actors. While US attention was on these non-state actors, a handful of nations have emerged with the potential to compete with the United States on either a global or regional stage. Of these emerging powers, China possesses the most significant potential to reshape the international order and impede the achievement of US strategic goals.

China, however, is different than the USSR. Outside of its immediate surrounding in the Indo-Pacific region, China uses primarily economic, diplomatic, and coercive efforts to influence members of the international community instead of using its military to force the spread of communism. China's aims still threaten US interests because Beijing seeks to remake the

international order. The United States must use a nuanced approach to competing with China due to its global savvy.

That stated, the United States can use three key aspects of NSC-68 to advance its strategic goals in light of China's rise. First, US strategy should prioritize competition with China over all other security concerns. NSC-68 described the United States and the USSR as incompatible forces in a bipolar world. The USSR would oppose the United States based on its need to expand communism into its near abroad. This provided the strategic focus required for the United States to follow a consistent strategy for forty years, create beneficial long-term changes to the international environment, and bring about the USSR's collapse. Conversely, today's NSS seeks to advance US objectives against four states, as well as an ill-defined group of non-state actors.<sup>143</sup> This strategy encourages an internal competition for resources and an incoherence between US actions addressing different competitors. Instead, like NSC-68, the United States should focus its efforts against its strongest strategic competitor, China, while maintaining minimal effort on other threats. This will allow the United States to consistently pursue changes in China's strategic behavior over the long-term. A focused approach allows for the greatest possible benefit to the United States.

Second, any new strategy should describe the risk of pursuing other approaches. NSC-68 presented four broad strategic courses of action and ruled-out different strategies based on the risks they created. The description of the risks associated with other courses of action reinforced the need for successive presidential administrations to follow NSC-68's recommended strategy. Even when administrations altered from the recommended course of action, changes in the strategic environment caused them to revert. Similarly, today's strategy should discount alternative strategic approaches. To do this, a current strategy must clearly show that it is superior to approaches that are too passive or too aggressive toward China and those that recommend

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<sup>143</sup> Office of the President of the United States, *National Security Strategy*, 2-3.

pursuing objectives against multiple threats. Describing the risks associated with multiple different courses of action will create an incentive for subsequent presidential administrations to pursue a consistent strategy.

Third, a new strategy should leverage all elements of national power to compete with China. NSC-68 did this for the United States during the Cold War. The document was groundbreaking because it justified the rapid expansion of defense spending and military employment during peacetime. Today, the United States accepts a large standing military, which is one of NSC-68's legacies. Instead, a new strategy should focus heavily on the other elements of national power, particularly economic and diplomatic. Military power should support these other efforts as part of a coherent US effort.

The United States is at a strategic turning point. After twenty years of combating terrorism and violent extremism, China is emerging as a global power and the greatest threat to future US prosperity and strength. Fortunately, this is not the first time that the United States has navigated a similar situation. While there are differences with each case, the present day and early portions of the Cold War are similar enough that the latter can inform the former. Drawing on US successes during the Cold War, particularly in how NSC-68 presented for a cohesive and coherent approach to containing the Soviet Union, the United States can craft a security strategy that can shape the future, ensure the stability of the international order, and limit the chances of conflict with China.

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