



2006 National Security Strategy: It's All About Democracy by Ralph A. Cossa

The 2006 National Security Strategy (NSS) document has just been released. News coverage has focused on one word: preemption. Largely overlooked has been the much greater emphasis on the promotion of democracy as the primary objective of American foreign policy in the second George W. Bush administration. How far and fast China proceeds down the path toward democracy will have a major bearing on future relations between Washington and Beijing.

Yes, the "P" word is still there. It appears a grand total of five times, all in the chapter entitled "Prevent Our Enemies from Threatening Us, Our Allies, and Our Friends with Weapons of Mass Destruction." The United States, the document asserts, "will, if necessary, act preemptively in exercising our inherent right of self-defense."

There are important caveats, however. It notes that the U.S. "will not resort to force in all cases to preempt emerging threats," stating instead a strong preference for "nonmilitary actions." It also warns that "no country should ever use preemption as a pretext for aggression." The NSS pledges that the U.S. "will always proceed deliberately, weighing the consequences of our actions. The reasons for our actions will be clear, the force measured, and the cause just," it asserts, further stressing that international diplomacy remains the primary means of dealing with potential threats to national security.

These qualifiers were not sufficient to prevent Pyongyang from quickly condemning the report as a "brigandish document declaring a war." The DPRK Permanent Mission issued a statement on March 23 condemning the NSS for designating the DPRK an "outpost of tyranny" and a "target of pre-emptive attack," which reveals the Bush administration's "undisguised attempt to realize its wild ambition to realize "regime change" through a 'pre-emptive attack.'"

For the record, a word scan of the entire report finds no reference to "outpost," "target," or "regime change," even though it did acknowledge that the people of the DPRK (and of six other nations) "know firsthand the meaning of tyranny" and, in discussing Pyongyang's counterfeiting and narcotic trafficking, does state that "the DPRK regime needs to change these practices." In praising the Six-Party Talks' September 2005 Joint Statement aimed at denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, the NSS clearly states that "regional cooperation offers the best hope for a peaceful, diplomatic resolution of this problem."

This concept of "preemptive diplomacy" – my term, not theirs – can be seen in action both in the Six-Party

Talks (to defuse North Korea's nuclear weapons program) and in Washington's collaboration with the EU and others in dealing with Iran's presumed nuclear weapons aspirations. Nonetheless, the NSS makes it clear that while diplomatic and other non-military means are preferred, "we do not rule out the use of force before attacks occur," in preventing or defending against the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

None of this is new. The doctrine of preemption was spelled out in equally clear terms, and with essentially the same caveats, in the 2002 NSS. What is new is the increased emphasis on, if not preoccupation with, the promotion of democracy and, with it, a continued downplaying of traditional alliance mechanisms as a primary means for dealing with security challenges, in favor of ad hoc coalitions of the willing.

The terms democracy (in its various permutations) and freedom appear in the 2006 NSS over 200 times (a roughly three-fold increase over 2002). The promotion of democracy is viewed as the cure to all the world's maladies: "promoting democracy is the most effective long-term measure for strengthening international stability, reducing regional conflicts, countering terrorism and terror – supporting extremism, and extending peace and prosperity." The document further asserts that "the best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world." Governments failing to deliver the "benefits of effective democracy" leave themselves "susceptible to or taken over by demagogues peddling an anti-free market authoritarianism."

This year's report is 18 pages longer than the 2002 version, in large part due to one additional chapter, on dealing with the challenges of globalization – "effective democracies are better able to deal with these challenges" – and a significant expansion of the opening chapter entitled "Champion Aspirations for Human Dignity," which lays out the game plan for how the Bush administration intends on spreading democracy throughout the world; a game plan which, with the possible exception of "applying sanctions," does not threaten or imply the use of military force to achieve this objective.

It notes that America has "a responsibility to promote human freedom," yet acknowledges that "freedom cannot be imposed; it must be chosen," and that its form "will reflect the history, culture, and habits unique to its people." "In the cause of ending tyranny and promoting effective democracy," it further asserts, "we will employ a full array of political, economic, diplomatic, and other tools at our disposal." The emphasis is on helping nations "make the difficult transition to effective democracies," while not "clinging to the illusionary stability of the authoritarian."

To accomplish all this, the Bush administration pledges to “continue to reorient the Department of State toward transformational diplomacy, which promotes effective democracy and responsible sovereignty.” In 2002, it was the Defense Department that was slated for “transformation.” That effort will be extended and enhanced, but the focus now is on getting U.S. diplomats “to step outside their traditional role to become more involved with the challenges within other societies.” This new “mandate to meddle” – again, my term not theirs – takes the traditional U.S. commitment to democracy to a new, more pro-active level.

Of note, the section describing plans to “Strengthen Alliances to Defeat Global Terrorism” makes no reference to Washington’s long-standing traditional alliances, focusing instead on the broader group of “friends and allies” who have joined the U.S. in the war on terrorism. The chapter lays out the sources of terrorism – political alienation, grievances that can be blamed on others, sub-cultures of conspiracy and misinformation, and an ideology that justifies murder – and notes that “the genius of democracy is that it provides a counter to each.”

Unlike the NSS reports issued during the Clinton era, where alliances formed the foundation upon which U.S. security strategy in Asia was based, Washington’s Asian alliances – with Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand – are scarcely mentioned at all in the section on East Asia. More than half this section is dedicated to a discussion of China’s proclaimed decision “to walk the transformative path of peaceful development.”

It admonishes China to “act as a responsible stakeholder,” repeating a term originally used by Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick in a major China address last fall and repeated recently in the Defense Department’s Quadrennial Defense Review – it is particularly refreshing to see State, Defense, and now the White House all singing the same tune regarding China. It is a song of engagement,

that opens up the possibility of even greater cooperation between Washington and Beijing, as long as China’s leaders “continue down the road of reform and openness . . . [to] meet the legitimate needs and aspirations of the Chinese people for liberty, stability, and prosperity.”

This cannot happen, however, if China continues “holding on to old ways of thinking and acting that exacerbate concerns throughout the region and the world.” Many have described Washington’s approach toward Beijing as a “hedging strategy.” The White House has now confirmed this suspicion, closing its East Asia discussion with this simple assertion: “Our strategy seeks to encourage China to make the right strategic choices for its people, while we hedge against other possibilities.”

There were many who saw the strong assertions regarding freedom and democracy in President Bush’s second inaugural address merely as an after-the-fact justification for the war in Iraq (given the absence of suspected weapons of mass destruction). The 2006 National Security Strategy should remove any doubt that this commitment to the promotion of freedom and democracy is real and will be pursued pro-actively (but not necessarily through force of arms) during President Bush’s second term.

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