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Women, Peace and Security and the 2022 National Security Strategy

A Strategic Blindspot in US National Security Interests

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KEY POINTS

- 1** Gender equality is a strategic blindspot in the US National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2022 because there is very little attention to gender equality as a strategic interest.
- 2** The overall approach to Strategic Competition with China and Russia as outlined in the 2022 NSS is gender blind.
- 3** Women's agency in conflict prevention, mitigation and recovery is not explicitly advanced by the 2022 NSS, however it does address economic, health and protection issues such as sexual and gender based violence.
- 4** Women, Peace and Security is at best alluded to (once) in the context of the Global Fragility Act. The WPS Act of 2017, the GFA Act of 2020 and the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2020 are all complementary and reinforce each other. The Women, Peace and Security agenda (WPS/UNSCR 1325) predates the US Global Fragility Act (GFA) by two decades.

I. INTRODUCTION

As Congress provides annual national security resources to the Administration, the legislative branch requires a thorough understanding of how the incumbent Administration perceives global threats and challenges to the United States and the international order, and how the executive branch intends to respond. For that purpose, Congress passed the [1947 National Security Act](#) requiring Administrations to outline national security priorities. However, reports were issued only sporadically, and it took the [Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 \(Public Law 99-433\)](#) to require regular National Security Strategy (NSS) reporting to Congress.

The first formal NSS was released by the Reagan Administration in 1987, and on October 12, 2022, President Biden's Administration released its long-awaited first full [National Security Strategy \(NSS\)](#). This NSS follows the [Interim National Security Guidance](#) released by the then-incoming Biden Administration on March 3, 2021. Not unlike Presidential "State of the Union" addresses to Congress, National Security Strategies are often very broadly framed. The NSS is supplemented by more specific and often classified strategies, such as the [National Defense Strategy \(NDS\)](#) the [National Military Strategy \(NMS\)](#), the National Strategies for Counterterrorism, or the first-ever [National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism](#), for example. However, a NSS prominently sets forth security priorities not just as guidance throughout all executive agencies, but also for a national and international audience.

Referencing specific security aspects or areas in the NSS is therefore hugely consequential, as a myriad of potential security issues compete for attention in the NSS.

As further discussed below, the Biden NSS stands in contrast to the [NSS](#) which was released by President Trump in 2017. President Trump's NSS enshrined the "America First" platform of the last Administration vis-a-vis the international community and international mechanisms, while the Biden NSS seeks to build and lead strong international coalitions within international frameworks, while also setting global norms and standards. This renewed commitment to international partnerships and norms set forth by the international framework echoes similar commitments made by the Biden Administration in the April 1, 2022 ["Prologue to the United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability."](#) which implements legislatively-mandated requirements of the Global Fragility Act. Additionally, both the March 2021 Interim National Security Guidance and the October 2022 National Security Strategy expressly reference the voices and needs of vulnerable communities, including the LGBTQI+ community. The reference to the LGBTQ+ community echoes the [2015 Obama NSS](#).

II. THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION 2022 NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

In the Strategy's foreword, President Biden writes:

“Around the world, the need for American leadership is as great as it has ever been. We are in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order. Meanwhile, shared challenges that impact people everywhere demand increased global cooperation and nations stepping up to their responsibilities at a moment when this has become more difficult. In response, the United States will lead with our values, and we will work in lockstep with our allies and partners and with all those who share our interests. We will not leave our future vulnerable to the whims of those who do not share our vision for a world that is free, open, prosperous, and secure. As the world continues to navigate the lingering impacts of the pandemic and global economic uncertainty, there is no nation better positioned to lead with strength and purpose than the United States of America.”

President Biden's Strategy is based on the premise that the best way to achieve America's security goals is via strong American leadership and engagement with the international community to build coalitions in multilateral fora and defend internationally recognized norms as fundamental to U.S. national interest. The 2022 NSS contrasts President Trump's 2017 NSS, which was clearly anchored in the “America First” approach toward the international framework, and which primarily sought to project U.S. interests and values abroad and use alliances in those cases where U.S. and international interests aligned. Similar to the 2017 NSS, the 2022 Strategy also recognizes the strategic competition with China and Russia as the most significant challenge. As in the Interim National Security Guidance, President Biden views the world as being at a post-pandemic inflection point which sees the traditional world order and its national and multilateral democratic institutions challenged by rising authoritarianism and expansionism. In his foreword, President Biden foreshadows the three main priorities the Strategy is concerned with:

1. Out-Competing China and Constraining Russia
2. Cooperating on Shared Challenges in the Areas of
 - a. Climate and Energy Security
 - b. Pandemics and Biodefense
 - c. Food Insecurity
 - d. Arms Control and Non-Proliferation
 - e. Terrorism
3. Shaping the Rules of the Road (setting norms and international standards)
 - Technology
 - Securing Cyberspace
 - Trade and Economics
 - Hostages and Wrongful Detainees
 - Countering Corruption

Three Lines of Efforts to Achieve these Priorities

“Our goal is clear—we want a free, open, prosperous, and secure international order. We seek an order that is free in that it allows people to enjoy their basic, universal rights and freedoms. It is open in that it provides all nations that sign up to these principles an opportunity to participate in, and have a role in shaping, the rules. It is prosperous in that it empowers all nations to continually raise the standard of living for their citizens. And secure, in that it is free from aggression, coercion and intimidation.

Achieving this goal requires three lines of effort. We will:

- 1) invest in the underlying sources and tools of American power and influence;*
- 2) build the strongest possible coalition of nations to enhance our collective influence to shape the global strategic environment and to solve shared challenges; and*
- 3) modernize and strengthen our military so it is equipped for the era of strategic competition with major powers, while maintaining the capability to disrupt the terrorist threat to the homeland.” (2022 NSS, p.10f).*

Implementation of the Biden National Security Strategy by Region

The Biden NSS further provides a breakdown of how the Strategy will be implemented by region and specific regional principles:

- Promote a Free and Open Indo-Pacific
- Deepen Our Alliance with Europe
- Foster Democracy and Shared Prosperity in the Western Hemisphere
- Support De-Escalation and Integration in the Middle East
- Build 21st Century U.S.-Africa Partnerships
- Maintain a Peaceful Arctic
- Protect Sea, Air, and Space

III. THE BIDEN NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY AND WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY (WPS)

In October 2017, President Trump signed the [Women, Peace and Security \(WPS\) Act](#), enshrining the principles of [U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325](#) into the law of the United States. The WPS Act sets forth that: *“It shall be the policy of the United States to promote the meaningful participation of women in all aspects of overseas conflict prevention, management, and resolution, and post-conflict relief and recovery efforts, reinforced through diplomatic efforts and programs [...]”* (Sec.4, P.L. 115-68).

Despite these legal provisions clearly relevant to U.S. national security policies, the term ‘Women, Peace and Security (WPS)’ does not occur in either the December 2017 Trump NSS nor the October 2022 Biden NSS (including the March 2021 Biden Interim National Security Guidance). In the larger WPS context, however, the Biden NSS is concerned with the implementation of the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) and focuses on all factors contributing to [fragility, which disproportionately impacts women and girls](#). In contrast to the 2017 and 2022 National Security Strategies, the [“2020 United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability”](#) (Global Fragility Strategy) as well as the [2022 Prologue to the Global Fragility Strategy](#) specifically reference Women, Peace and Security, as well as atrocity prevention, as key elements of the Global Fragility Strategy. The Biden National Security Strategy is furthermore heavily development-focused regarding women and girls, without at least an equal emphasis on the empowerment of women in the security context regarding conflict prevention, management, resolution and recovery, as required by the WPS Act. There is also no specific discussion on what role U.S. security entities should play in promoting WPS goals. The NSS exclusively references the [Global Fragility Act](#), the only Act cited of the ‘troika’ of key national security and conflict-related laws (Women, Peace and Security Act; [Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act](#); Global Fragility Act):

*“We will work to confront these shared challenges and recommit to advancing the Sustainable Development Goals by pursuing more inclusive development partnerships, especially by putting local partners in the driver’s seat, and by deploying a more expansive set of tools, including catalytic financing and integrated humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actions. We are already applying this approach to helping vulnerable nations build resilience to the devastating impacts of the climate crisis through the President’s Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience (PREPARE) and in support of democratic renewal through the Partnerships for Democratic Development (PDD). We are also implementing this development approach to advance global health security and systems and to take principled humanitarian action while addressing the root causes of fragility, conflict, and crisis, including through the Global Fragility Act. We will use our humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding tools more cohesively. **And we will invest in women and girls, be responsive to the voices and focus on the needs of the most marginalized, including the LGBTQI+ community; and advance inclusive development broadly.**” (2022 NSS, p.19f).*

Contrary to the failure by the previous and current Administration to explicitly reference WPS as a critical element in their National Security Strategies, Congressional intent and the relevant law are entirely clear. While WPS of course also has to be a critical part of the global fight against fragility, it is not a policy area somehow subordinate to, subsumed by, or limited to the global fight against fragility.

On this point, the WPS Act is very clear:

“SEC. 5. UNITED STATES STRATEGY TO PROMOTE THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN CONFLICT PREVENTION AND PEACE BUILDING.

(a) REQUIREMENT.—Not later than one year after the date of the enactment of this Act, and again four years thereafter, the President, in consultation with the heads of the relevant Federal departments and agencies, shall submit to the appropriate congressional committees and make publicly available **a single government-wide strategy, to be known as the Women, Peace, and Security Strategy**, that provides a detailed description of how the United States intends to fulfill the policy objectives [...] [Sec. 5 , P.L. 115-68].

As already stated above, cited from the binding policy section of the Women, Peace and Security Act, the WPS approach shall be used by the United States to *“promote the meaningful participation of women in all aspects of overseas conflict prevention, management, and resolution, and post-conflict relief and recovery efforts [...]”* (Sec.4, P.L. 115-68). It must therefore be part of all national security documents and strategies, including the NSS. A similar point should be made about the atrocities prevention agenda and provisions included in section 3 (3) of the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act [P.L. 115-441].

In the section of the 2022 NSS ‘Sharpening Our Tools of Statecraft,’ the Strategy strives to: *“Making development assistance more accessible and equitable by increasing engagement with and shifting 25 percent of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funding to local partners, and double USAID’s work on empowering women and girls.”* (2022 NSS, p.46). The Biden NSS clearly tasks USAID to work on women and girls’ empowerment, without explicitly referencing other, primarily security-focused agencies, such as the Department of Defense or the Department of Homeland Security. Under the WPS Act, however, these agencies have a specific WPS role to play.

It is unclear what exactly “empowering women and girls” means in the 2022 NSS context beyond the development focus on women and girls regarding economic participation, food security and the health context. This lack of specificity is rather surprising, given that even prior to the passage of the WPS Act by the U.S. Congress in 2017, President Obama’s [2010 NSS](#) directly addressed WPS principles:

“Supporting the Rights of Women and Girls: Women should have access to the same opportunities and be able to make the same choices as men. Experience shows that countries are more peaceful and prosperous when women are accorded full and equal rights and opportunity. When those rights and opportunities are denied, countries often lag behind. Furthermore, women and girls often disproportionately bear the burden of crises and conflict. Therefore the United States is working

with regional and international organizations to prevent violence against women and girls, especially in conflict zones. We are supporting women's equal access to justice and their participation in the political process. We are promoting child and maternal health. We are combating human trafficking, especially in women and girls, through domestic and international law enforcement. And we are supporting education, employment, and microfinance to empower women globally.” (2010 NSS, p.38) The [2015 Obama NSS](#) additionally states: *“We will continue to lead the effort to ensure women serve as mediators of conflict and in peacebuilding efforts, and they are protected from gender-based violence.”* (2015 NSS, p.11). Most notably, by inserting the cited language in the Obama National Security Strategies, women are assigned an active role and agency in the prevention, mitigation and recovery from conflict in addition to the protection and needs-based approach of the Biden NSS.

The Biden NSS further addresses the life-sustaining needs of women and children in the section discussing food insecurity, as part of the [“Roadmap for Global Food Security: A Call to Action,”](#) which the Biden Administration has announced with other partner countries. *“The United States is also implementing the Global Food Security Strategy, which focuses on reducing global poverty, hunger, and malnutrition by supporting inclusive and sustainable agriculture-led economic growth; strengthening resilience among people and food systems; and supporting well-nourished healthy populations, especially among women and children. This requires working across entire food systems to consider every step from cultivation to consumption, and to integrate these efforts within larger climate, health, conflict mitigation, and peacebuilding work.”* (2022 NSS, p.29).

In the section on ‘Trade and Economics,’ the strategy discusses the importance of addressing barriers that prevent women from fully participating in the economic system of a country: *“And we will address growth-stymying legal, structural, and cultural barriers that undermine labor force participation for women and marginalized groups. We will also support efforts by the international financial institutions will also need to continue to evolve to meet the challenges of our times. Many of the biggest challenges in our world today—such as pandemics and health, climate change, fragility, migration and refugee flows—cross borders and disproportionately affect the poorest, most vulnerable populations. Bolstering these institutions is also critical to tackling serious long-term challenges to the international order, such as those posed by the PRC.”* (2022 NSS, p.35).

‘Gender’ is discussed only in the context of ‘gender equality,’ such as one of the goals of the Partnership for Global Investment and Infrastructure (PGII) (2022 NSS, p.12), or ‘gender-based violence,’ in the section on the Strategy implementation in the Western Hemisphere (2022 NSS, p.41). Gender analysis as a critical national security policy tool is not referenced, much less prescribed as an integral part of the Strategy.

IV. THE TRUMP NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY AND WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

As stated above, the 2017 NSS by President Trump takes an explicit “America First” approach in stark contrast to the Biden NSS. While also identifying the strategic competition with Russia and China as the biggest security challenge going forward, the WPS agenda is addressed entirely differently. In the Trump NSS, WPS is less a development concern, but rather emanates from a projection of U.S. values:

“An America First National Security Strategy is based on American principles, a clear-eyed assessment of U.S. interests, and a determination to tackle the challenges that we face. It is a strategy of principled realism that is guided by outcomes, not ideology. It is based upon the view that peace, security, and prosperity depend on strong, sovereign nations that respect their citizens at home and cooperate to advance peace abroad. And it is grounded in the realization that American principles are a lasting force for good in the world.” (2017 NSS, p.1).

“We will continue to champion American values and offer encouragement to those struggling for human dignity in their societies. There can be no moral equivalency between nations that uphold the rule of law, empower women, and respect individual rights and those that brutalize and suppress their people. Through our words and deeds, America demonstrates a positive alternative to political and religious despotism.” (2017 NSS, p.38).

While the term Women, Peace and Security does not occur in the 2017 NSS either, the Trump NSS stated under ‘Priority Actions’:

“EMPOWER WOMEN AND YOUTH: Societies that empower women to participate fully in civic and economic life are more prosperous and peaceful. We will support efforts to advance women’s equality, protect the rights of women and girls, and promote women and youth empowerment programs.” (2017 NSS, p.42).

Neither the term ‘gender’ nor the term ‘LGBTQI+’ appear in the Trump NSS. The term ‘development’ is very much understood as not being driven by internationally agreed-to norms, such as the UN development goals, but rather driven by U.S. interests and by unleashing of private U.S. investment:

“The United States will promote a development model that partners with countries that want progress, consistent with their culture, based on free market principles, fair and reciprocal trade, private sector activity, and rule of law. The United States will shift away from a reliance on assistance based on grants to approaches that attract private capital and catalyze private sector activities. We will emphasize reforms that unlock the economic potential of citizens, such as the promotion of formal property rights, entrepreneurial reforms, and infrastructure improvements—projects that help people earn their livelihood and have the added benefit of helping U.S. businesses. By mobilizing both public and private resources, the United States can help maximize returns and outcomes and reduce the burden on U.S. Government resources. Unlike the state-directed mercantilism of some competitors that can disadvantage recipient nations and promote dependency, the purpose of U.S. foreign assistance should be to end the need for it. The United States seeks strong partners, not weak ones. U.S. development assistance must support America’s national interests. We will prioritize collaboration with aspiring partners that are aligned with U.S. interests. We will focus on development investments where we can have the most impact— where local reformers are committed to tackling their economic and political challenges.” (2017 NSS, p. 38).

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

- While National Security Strategies often provide a more general overview of the current global security situation, they are still the most authoritative document on national security priorities and challenges guiding all agencies within a respective Administration, the U.S. Congress, and inform the American people. Going forward, these documents should at least specifically address national security-relevant strategies mandated by law, such as the U.S. Women, Peace and Security Strategy or the Atrocities Prevention Strategy, in addition to the Global Fragility Strategy.
- As the Administration is developing a new 2023 WPS Strategy as required by the Women, Peace and Security Act, the new WPS Strategy should clearly state how it is a critical component of the NSS and how the WPS Strategy relates to other legislatively mandated national strategies.
- Future National Security Strategies should further explain which executive office coordinates the overall implementation of each of the Congressionally-mandated strategies relevant to U.S. national security. In addition, the NSS should specifically name those agencies that have to implement action plans related to each of the strategies. Such designations were required by the Global Fragility Act for the Global Fragility Strategy.
- All documents related to U.S. national security policies should include a thorough gender analysis. Agencies should strive to develop common principles for their gender-analysis tools, flexible enough for each of the policy-implementing agencies to fulfill their respective policy responsibilities.

Gender perspectives improve security outcomes



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