

MINIMIZING DISCONTINUITY AND VOLATILITY IN U.S. NATIONAL STRATEGIES

CHALLENGING 40
YEARS OF POLICY
OSCILLATION
AROUND
RECURRING
STRATEGIC THEMES
IN FAVOR OF A
MORE CONSISTENT
APPROACH THAT
FOCUSES ON
STRENGTHENING
ALL ASPECTS OF
NATIONAL POWER.



Strategy Futures Reimagined (SFR)

Global Forward Planning

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last four decades, U.S. National Security Strategies (NSS) have oscillated with each administration between being engaged and being cautious and protective, creating structural discontinuity in policy that undermines our long-term development, alliance cohesion, industrial resilience, and national competitiveness. Resetting U.S. critical needs with each administration diminishes capacity, resilience, and sustainability, while reinforcing societal fragilities that may already exist. Some recurring issues may always have wide swings, but there are government actions that can create “shadow effect zones”—statutory requirements, appropriations, alliances, and industrial integration—to provide stabilizing continuity. Strengthening these efforts while reducing political volatility in fragile domains (economic messaging, climate policy, social investment) is essential strategic coherence in our planning and policy efforts.

This report argues for a whole-of-nation, multi-decadal planning model that minimizes discontinuity and volatility across national security strategies. It enables progress by:

- Investing in human and social capacity building with a goal of igniting a new civil potential based on diverse and innovative contributions across classes.
- Implementing long-term economic goals that address economic, environmental, and security risks, while expanding the middle-class potential in America.
- Integrating visionary and scaled defense modernization against nontraditional threats first, minimizing strategic deterrence platforms to essential needs.
- Reforming the U.S. industrial capacity based on the continual assessment of national and international supply chains and the risk to our critical systems.

Without multi-Administration planning and policy continuity in key issues, the U.S. cannot sustain long-term competitiveness in an era of rapid technological change and great-power rivalry. We will bounce from challenge to challenge with inconsistency rather than anticipating and shaping outcomes to our advantage. A whole-of-nation, multi-decadal national strategy for a suite of recurring issues can provide greater progress, security, and stability if it includes:

- Statutory continuity and funding for key strategic themes across Administrations.
- An independent, authoritative oversight body for strategic foresight and planning that reports to Congress, not a sitting Administration.
- National planning that integrates future needs and technology, domestic and partner supply chains, and guides national resilience and sustainability efforts.
- Social capacity development grounded in improved necessities like economic affordability, accessible health care, and internationally competitive education.

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For Reference:

- National Security Strategy oscillation in this paper refers to the swing, over time, between a U.S that is engaged globally and is fully utilizing the power of world markets, partners, and institutions and one that is more cautious and protective.
- Discontinuity in the context of oscillation refers to prevalence or absence of issues in National Security Strategies over the last four decades, herein represented by the discontinuity designator in the Table on page five.
- Volatility, in the same Table on page five, is an estimation of the fluctuation in priority, funding, authorities, org charts, and impact of political churn on the issue.

Caveat:

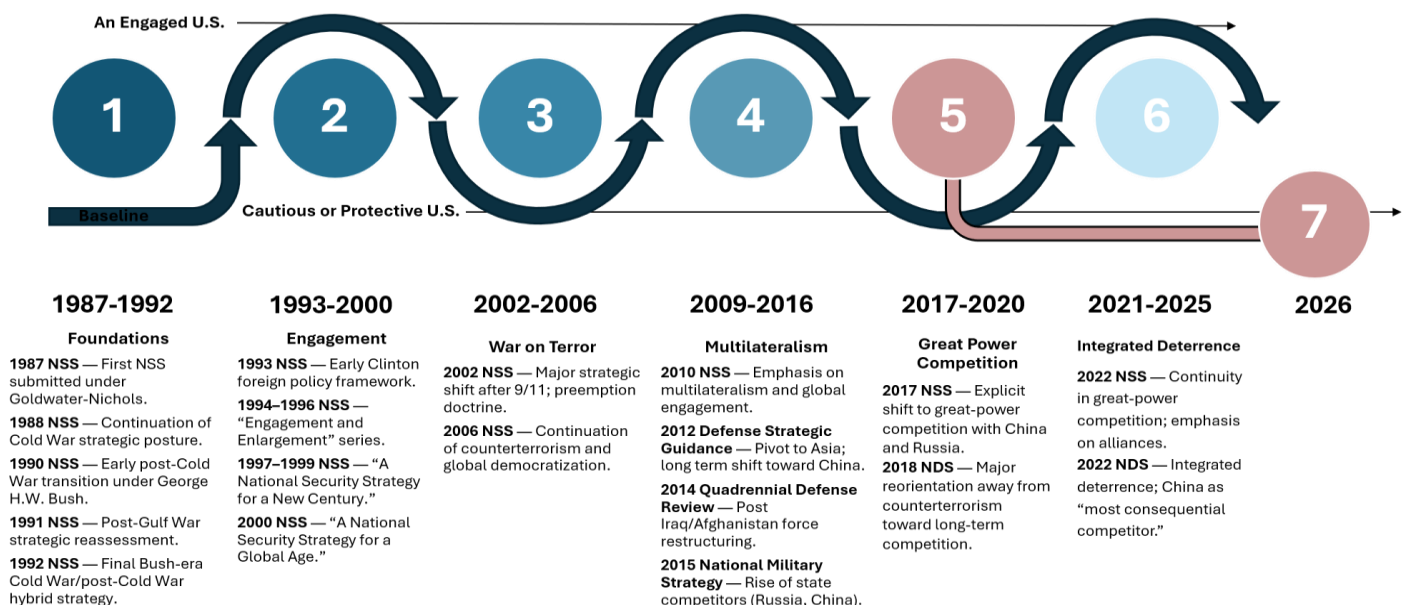
The opinions expressed in the paper are those of the author and not attributable to any previous or current employer. They present a position to stimulate a discourse for change.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE STRATEGIC OSCILLATION PROBLEM

History shows a pattern of issue oscillation in our national strategies from 1987 to 2026, with each era representing a distinct shift in priorities between engagement and protectionism. This cycle reveals a deeper structural issue. U.S. national security strategy is not cumulative—it is cyclical. Long-term goals and measures of success get reframed every 4 years or less. The result is strategic churn: programs stall, alliances adjust, and industrial planning becomes reactive rather than strategic.

1. **Foundation:** The early years (1987-1992) in which the U.S. was transitioning from the Cold War to a post-Cold War strategy that was influenced by the Gulf War.
2. **Engagement:** 1993-2000, This period focused on “engagement and enlargement” and was used to address and support the U.S. involvement in globalization.
3. **War on Terror:** Between 2002 and 2006, National Security Strategies were focused on countering terrorism and furthering democracy as a part of the tool kit.
4. **Multilateralism:** From 2009-2016, U.S. strategy focused on global engagement, the pivot to Asia (China), and the rise of state competitors.
5. **Great Power Competition:** 2017-2020 was a clear shift away from countering terrorism to countering our competitors with all the “great power” tools at our disposal.
6. **Integrated Deterrence:** Conversely, 2021-2025 was a period of outreach, rebuilding alliances, and expanding on the concept of integrated/hybrid/economic warfare.
7. **Great Power Double Down:** The NSS for 2026 doubled down on Great Power Competition (2017-2020) and economic warfare.

The National Security Policy Oscillation from 1987 to 2026



2. THE CONSEQUENCES OF DISCONTINUITY

As a hyper-connected world of advanced technologies erodes the U.S. 20th Century advantage, the impact of regularly resetting our national security planning, partnerships, and resource management is hastening and weakening our national security. Despite the strong political component to each Administration's reset, some themes persist beyond new agendas with a high continuity of appearance in national strategy. While they may be represented differently in language and objective, their addressal across administrations and strategies provides some continuity across the decades. However, for issues with higher discontinuity there are two important aspects when developing and implementing a comprehensive, national security strategy. Frequent resets can cause:

- Programs to lose momentum, participants, and resources.
- U.S. long-term capacity, capabilities, and competitiveness to suffer.

Each administration resets national security requirements. Long-term goals and measures of success get reframed every 4 years or less. Those core, long-term themes in national security that survive do so despite the discontinuity and volatility of our national security policy. This strategic churn accumulates over decades and disrupts strategic security goals, reducing the U.S. ability to compete with long-term planners like China.

Core Long-term Themes

- Great-power competition (Russia, China)
- Alliance management
- Technological superiority
- Deterrence and force posture
- Global stability and economic leadership

Disrupted Long-term Goals

- Nuclear modernization
- Shipbuilding
- Microelectronics and supply-chain reshoring
- Space architecture
- Climate resilience
- Infrastructure modernization
- Competitive and resilient civil sector

The disrupted, long-term goals present national security challenges, gaps, and needs.

2.1 Capability Erosion: Long-term modernization programs—nuclear forces, shipbuilding, microelectronics—are repeatedly reset, delaying progress and increasing cost.

2.2 Alliance Uncertainty: Partners adapt to U.S. political cycles, weakening deterrence and shared planning.

2.3 Industrial Instability: Economic branding cycles (“Build Back Better,” “America First”) disrupt investment signals and long-term planning.

2.4 Civil Sector Fragility: Workforce development, infrastructure, and social capacity lag strategic needs, reducing national resilience.

3. CONTINUITY VS. VOLATILITY: MAPPING LOW-TO-HIGH ISSUES IN BOTH

Combining the themes, continuity level, and degree of volatility (size of policy swing for that issue between strategies) provides a powerful framework for understanding strategic stability. It also encourages progress by helping planners frame strategies that are appropriate to the volatility of each recurring theme.

	Area of National Security Planning	Decadal Continuity	Volatility	Why These Areas are Ranked This Way
High Continuity	Nuclear deterrence & modernization	Very high	Very low	Statutory, existential, multi-decade programs of record that are currently in an expansion mode
	Alliance structure (NATO, Japan, ROK, AUKUS, QUAD)	High-medium	Low-to-medium	Deep institutional, military, and political entrenchment that has retreated and retrenched
	China as primary long-term competitor	High	Low-to-medium	Framed differently by administrations, but underlying assessment is stable
Medium Continuity	Defense industrial base & supply chains	High	Medium	Direction is stable (onshoring, resilience), although tools, branding, and momentum change
	Cyber & space as core domains	High-medium	Medium	Mission endures; org charts, authorities, & national doctrine can integrate or devolve to state and local
	Counterterrorism posture	Medium-low	Medium-to-high	Infrastructure persists; priority and resourcing fluctuate depending on threat and funding
Low Continuity	Climate & energy transition	Medium-low	High	Direction oscillates sharply with party control, despite long-term need to improve resilience
	Immigration & border policy	High-medium	Very high	Legal, rhetorical, and operational swings across administrations around mgmt. and oversight
	Domestic social policy / Equity Issues	Low-medium	Very high	Narrative and emphasis change dramatically with political control, but always highly debated
	Economic strategy branding (“Build Back Better”, “America First”, etc.)	Substance: medium Branding: very high	Very high	Core concerns (growth, jobs, competitiveness) persist; framing and tools churn, volatility grows

3.1 Zone 1: High Continuity Themes

The three Strategic Themes in this High Continuity Zone benefit from statutory requirements, multi-decade programs, and entrenched institutions that also exhibit lower volatility in campaigns, public opinion, and policy development. In addition to the structural benefits to continuity just identified, these areas can generally be agreed upon as necessary but are complicated, highly technical, or removed from public debate. These Themes have high continuity across multiple National Security Strategies because they require long-term capability planning (10–30-year builds) that right-sizes military capacity to the complex and unconventional battlespace, although some might argue this makes them not adaptive or agile enough to new challenges and threats.

- Nuclear modernization
- Alliance structures
- Defense industrial base

Hard’ systems...aid progress due to higher continuity over longer planning cycles.

3.2 Zone 2: Medium Continuity Themes

While these important national issues have endured in some form over many National Security Strategies, there is often much debate in Administrations and among policy makers over what future efforts should entail, what success is, and who should lead on these NSS Themes. These issues are tied to the rapid changes in technology or the future, which makes them more volatile by nature. This area of medium continuity can also experience organizational missions that become competitive and contentious due to the high costs of development, countering adversaries, and uncertainty about the future paths they may take. They may also have the greatest impact on our national security and how our society adapts and prospers with foresight and sufficient support. They endure across multiple NSS’s but shift frequently in organizational form from strategy-to-strategy.

- Cyber
- Space
- Supply chains
- Emerging technology
- Foresight and analytic capacity

The requirements of medium continuity issues demand continual review and rapid adaptation to stay ahead of competitors and the underlying, evolving technology on which they depend.

3.3 Zone 3: Low Continuity Themes

Low policy continuity that is dominated by issues that fluctuate with administrations or party politics but may significantly impact people's daily lives. While they have low policy continuity, they have high volatility driven by political cycles, the current state of public welfare, and perceptions of risk or deteriorating living conditions. Wide and rapid swings in social investment negatively impact economic and environmental security and limit diverse and innovative contributions. In several of these areas, the U.S. is rated in the bottom one-third of all nations.

- Climate and energy
- Immigration
- Domestic social policy
- Economic messaging

Narrative and identity-based domains have lower continuity in national strategies and can be the most volatile and fragile of issues. Despite this, they can often determine long-term competitiveness.

4. SHADOW EFFECT ACTIONS: HIDDEN STABILIZERS IN STRATEGY

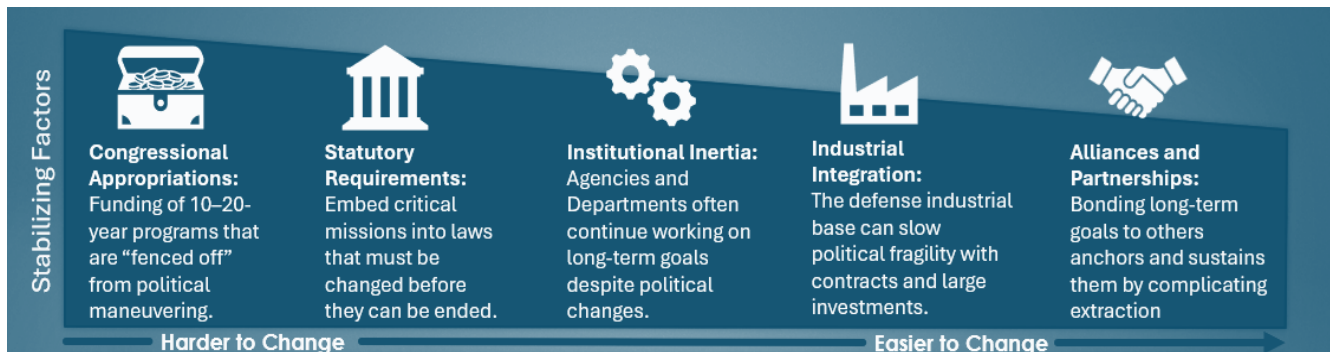
The vulnerability of long-term themes and goals to successful implementation can be due to wide swings in political agendas. A stabilizing factor are the slower, sometimes decadal strategic actions and commitments that continue regardless of administration changes, national strategy rewrites, or political/rhetorical shifts – in the policy shadows.

4.1 Key Stabilizers

- Congressional appropriations on 'hard' systems like those in the High Continuity Zone.
- Statutory requirements are set in laws that must be changed to end a program.
- Institutional inertia occurs when individual organizations' investments are applied to long-term goals or needs (like infrastructure or IT upgrades) despite policy.
- Industrial integration through large contracts or investments carry their own inertia.
- Alliances and partnerships can create an obligation or dependency but are more fragile than the previous stabilizers.

A stabilizing factor can be slower, sometimes decades long artifacts or commitments that continue regardless of Administration and strategy changes.

These components of national planning and policy act as ballast—quietly sustaining long-term goals even when political winds shift. Each requires a robust set of federal institutions and organizations.



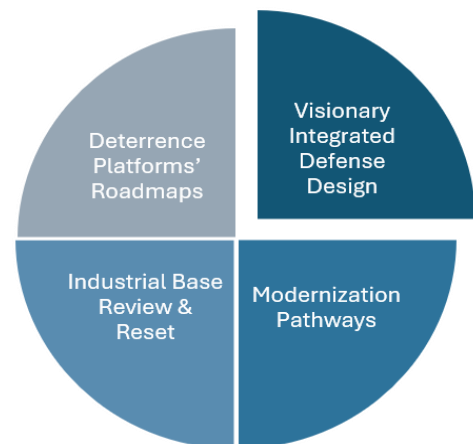
5. NATIONAL SECURITY DRIVERS ACROSS CONTINUITY ZONES

The author identifies nine drivers that shape U.S. competitiveness across the three continuity zones, which are summarized in an overarching objective for strategy and policy development (offset quarter in each graphic).

5.1 Visionary Integrated Defense Design (High Continuity Drivers)

Visionary integrated defense design moves beyond current attempts to create joint, integrated battlespace capabilities. It shifts from individual services contracting and designing platforms that may be outdated, outmoded, and unable to synchronize upon completion to platform and system design that is based on integrated, system-of-system battlespace management. In China’s doctrine, this is often called “informationized” warfare and relies on orchestrated development of military space assets (satellites, ground stations, launchers), ground-based sensors and networked platforms that utilize artificial intelligence and big data analytics to integrate sensors and advanced weapons systems.

- Reinvent Deterrence Platforms by creating roadmaps based on the changing nature and valuation of weapons of mass destruction.
- Modernization Pathways for advanced conventional (nonnuclear) weapons’ systems to reflect 21st Century unconventional battlespace threats.

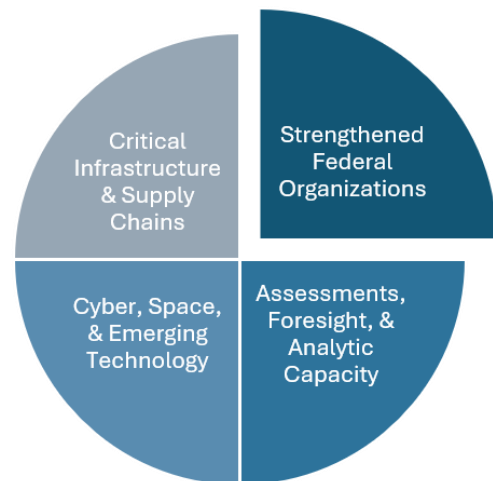


- Industrial Base Review and Reset should be an ongoing, unbiased approach to acquiring national security materiel with continual contract reevaluation.

5.2 Strengthened Federal Organizations (Medium Continuity Drivers)

Strengthening federal organizations and the role they play is historically not popular in the United States, achieving gains in the national structures noted below require leveraging enhanced foresight and analytic capabilities. Let me explain, the national security sectors in the first bullet are extremely difficult to keep up with domestically and internationally, especially since many of the advances are outside the U.S. government. The second bullet is seeing rapid changes in what is considered critical, securing our infrastructure and supply chains, and facing economic warfare. In a national security strategy, the planning guidance is too general and purposely designed to last several years, which is antithetical to the pace at which these sectors are changing.

- Cyber, Space, and Emerging Technology should continue to be fast-tracked as a priority, but backed up with the resources, monies, and legal structures that ensure U.S. prominence.
- Critical Infrastructure and Supply Chains need reinforcing, but because most of these lie outside of direct government control, or are international, greater emphasis in international partnering with trusted agents will be essential. How we accomplish this is directly linked to then next bullet.
- Assessments, Foresight and Analytic Capacity should be expanded, institutionalized, and incorporated by U.S. agencies into national planning for the above sectors and all high-priority issues identified in the national strategy.



I am devoting considerable space to the issue of strengthening the role of the Federal Government in selected areas because it could have the following effects.

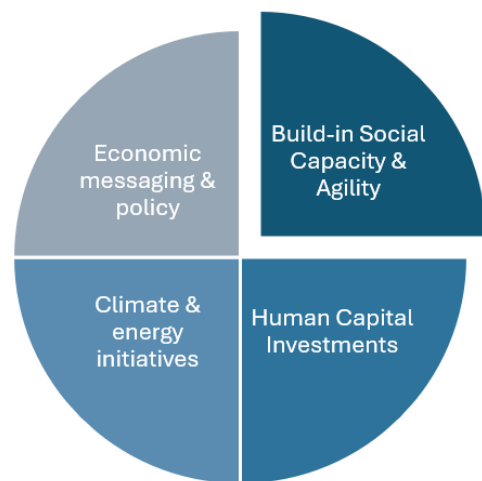
- Immediate (weeks–6 months): See positive direct operational impacts on current missions.
- Medium-term (6–18 months): Rebuild procedures and a new civic culture to reimagine roles and responsibilities, while building a new, skilled generation.

- Long-term (1.5–5 years): Integrate strategic, structural, & systemic effects into continual planning to keep pace with competitors and rapidly advancing technology.
- Long, long-term (5-10 years): Progress toward a balanced/equitable budget, sustained economic growth, and national/international prestige.

5.3 Social Capacity and Agility (Low Continuity Drivers)

Low policy continuity is dominated by issues that vary considerably in how they are approached by each administration but may significantly impact people's daily lives. These issues are characterized by wide and rapid swings between Administrations and National Security Strategies. The impact of reduced social investment affects the amount of diverse and innovative contributions by individuals and ultimately has negative impacts on economic and environmental security. The U.S. is currently experiencing an intellectual drain and a shortage of skilled workers necessary defense modernization, critical infrastructure and supply chain resilience, and advanced technology research, development, and adoption. The drivers identified below help form a whole-of-nation security architecture—but only if continuity is strengthened across national strategies so that long-term investment in capacity building and problem solving is guaranteed.

- Human Capital Investments reignite civil potential, social and technical capacity, and industrial agility and competitiveness – making them foundational and a central component of any national security strategy.
- Climate and Energy Initiatives should not be contentious because the costs of environmental disasters are well documented and the costs of traditional energy sources are subject to rapid price increases based on geopolitical risks and market instability.
- Economic Messaging and Policy volatility can raise costs and consumer concerns, as well as drive investors to other markets, despite any messaging to the contrary people in the U.S. and international investors watch their paychecks and returns.



6. CONSISTENCY PROMOTES NATIONAL SECURITY AND RESILIENCE

The following recommendations strengthen continuity and reduce volatility between strategies, thereby building capacity and resilience in our society. They span multiple administrations, budgets, and legal or policy instruments that support key aspects of national security. The recommendations are foundational to national growth, resilience, and security, as well as any future Administration's National Security Strategy.

- **Expand Analytic and Foresight Capacity:** Addressing 21st Century whole-of-nation threats will require a balanced deterrence posture and program, a more competitive civil and defense industrial base, a possible reassessment and realignment of U.S. military power, more resilient national infrastructure, and reestablishing alliances around the world. These, and other initiatives, will require institutionalizing assessments, foresight, & analytic capacity as a core component of national strength.
- **Institutionalize Multi-Decade Planning:** Embed the requirement for long-term strategies and implementation plans in statute, not depending on executive preference or capricious organizational design. This should include impartiality and fenced federal funding where necessary for programs and projects that exceed State mandate or resources and national administrations.
- **Build Social Capacity as a National Security Asset:** Economic security is more than messaging with branding cycles and catch phrases. Long-term competitiveness requires workforce development, civic cohesion, and infrastructure modernization can reignite civil potential. It also requires environmental security, personal and national, to be stabilized and improved. A social capacity economic policy includes climate and energy stabilization goals and programs, technical training or retraining of the workforce, and investment in industrial sector competitiveness by the government where necessary.

A whole-of-nation, multi-decadal national security strategy—anchored in statutory continuity, industrial resilience, and social capacity—is the only path to restoring stability and long-term strength. It will require recreating a strong federal role that can initiate and support immediate operational impacts, medium-term procedural rebuilding, and long-term structural integration.