

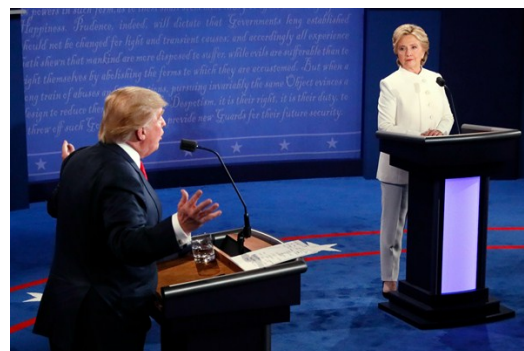
# Why The Next President Must Reset U.S. Global Strategy—and How to Do It

Steven Metz | Friday, Nov. 4, 2016

When Dwight Eisenhower took office as president in January 1953, he was deeply concerned about the trajectory of America's security strategy. Much had changed in the years leading up to his election the previous November, as hopes that the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France and China—would collaboratively manage global security were dashed by the emergence of the Cold War. By the time Eisenhower moved into the White House, no one doubted that containing the Soviet Union was America's most pressing strategic task. What worried him was how to go about it.

Under his predecessor, President Harry Truman, containment had been increasingly militarized, particularly after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Eisenhower feared that the defense spending this required would derail U.S. economic growth, eventually degrading public support for containment and giving Moscow a free hand. To avoid this sort of slow-motion disaster, Eisenhower wanted to employ a less expensive form of containment that balanced risks and costs. He quickly kicked off a major review of U.S. strategy in the hope of finding one.

In what became known as Project Solarium, after the White House solarium room where many of the key meetings took place, Eisenhower created three teams of Soviet experts from the government and academia. Each was instructed to build a case for a specific form of containment. One team was assigned a political variant of containment focused on Europe; the second, a more military-centric version relying on the U.S. nuclear deterrent; and the third, a strategy to “roll back” Soviet influence. After completing their assessments, the teams presented their arguments to the president and his senior advisers. Eisenhower then approved National Security Council Document 162/2, which incorporated ideas from all three teams. This became the basis for U.S. grand strategy during much of the Cold War. While the application of this strategy evolved over the years, there was always a working agreement on its foundational concepts.



*U.S. presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump during the third presidential debate, Las Vegas, Oct. 19, 2016 (AP photo by Mark Ralston).*

That experience should provide a roadmap for whoever is elected U.S. president next week. The new president needs a new Project Solarium to reset American strategy and find a way to deal with the four most pressing and dangerous security threats the United States is likely to face in the next four years: the bizarre and dangerous North Korean regime; growing Chinese military power and assertiveness; Russia's complex multifaceted aggression; and violent Islamic extremism.

A new Project Solarium would differ from Eisenhower's assessment in a very important way. In 1953, America's primary opponent was clear; the issue was how best to address it at an acceptable cost. Today's question is what threat or challenge takes priority. This means that the three-option framework in the original Project Solarium may not be enough. Instead the new review should use what might be called a "3+2" framework, with three primary strategic options and two secondary ones. The key would be assessing the benefits, costs and risks of each option to help the new president chart a course for American security.

***There is a pressing need to reassess the fundamental organizing concepts of American security.***

The first option might be called "balanced primacy." It would largely continue what the United States has done since the end of the Cold War: working with allies and partners to address threats and build global stability. The focus of American effort would shift as threats arose and ebbed, much as it has since the 1990s. The trick would be finding an affordable way to do this that avoids simply reacting to security challenges rather than resolving or preventing them.

The second strategy would accept a diminished U.S. role in the Middle East and Europe to focus on Asia. It would reflect the declining economic importance of the Middle East to the United States, the limited positive impact that American involvement there seems to have, and Europe's ability to largely defend itself. It would recognize Asia's growing economic importance and the fact that North Korea and China could pose greater threats to the United States than anything arising from the Middle East or Europe.

The third major option would focus on violent Islamic extremism and would be Middle East-centric. After all, organizations like al-Qaida and the so-called Islamic State are actually attacking the United States—China and North Korea are not. Containing or resolving the conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Libya would be important parts of this strategy. It might even include U.S. involvement in international peacekeeping and

stabilization missions if support to allies and direct strikes on extremist organizations are not enough.

The two additional strategies would include a Russia-focused one and one based on American disengagement from global security coupled with “offshore balancing

(<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>).” The time may come when the United States needs to adopt these options, but at least today they should be held on standby. While Russia’s use of proxy aggression in neighboring states and political warfare and information attacks elsewhere is deeply troubling and must be stopped by the next American president, Russia’s inherent weaknesses, particularly its economic shortcomings, relegate it to a second-tier threat over the long term.

The original Project Solarium was able to concentrate on a single security threat. In today’s more complex strategic environment, there are still other challenges that do not fit cleanly in any of the “3+2” options but are nonetheless important: containing Iran, finding a way to stabilize and disengage from Afghanistan, and deciding whether to participate in humanitarian interventions. Given this, a grand strategy emerging from a new Project Solarium cannot be as tightly focused as Eisenhower’s.

But this does not make it less important. There is a pressing need to reassess the fundamental organizing concepts of American security. It is impossible to refine the means of strategy—in particular determining how large the U.S. military should be and what it should do—without a working consensus on the fundamental concepts of American grand strategy. A new Project Solarium that would restore the badly needed conceptual clarity should be high on the next president’s to-do list.

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*([http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0044KMTLK/ref=as\\_li\\_tl?](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0044KMTLK/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B0044KMTLK&linkCode=as2&tag=worlpolirevi-20&linkId=KGH435FD2U6MHBSX))*

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*His weekly WPR column, Strategic Horizons (/authors/790/steven-metz), appears every Friday. You can follow him on Twitter @steven\_metz ([https://twitter.com/steven\\_metz](https://twitter.com/steven_metz)).*