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What is National Security Policy?

National security policy (NSP) is a framework for describing how a country provides security for the state and its citizens, and is often presented as an integrated document. For the purposes of this Backgrounder, NSP will refer to such an integrated document. This document can also be called a plan, strategy, concept or doctrine.

NSP has a present and future role, outlining the core interests of the nation and setting guidelines for addressing current and prospective threats and opportunities. Normally, NSPs are hierarchically superior to other subordinate security policies such as military doctrine, homeland security strategy, etc., which address national security as it concerns specific agencies or issues. It is also distinguished from these other policies by the range of subjects that it addresses, attempting to outline both internal and external threats. Finally, it seeks to integrate and coordinate the contributions of national security actors in response to the interests and threats deemed most important.

Some states, such as the UK, France and China, do not have a single, unified NSP document, but rely on defence policies or white papers that focus solely on national defence. Other states do not make public their policy documents, or do not have comprehensive written policies on security or defence.

Why do states need an NSP?

There are five main reasons for states to have an integrated and detailed NSP:

- to ensure that the government addresses all threats in a comprehensive manner
- to increase the effectiveness of the security sector by optimising contributions from all security actors
- to guide the implementation of policy
- to build domestic consensus
- to enhance regional and international confidence and cooperation

First, to be a comprehensive framework, NSPs require a thorough analysis of all threats to national security. Internal and external threats have long been addressed separately, but increasingly security policy includes a comprehensive evaluation of both the domestic and international environments. In creating such policies, the input of all security-relevant government actors should be solicited, and ideally from international and nongovernmental actors as well.

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Second, NSPs can help to harmonise the contributions of the growing number of security actors, including those at the national level, local government, the business community (for example, in the protection of vital infrastructure), various civil society organisations, as well as regional and international institutions. A centralised process of policy formulation that encompasses input from a variety of sources can help forge a common understanding of security.

Third, NSPs give policy guidance to the various actors involved in national security. NSPs provide benchmarks for aligning operational decisions with the short- and long-term goals of national policy. A centralised process allows for the optimal use of resources, helping to avoid discrepancy, redundancy and deficiency in drafting and implementation.

Fourth, NSPs ensure broad ownership of security policy by deepening discussion and cooperation across professional, departmental and party lines. This dialogue can help to form a consensus on core national values and interests and the threat spectrum challenging these values and interests.

Fifth, NSPs are confidence-building instruments at the regional and international levels. A coherent and transparent policy communicates the security concerns of a state to the international community, thus facilitating international understanding and cooperation.

What is the legal basis for an NSP?

Sometimes, an NSP is mandated by specific legislation. For instance, the United States requires the President to submit a national security strategy every year to the Congress, though in practice this does not always occur annually. In Latvia, the Parliament must approve an NSP written by the Cabinet and approved by the National Security Council every year. In other cases, the executive undertakes to produce a national security strategy on its own. In the Russian Federation, for instance, the National Security Council produces security strategies that are approved by the executive. In Austria, the Parliament established a National Security Council in 2001 that is mandated to guide national security policy, but not necessarily to produce an integrated NSP document (though this has been done).

How is an NSP structured?

Although NSPs vary from state to state, they tend to be a single document addressing at least three basic themes: the state's role in the international system, perceived domestic and international challenges and opportunities, and the responsibilities of implementing actors in addressing these challenges and opportunities.

The first theme seeks to define the state's vision of the international system, and the role that the state plays in that system. This requires taking into consideration the state's interests and values, governance structures and decisionmaking processes. It usually culminates in a long-term vision of where the state and society should stand in the future.

The second theme is an assessment of current and future threats and opportunities. In theory, these should include both internal and external threats, though in practice many NSPs focus on external threats and opportunities. Also addressed are political stances and preferences as they concern international security partners, which could also lead to the emergence of opportunities for cooperation.

The third theme describes each implementing actor's area of responsibility. This includes the type of security activity (such as homeland defence, intelligence, etc.) and the areas in which these actors have a mandate. Because in some countries the term 'national security' has a historical association with the over-involvement of security forces in domestic affairs, this can be controversial. Actor contributions are often described in detail, but usually very specific information such as force structure is left out or included in subordinate documents.

How is an NSP formulated?

NSP formulation follows a standard policy cycle spanning initiation, drafting, reconciliation and approval.

The review is nearly always **initiated** by the executive. In some cases, the legislature or standing groups on security issues may recommend a review of NSP. The process may vary from being annual or regular or, as in the case of Switzerland, only occasional.

The **drafting** body is also normally specified by the executive, and can be a standing committee or existing body, or can be ad hoc. In many cases, this is a special security council that advises the president (United States,

Austria, Russian Federation), but in other cases, it can be the cabinet (Latvia and Canada) or an ad hoc committee. This committee usually consults widely with governmental security actors such as ministries of defence, intelligence agencies, representatives of the armed forces, legislative committees and increasingly with ministries not traditionally associated with the security sector, such as those of agriculture, transport, health, immigration and financial management bodies. The committee may also consult with non-governmental actors, such as political parties, media, civil society and academia. Sometimes these groups merely offer feedback, but the committee often works to synthesise their various visions into a coherent approach to state security. The breadth of participation in the formulation of NSP is key to ensuring broad ownership of the policy, which can help enhance its implementation. In Switzerland, a two-phased approach was applied in producing its most recent NSP: first, a broad and inclusive socio-political consultation leading to a non-binding report to government with suggestions for the NSP; second, drafting by a governmental body that took this document into account when producing its own report.

Reconciliation is achieved by seeking inputs from various actors involved in the security sector during the drafting process and by circulating initial drafts of the legislation during the process, either internally, publically or by a combination of both.

Approval by the legislature or executive may be required. If the executive has initiated the review process, it is unlikely that it will be required to obtain legislative approval, but it may also choose to submit the NSP to the country's legislative body to secure its endorsement. Some parliaments may only take note of an NSP, as in Switzerland, while others may have the right to make substantive changes to the text.

What are the key challenges for an NSP?

First, NSPs must **balance openness and secrecy**. Some nations try to avoid this problem by using vague language (also known as "strategic ambiguity"), but this may reduce the effectiveness of the document. Others have both public and classified versions of the National Security Strategy. If NSP is a subject of public debate, however, its contents will

likely reflect general national security goals, and leave their implementation to subordinate doctrines or other planning mechanisms.

Second, some perceive a **conflict between the need to preserve freedom of action and limits** placed on the actions of leaders. For this reason, many nations prefer to address specific *issues* rather than specific *countries* in their NSPs, although in cases where the NSP is designed to send a clear signal to another power, it might be named.

Third, the need for NSP reviews must be **balanced against their cost** in both human and material terms. While reviews are necessary when important changes in the strategic environment occur or if current security policy is deemed inadequate, if they are mandated too frequently, this can put a strain on resources, particularly since good NSP requires the input of those officials who are involved in implementing policy.

Fourth, NSP must **balance public debate with the input of experts**. While public debate is necessary for ownership, if there is a perception that the document has become captive to political interests, this can undermine its utility.

What are the key questions for formulating effective national security policy?

- When should a review be initiated?
- What actors should be included in the review process?
- Is there an independent lead agency that facilitates and consolidates NSP input from working groups?
- How is national security defined? What are the current and likely future challenges to national security?
- What instruments are available for national security and what new instruments may be required?
- How does the NSP address the balance between transparency and the need to preserve confidentiality in areas vital to national security?
- Has a monitoring body been set up to review NSP? Is the monitoring body inclusive?
- What measures should be taken to disseminate the NSP and to make the public aware of its content?

How to implement an NSP

NSPs rarely offer solutions to specific security problems, since these documents are not detailed or rigid enough to provide for every contingency. Therefore, following approval, individual security actors are responsible for implementing the NSP, which will probably involve detailed capability assessments and policy reviews in each agency.

These may recommend the following structural changes:

Adaptation of existing policy instruments.

This can have implications for personnel levels, the geographic distribution of resources, procurement policies and a variety of other instruments. Any subordinate policies, such as national defence or military strategies, should be modified to correspond to the NSP.

Creation of new policy instruments. These can include oversight committees, inter-departmental working groups or other mechanisms.

On the national level, NSP implementation can be assisted by establishment of **standing groups** to monitor the way in which national security policy is executed, though some may view this as an impediment to efficient security decisionmaking. These groups evaluate NSP in the light of current capabilities and threat assessments. Some countries attribute this task to an institutionalised body such as the National Security Council; others foresee regular meetings by an ad hoc interdepartmental review group. Preferably, the monitoring bodies' composition and proceedings follow the same principles of inclusiveness, transparency, debate and consensus as the NSP review committees. Some monitoring bodies may propose an NSP review to the executive when they deem necessary.

Wrap-up: Principles for an effective and democratic NSP

The committee or body charged with drafting the NSP should observe the following principles:

Inclusiveness and responsiveness: Inclusive policy formulation is the best way to address fully the security concerns of state-level stakeholders and to reconcile these concerns with available means and capabilities. Non-governmental inputs must also be sought and addressed by NSP.

Debate and consensus: Debate and the search for consensus are essential to produce a broadly supported and effectively implemented NSP.

Broad consideration of threats: A wide range of threats should normally be considered, including those mentioned in the UN Report of the High Level Panel on Threats, Risks, and Opportunities: economic and social threats (including pandemics and natural and accidental disasters), interstate conflict, internal conflict, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and transnational crime.

Frank assessment of means: The NSP should evaluate the duties of different governmental bodies with respect to the threats identified, as well as current policies towards issues such as alliances, use of military force, WMD proliferation and the role of democracy and economic development in the nation's vision of security.

Transparency: A transparent process of formulation helps to prevent particular interests, such as individual ministries or security organs, from dominating the final product.

Constant monitoring and threat assessment: The compatibility between an existing NSP and the evolving national and international environment should be constantly monitored by a standing group. Monitoring bodies should follow the same principles as the review committees.

International considerations: Since states do not exist in isolation, no state can formulate a purely 'national' security policy. The state's membership in multi-national organisations or groups related to security or economics will have an influence on the formulation of the NSP.

Respect for international law: NSP should take into consideration the provisions of those international legal instruments to which the state adheres, as well as generally binding customary law.

Related issues

- Defense policy
- International security commitments
- Internal security institutions
- National interests
- Military command structure
- Non-defence ministries and the security sector
- Parliamentary oversight
- Standing groups on the security sector
- States of emergency

Further information

NSPs on the web:

Austria: Security and Defense Doctrine (2002). www.am.gov.lv/en/nato/basic/4534/

Canada: Securing an Open Society: The National Security Policy of Canada (2004). www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/docs/Publications/NatSecurnat/natsecurnat_e.pdf

Latvia: National Security Concept (2002). www.am.gov.lv/en/nato/basic/4534/

Switzerland: Security through Cooperation: Report of the Federal Council to the Federal Assembly on the Security Policy of Switzerland (1999). www.vbs-ddps.ch/internet/vbs/en/home.html

United States of America: The National Security Strategy of the United States (2002) www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf

Other countries with NSPs include Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Sierra Leone and Turkey. Both the EU and NATO have also developed security strategies or concepts.

Other resources:

Civilian Control or Civilian Command? DCAF Conference Paper www.dcaf.ch/publications/Working_Papers/121.pdf

Managing National Security Policy: The President and the Process. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press

The National Security Strategy: Documenting Strategic Vision. Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) monographs, US Army War College. www.carlisle.army.mil/ssi/pdf/PUB332.pdf

“A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility.” Report of the Secretary General’s High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change. www.un.org/secureworld/report2.pdf

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Other Backgrounders are available at www.dcaf.ch/publications/backgrounders

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