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The 2015 National Military Strategy: Background and Questions for Congress

Kathleen J. McInnis, Analyst in International Security (kmcinnis@crs.loc.gov, 7-1416)

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In June 2015, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued the most recent [United States National Military Strategy \(NMS\)](#). This NMS argues that "revisionist states" seeking to change the existing international order (such as Russia) and non-state actors (such as the Islamic State) are creating a strategic context whereby "global disorder has significantly increased, while some of our comparative military advantage has begun to erode." Of note, the NMS states—for the first time in a major strategy document produced in the past 20 years—that there is a distinct possibility that the United States may find itself at war with another great power, although it notes that the probability of that actually happening is "low but growing."

The Threat Environment

Like many other national strategy documents, the NMS describes a global environment marked by increasing interdependence, complexity, and the diffusion of information and technologies across state boundaries. In contrast to the [National Security Strategy](#) that was issued in February 2015 (see CRS Report R44023, [The 2015 National Security Strategy: Authorities, Changes, Issues for Congress](#), coordinated by Nathan J. Lucas), the NMS organizes threats to the United States into two primary categories: "revisionist" states and "violent extremist organizations" (VEO). With respect to "revisionist states," the NMS calls attention to the challenges posed by four different nations: Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China. Russia, it states, has demonstrated its willingness to redraw international boundaries and violate international law using military force. Further, the

NMS states that Iran is a state sponsor of terrorism that has undermined stability in Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. North Korea, according to the NMS, threatens its regional neighbors (including Japan and South Korea) with its production of nuclear weapons. Finally, the NMS argues that China's recent "land reclamation" (also referred to as "island building") activities in the South China Sea are destabilizing. With respect to Violent Extremist Organizations, the NMS points out that these actors utilize a combination of low-technology weaponry (such as suicide vests and improvised explosive devices) as well as sophisticated propaganda and messaging strategies to spread their influence.

While the NMS judges that the VEO threat is "immediate" due to the fact that they are currently destabilizing the Middle East, it also notes—for the first time in several decades—that the probability that the United States may find itself at war with another great power is "low but growing." The NMS also discusses "hybrid" warfare, whereby state and non-state actors (Russia and its Ukrainian proxies, for example) "blend techniques, capabilities, and resources to achieve their objectives." The ensuing ambiguity in the battle space makes it difficult for the United States and its allies to coordinate responses.

National Military Priorities

In order to respond to the emerging threat environment, the NMS prioritizes the following tasks for the U.S. military:

- Maintain a secure and effective nuclear deterrent. This includes investing in sustaining and modernizing the deterrent and improving command and control of nuclear forces.
- Provide for military defense of the homeland. This includes interdicting adversaries' attack preparations abroad, defending against ballistic missiles and cyber-attacks.
- Defeat an adversary. This refers to the projection of military power to compel an adversary to cease hostilities. Interestingly, the NMS refers to *an* adversary rather than defeating *adversaries* generally, which may have force planning implications.
- Provide a global, stabilizing presence. The military will continue providing stability around the world to promote economic growth and regional integration and to be better positioned to respond to emerging crises.
- Combat terrorism. The military will assist local forces as they work to defeat terrorists in their respective countries through providing training, precision strike, logistical and intelligence support, as well as interdict and disrupt threats to the U.S. homeland.
- Counter weapons of mass destruction. The military will work with partners to locate, track, interdict, and secure (or destroy) weapons of mass destruction.
- Deny an adversary's objectives. By maintaining highly ready, highly capable forces both at home and abroad, as well as pre-positioning equipment, the United States can quickly respond to crises and help prevent further escalation of conflicts.
- Respond to crises and conduct limited contingency operations. This refers to

maintaining the United States' ability to quickly partner with local allies in order to flow in forces in a crisis.

- Conduct military engagement and security cooperation. This refers to military activities designed to train, equip, and otherwise build the military capacity of other countries.
- Conduct stability and counterinsurgency operations. The military will retain the capability to perform these missions, albeit in a limited capacity.
- Provide support to civil authorities. This refers to the ability of the military to help respond to emergencies in the United States, whether they be man-made or natural disasters.
- Conduct humanitarian assistance and disaster response. This refers to the military's ability to help efforts to alleviate human suffering in the wake of crises including earthquakes, tsunamis, and so on.

Rather than emphasize a platform or capability *per se* to accomplish the above, the NMS instead stresses activities designed to improve the U.S. military's agility. These include streamlining processes, finding efficiencies, improving the military's ability to operate with others, and developing military leaders capable of navigating an increasingly dynamic strategic environment.

Considerations for Congress

In scrutinizing the NMS, Congress may wish to consider the following questions:

- What are the resource implications of the NMS? The NMS states that it will focus on finding greater efficiencies within the military, but the document does not appear to link military priorities to specific programmatic or financial requirements. Have priorities for the joint force been selected appropriately?
- What are the force structure implications of hybrid warfare? Does the Department of Defense have the capabilities necessary, in appropriate numbers, to operate in ambiguous threat environments? How does DOD support other departments in hybrid scenarios?
- Is the Department of Defense properly organized to simultaneously grapple with the re-emergence of geopolitics on the one hand, and decentralized, non-state extremist organizations on the other? How might the department be restructured to incentivize agility? What, exactly, does DOD mean by "agility?"



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