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What 'Security' Means Now

Outmoded concepts hamstring policymaking

By Peter Tarnoff
and Gregory F. Treverton

OLD phrases, like old policies, die hard after the end of the cold war. Take "national security," an expression that hardly existed before 1945, but, once canonized in the National Security Act of 1947 that created the National Security Council, was everywhere.

Virtually every American initiative in foreign affairs for more than 40 years was taken in the name of "national security." The presidential assistant for national security affairs (or national security adviser) came to rival the secretary of state for influence with successive presidents.

Today there is a frenzy of activity aimed at trying to redefine "national security" — including at the Council on Foreign Relations. The Soviet menace has all but disappeared. What, we all ask, are the new threats to national security? Politicians courting voters and institutes courting funders search frantically for places under

some new "national security" tent, however configured.

Instead of these semantic contortions, it would be better to honorably retire the term "national security," which has come to mean defense against external threats framed primarily in strategic terms and freighted with military baggage. Today this is an unnecessarily restrictive, and potentially damaging, way for the United States to think about its new international responsibilities. If, for example, America's drug problem is brought under the "national security" tent, it is tempting to view the problem as a threat from abroad against which the US military can be of major help — impulses that mispose the threat and deform the response.

Economic and environmental threats — part international, part internal but both high on the list of public worries — can be similarly distorted if they are viewed through the lens of "national security." Because more Americans now feel threatened by the Japanese economy than by the Kremlin's nuclear arsenal should not imply simply that the former has replaced the latter atop the na-

tional security agenda. Any national strategy for rebuilding economic competitiveness must integrate domestic and foreign components — a task for which the traditional national security perspective is too confining.

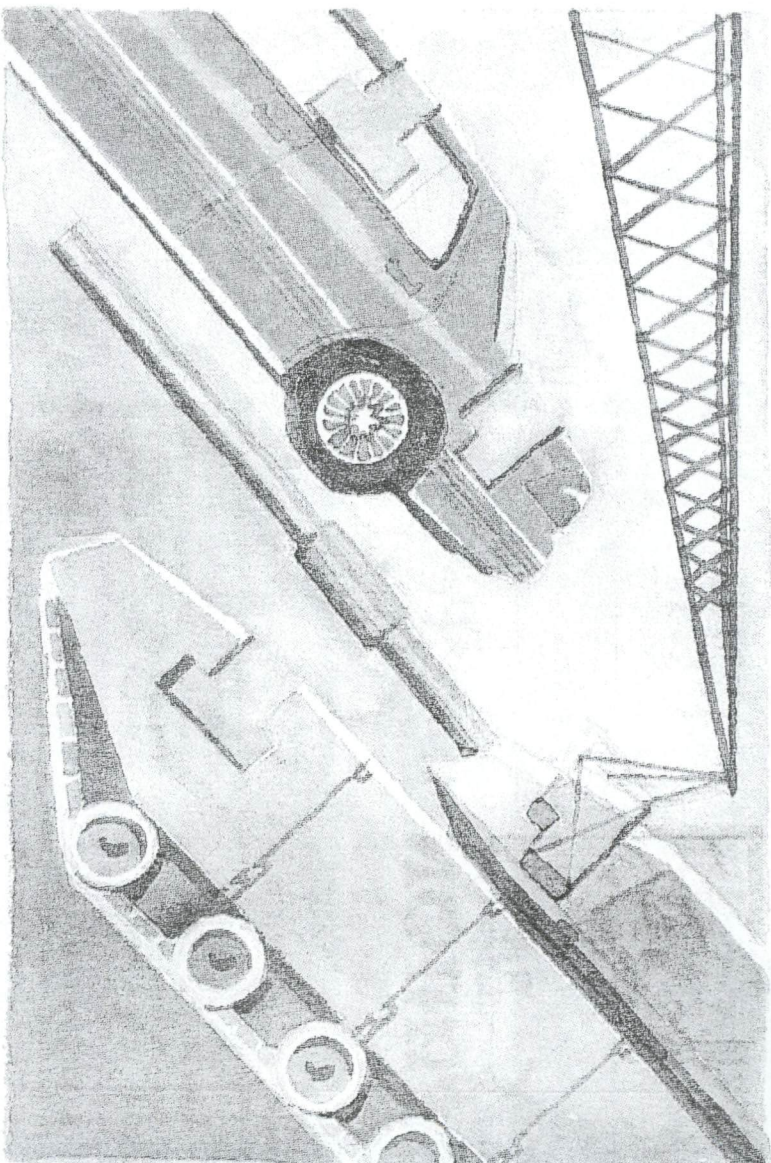
Moreover, "national security" as an operational credo encourages administrations and Congress to keep separate the domestic and foreign strands of national policy. For decades, segmented bureaucracies have addressed different pieces of policy, with pride of place given to "national security" defined as foreign and de-

fense policies. This rigid separation has contributed in part to the surge of unhappiness with the president for spending too much time on America's place in the world and not enough on the condition of Americans at home.

Bridging this gap between the country's foreign and domestic needs is a matter both of perceptions and policies. The administration and Congress could begin by modifying the governmental structures that perpetuate the tendency to deal piecemeal with national issues. When John Sununu resigned, the president

missed an opportunity to integrate his "national security" and "domestic" staffs under a single assistant for national policy, separate from his chief of staff. The mission for this assistant and the combined staff would be to design national policies. They should have free rein to range all across the expanse of issues — public and private, domestic and foreign — that must be weighed in the making of national policies.

It is not that all the old "national security" issues have disappeared. Arms control, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and regional conflict — to name just a few — will continue to require attention. But even these can no longer be regarded in splendid "national security" isolation, for they now figure



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It is not that all the old "national security" issues have disappeared. Arms control, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and regional conflict – to name just a few – will continue to require attention. But even these can no longer be regarded in splendid "national security" isolation, for they now figure in the stormy public debate over budgetary priorities, industrial policies, education, and federal funding for research. During the Gulf war, Mr. Bush did not make the case for an American military commitment solely on "national security" grounds; public support for the war stayed high in part because oil was at stake and foreign governments paid the bill. At one point, the administration advanced "jobs" as the reason for US troops in the Gulf.

We will have a better chance of coping with old and new challenges if "national security" is retired from our lexicon. Americans will work harder for a national purpose if the White House and Congress offer a national strategy and a national agenda reflecting the nation's interests – setting aside the old "national security" trumped used to summon the spirit to action and sacrifice as in the past.

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