Virtual Event | Insights on the Upcoming National Security Strategy from Michael R. Pompeo and Nadia Schadlow

TRANSCRIPT
Discussion..................................................................................................................................................2

- Michael R. Pompeo, Hudson Institute Distinguished Fellow and former Secretary of State
- Nadia Schadlow, Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute, and former Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategy

Disclaimer: This transcript is based off of a recorded video conference and breaks in the stream may have resulted in mistranscriptions in the text.

A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/2093-virtual-event-insights-on-the-upcoming-national-security-strategy-from-michael-r-pompeo-and-nadia-schadlow-32022

About Hudson Institute: Founded in 1961 by strategist Herman Kahn, Hudson Institute challenges conventional thinking and helps manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary studies in defense, international relations, economics, health care, technology, culture, and law.

Hudson seeks to guide public policy makers and global leaders in government and business through a vigorous program of publications, conferences, policy briefings, and recommendations.
Nadia Schadlow:

Well, it's great to be here this afternoon with former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. I had the pleasure of working with Secretary Pompeo for a couple of years in the former administration. I'm Nadia Schadlow, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and a former deputy national security advisor for strategy. So we're here today to talk about a document that's not yet out, which makes it a little bit hard, and maybe even in Washington, a little bit unfair [to discuss]. But nonetheless, that never stops us from offering comments. We're here to talk about the Biden administration's National Security Strategy, which is due out pretty soon. Their interim national security strategy was published in March of 2021, over a year ago. About a year ago, exactly, actually. And it did include some themes, which already hinted at a bit of a difference from the Trump Administration's 2017 National Security Strategy, which the Secretary and I worked on.

So I thought we'd talk about that a little bit and some of the areas where the Secretary thinks the Biden administration is probably rethinking some of its assumptions and where it might be going. So let's start a little bit with that. A key theme of the 2017 Strategy was, as most people know, the nature of competition and how competition is important in the world, specifically, great power competition. We prioritized China, but also spoke about Russia and Iran. Maybe Mr. Secretary, could you tell us a little bit about your thinking about was that the right approach and where you think the Biden administration is in terms of its views on competition?

Michael Pompeo:

Well, Nadia, thanks. It's good to be with you again. You're right, I did work on this. But you were the primary author and you did an amazing job. I was incredibly proud of that product. Not only the substance of it, but it was really important, we got it out quickly. And this matters as you get four years and to wait as long as now the Biden administration has to actually put out their strategy, they've eaten into a substantial piece of the entire national security team's capacity to work against the problem set that's identified as that strategy. It's not just a document. It is the referential touchstone, since what, 1987, since these first were actually prepared. It's the referential touchstone that you build out, appropriations processes, all the strategies that the Defense Department, State Department put together. These documents matter.

So the fact we got ours out in such a timely way, in such a substantive way, so different than the one that had been prepared before us is something I'm still proud of. Look, that really gets to what I suspect the Biden administration will do that's different. They want to round the edges. And this matters as you get four years and to wait as long as now the Biden administration has to actually put out their strategy, they've eaten into a substantial piece of the entire national security team's capacity to work against the problem set that's identified as that strategy. It's not just a document. It is the referential touchstone, since what, 1987, since these first were actually prepared. It's the referential touchstone that you build out, appropriations processes, all the strategies that the Defense Department, State Department put together. These documents matter.

So the fact we got ours out in such a timely way, in such a substantive way, so different than the one that had been prepared before us is something I'm still proud of. Look, that really gets to what I suspect the Biden administration will do that's different. They want to round the edges. And they will have a different set of priorities than we did. We were the first administration to identify in decades, and this isn't partisan, to identify the Chinese Communist Party as the single greatest competitor. We used the word "competitor." I would use the word "adversary" today if I were writing this myself. The single biggest challenge to the American way of life. I hope this administration will keep that at the center. It doesn't mean there aren't other challenges that one has to confront. But it is, and you can even see this even in Ukraine today, the Chinese Communist Party itself understands power deeply and they respect only power.
Nadia Schadlow:

Do you think the Biden administration will, how do you think they'll balance their concerns about China with climate? The interim strategy noted that China was a strategic competitor. But also at the same time, really left the door open for a lot of cooperation, especially in areas of climate. How do you interpret that approach?

Michael Pompeo:

I think President Biden himself is going to have to weigh in on this. You can see inside their list of stars that are trying to align around the president, there are very different views on this. I take two points as what I would expect. Not too terribly long ago, President Biden was with a group of soldiers. He told those soldiers, uniformed military personnel, that the greatest security risk to the United States of America was climate change. I think that's very telling about what he personally believes. Second, the senior administration official that met with Xi Jinping first and with Vladimir Putin first was Secretary Kerry. Not Secretary Blinken, not Secretary Austin, not the President himself, the climate guy. I actually think that Xi and Putin and the Ayatollah and Chairman Kim all took note of that priority. That is an enormous mistake.

Nadia Schadlow:

Right. The kind of the desire to compartmentalize. I was struck by a few days before Secretary Kerry had been in Europe and I think four days before the Russian invasion, he was expressing concern and disappointment about what could happen to the climate agenda on the eve of a major military invasion. And that struck me as just kind of discontinuous, shocking. But speaking of compartmentalize, Russia and Iran, so there's a major war in Europe caused by Russia and they're still at the table. Can you tell me a little bit about what you think about that? Sort of, what are they thinking about that?

Michael Pompeo:

So it'll be interesting to see what they put in their National Security Strategy about this. They, in their interim document with respect to the Middle East, they took a fundamentally different approach than the Trump administration did. Our pillars were this: We had a good, strong security ally in the state of Israel. And we were going to do all the things we needed to do to make sure that connectivity, economic, diplomatic, militarily was there. Second, we understood Iran was the primary sponsor of terror in the region, the primary force for instability in the region and so we were going to do our best to deny them resources to foment their terror and to build out their nuclear weapons program.

And then finally, our third piece was really, how can we find allies and friends in the Gulf states? How can we work alongside them to deliver a more prosperous, more stable Middle East, so we don't have to send twenty, forty, a hundred thousand American kids to go fight and die there someday? The Biden administration has flipped a switch. They're sitting at the table today with the Russians. I mean, it's hard to even say that sentence with a straight face. You have Vladimir Putin killing women and children in Ukraine. And sitting to the right of Robert Malley, the American special envoy to Iran, sitting to his right is a Russian guy working ostensibly against somebody on the other side of the table. That's not strategy. That's ignorance.
And it is naive and dangerous, most importantly to the United States. We think about this as a Middle Eastern challenge. But this is a real risk to the United States of America. We will be drawn into a series of cascading security challenges if we don’t understand that there is a bright line in between authoritarian regimes, dictators and those of us who believe in the rule of law and sovereign nations.

**Nadia Schadlow:**

And that actually goes a little bit to your National Interest article, which I recently read from January, where you articulated an idea about a kind of strategic defense initiative for the 21st century, where power was really a key part of it, was a pillar of it. I think what struck me about the Biden administration’s interim guidance was this phrase, "leading with diplomacy," disassociated from the underpinnings of power. Diplomacy is a tool. It's just a tool. But it’s based on fundamentals of power, whether it’s economic, military, or technological.

**Michael Pompeo:**

As someone whose role was as America's most senior diplomat, one might say, "No, no, no, it was me. I was all powerful." No, the truth of the matter is it was really good that we had a powerful military behind us. It was even more important that we had a powerful American economy behind us. It was yet, again, important that American energy was capable of delivering good outcomes for people across the world. Those were the things, those were the tools, the hard power that gave me the opportunity to sit across the table, to actually engage in a way that could get a beneficial outcome for the United States of America. To walk away from those, to not be prepared to have that capability so that you can demonstrate your will not to use them, is how good diplomatic outcomes are reached around the world.

You can see what happens, I mean, Ukraine is a perfect exemplar. When you have a president who has spent his time talking about things that we won’t do, making very clear there are certain limits to American power when you have a president who apologizes for the United States America, when you have a president who says, "We’re going to shut down this important American economic tool," our capability to deliver mostly natural gas, but crude oil as well, around the world at a very affordable price so that people in Nigeria, or people in Bulgaria, or people in Malaysia can actually turn the lights on affordably in their country or drive their vehicles, those are destabilizing activities. And the bad guys will see that as weakness and drive a truck through it.

My piece was aimed at going back to some of the central ideas that you knew from your time and service as well, about how strength actually delivers really peaceful outcomes for the entire world. And a piece of it was conventional, the piece that was talking about the strategy that we wrote in the Trump administration. It talked about nuclear deterrence as well. What does that model look like when you no longer have just the Soviet Union and the Americans? We did our darndest to get the Chinese weapons tucked under that idea of how do we negotiate to a place where the world doesn't have to sit under nuclear risk. As we watch Vladimir Putin threaten the world with nuclear weapons, we know this is more important than ever.

**Nadia Schadlow:**

What is your view of arms control on the Chinese, because you touched upon that in your piece as well? What's your sense about, can we really be... I mean, realistically, is that a framework that could work?
Michael Pompeo:

It could. It will take the Chinese willingness to engage. We would remind them, they wanted to claim superpower status. Superpowers don't threaten the world with annihilation. Superpowers engage in rational conversations about how we can make sure that these most dangerous weapons are never actually employed. And so we wanted them to be part of this conversation. They would always say, "Well, there are other players besides Russia, China, and the United States." We would say, "Great. Let's make sure that the world is working along the same central thesis." Reagan put some good arms control arrangements in place that just took down the threat some. We could do that again, but it's no longer the case that an agreement just between two countries is possible to achieve those kinds of threat reduction.

Nadia Schadlow:

So that might be an opportunity as the Biden administration is rewriting the strategy and thinking about opportunities going forward, arms control being one.

Michael Pompeo:

Yeah, definitely. The Chinese resisted this. Their program was still smaller, they said, less advanced. That may or may not be completely accurate. Whatever stage their program is, it's imperative that we bring them inside this discussion so that we are at least transparent about what each side has. We want to make sure there's no miscalculation. This is very dangerous stuff.

Nadia Schadlow:

Do you think they'll see other opportunities? I mean, one I was thinking about was really reaffirming the importance of regional balances of power. That was another element of the 2017 strategy of recognizing how important regions are and the economic, political, and military balancing that needs to go on in regions. What we're seeing now, in some ways, and with the Russian invasion, was how out of sync that balance was. Russia had been focused on its military power for years, while European allies were decreasing theirs.

Michael Pompeo:

Right. Yes. I think the whole world can see this plainly. I think this will matter. I think the Europeans will, I was going to say get religion, but more importantly, get power back in their central understandings of how it is they can provide security for their own people. Nadia, I do worry. By the way, I was just in Taiwan. And I was in Singapore on that same trip. I think they're watching this very tentatively as well. They can see that they're going to have to step up their capacity to make sure that they aren't the next victim of an autocratic leader who decides aggression is the solution to all that ails. But also, one of the things that's on my mind, when you talk about strategies, you're not talking about next week, or next month, or even next year. You're thinking about trajectories measured in decades. I pray that when this moment passes, whenever Putin settles in for whatever the outcome is, is that Europe won't forget.

They forgot when they took one-fifth of Ukraine. When they took Crimea, everybody put sanctions in place and then said, "Let's go meet in Minsk," and did almost nothing. And the Europeans did very little
to secure their own freedom. I pray that when this moment has passed us, that this won't have been ephemeral. This call to arms, this desire to spend two or three percent of their GDP to secure their own freedom won't be a passing moment. It takes leaders, Nadia. It takes leaders who are prepared to say, "Here's our strategy. Here's how we're going to deliver this. And this is what this means to our nation. Whether you're Belgium, or Switzerland, or Vietnam, this is what this means to the people of our nation. And we are not going to sit at risk from the Chinese Communist Party or Vladimir Putin."

**Nadia Schadlow:**

Yeah, certainly we've seen with the Germans, that it's been a remarkable shift. And now, the key will be, is it sustainable over the long term, with the leaders being key? But before we wrap, I would like to get your sense of what do you think China is learning from the current situation? And how does that apply to how they're thinking about Taiwan?

**Michael Pompeo:**

Before I say what I think they're learning, I want to talk about what, I'm pretty sure, they're not learning. They're not learning that their vision for global hegemony is at risk. I can't see anything that will cause Xi Jinping to change his vision for being the Middle Kingdom, to be this global hegemonic power. I don't think whatever problems Vladimir Putin may be having in conquering Kyiv, I don't think this is going to change Xi Jinping's vision at all. My guess is he's going back to his generals and his admirals and saying, "Are we really as good as you told me we are? Are these programs as real? Can we deliver them? We want to train more. We want to do more." I think his use of hard power and their capacity will only be encouraged by this. He'll see that no, we not only have to have it, we have to be effective in our ability to execute it. What does that mean for Taiwan?

**Nadia Schadlow:**

So he might be biding his time.

**Michael Pompeo:**

He may step back for just a moment. And he may conclude that he can capture Taiwan or bring Taiwan into the Chinese orbit without use of kinetic power, without use of true hard power. But he might not. He might decide to circle an island to blockade a particular set of activities. It would be a path that was somewhere in the middle and would still achieve his ultimate objective. His tactics may well change, but his objective, I can't imagine would be altered. When I was in Taiwan, I think they knew that, too. Their ask of me was to make sure that when I came back we talked about the things that America could do to help them with their regional friends and partners. The Japanese, the Australians, the South Koreans ought to be part of this, too, to build out a collective security set of understandings for them.

And to make sure that the Taiwanese have the capacity to defend themselves, to make sure that Xi Jinping's calculus included an enormous cost should he decide to move. This is the way they were thinking about it. I share that view. We've had this idea of ambiguity for the United States policy in Taiwan for a long time. And we've spoken out of both sides of our mouth. My view is that what we saw in Ukraine was being in the middle is really dangerous. Being in an ambiguous place is really, really dangerous. Authoritarians will use that ambiguity against you every time. We ought to acknowledge that
Taiwan is an independent nation. It's not part of the Chinese Communist Party. Why not just acknowledge that simple fact? Everyone will say that it is independent, but no one wants to recognize it. We ought to simply do that. I think that would provide the clarity that would reduce risk for the people of Taiwan.

Nadia Schadlow:

That would be interesting to see if the Biden administration will take that to heart in their National Security Strategy.

Michael Pompeo:

You would need be prepared to help the Taiwanese truly defend themselves. And that includes not only weapon systems. It includes intelligence sharing. It includes all the trainings to make sure they're capable of using them. And then it would mean building out this alliance. Not every southeast country will say this publicly, but privately they will all say that this demands not American soldiers, and sailors, and boots on the ground. It means America's know-how and wisdom and a strategic understanding that's prepared to support them when the moment strikes.

Nadia Schadlow:

Right. But that's sustainable.

Michael Pompeo:

That is sustainable over the long haul.

Nadia Schadlow:

Yeah. You can't develop capabilities overnight.

Michael Pompeo:

No. You've been down this path. These are years-long, in some cases, decades-long when it comes to your nuclear deterrent force. Certainly decades long. We're flying airplanes that are 50 years old. We've got ground base missile systems that are ancient. It is time.

Nadia Schadlow:

Right. Well, as we wrap, I'd like to wrap on a high note and just ask you, so what were some of your favorite moments as Secretary? And if you had any advice to give Secretary Blinken, what would that be?

Michael Pompeo:

Secretary Blinken will find his own way. I don't want to give him any public advice. I was really proud of the work we did to identify the Chinese Communist Party as this central challenge, not just a military challenge, but one that's inside the gates here at home, where we disrupted one of the largest spy
operations in the history of the United States being run out of the Chinese Consulate in Houston, Texas. We were serious about protecting the American people from the economic predation that they'd engaged in. And while there was still a lot of work to do, I think we changed course there. The Abraham Accords are a historic, good thing. They're not going backwards.

People in Bahrain, people in the Emirates, people in Israel can say, "Hey, my life is better because of this." But it took some really remarkable leaders in President Trump, Prime Minister Netanyahu, the Crown Prince and the Emirate's leadership throughout in Bahrain to break glass and take that step forward. We were also incredibly diligent about getting Americans home when they were held hostage. I'm really proud of the work we did there as well. We didn't get everything right. We didn't get all the way home with Chairman Kim. He still has his nuclear weapons program. But we made clear to him there were limits. And we made clear to the Iranians that we were going to make sure they never got a weapon, too. If you said, "What are the things that you're most proud of?" Those might be the touchstones.

**Nadia Schadlow:**

Those are great. Well, thank you.

**Michael Pompeo:**

Thank you very much, Nadia.

**Nadia Schadlow:**

Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Thanks.

**Michael Pompeo:**

Great to be with you.

**Nadia Schadlow:**

Thank you.