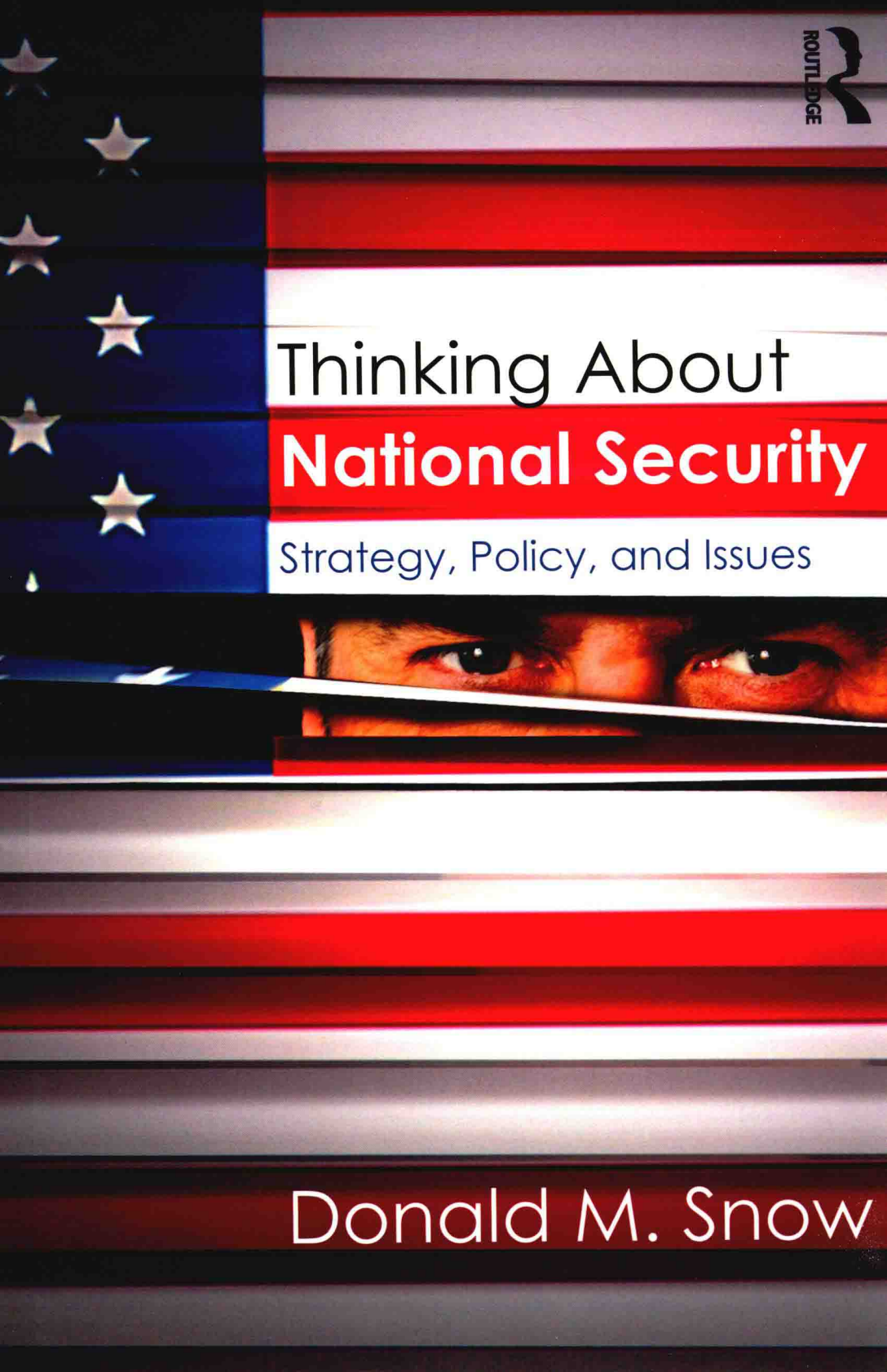
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Thinking About National Security

Perhaps the most basic national security question that U.S. leaders and the body politic continuously face is where and under what circumstances to consider and in some cases resort to the use of armed force to ensure the country's safety and well-being. The question is perpetual—but the answer is not. This insightful text helps students make sense of the ever-changing environment and factors that influence disagreement over national security risks and policy in the United States.

The book takes shape through a focus on three considerations: strategy, policy, and issues. Snow explains the range of plans of action that are possible and resources available for achieving national security goals, as well as the courses of action for achieving those goals in the context of a broad range of security problems that must be dealt with. However, there is little agreement among policymakers on exactly what is the nature of the threats that the country faces. Snow helps readers frame the debate by suggesting some of the prior influences on risk-assessment, some of the current influences on national security debates, and suggestions for how future strategy and policy may be shaped.

Donald M. Snow is professor emeritus of political science at the University of Alabama, where he specialized in international relations, national security, and foreign policy. He has also served as visiting professor at the U.S. Air, Army, and Naval War Colleges and the U.S. Air Command and Staff College.

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Introduction

Where We Are Now

The major national security question that always faces the country is where and under what circumstances the United States must consider and in some cases resort to the use of armed force to ensure its safety and well-being. It is arguably the most basic question with which any national government deals: it is not clear what good a government is that cannot protect its people from harm, ultimately death. It is also a perpetual question: the problem of national security never goes away.

The answer to the question, however, changes with time and circumstance. Sometimes the answer seems obvious and clear enough to virtually everyone that there is essential agreement both on what the problems (usually expressed as threats) are and what must be done about them. Such situations, however, occur relatively rarely and are generally limited to times of great and obvious peril. The declaration of war on the United States by Germany and Japan in 1941 and the recognition of the existential threat that Soviet nuclear-tipped rockets highlighted during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and afterward are examples of extraordinary circumstances that produced a virtual unanimity of purpose around the dictates of national security.

Most of the time, such consensus does not exist, and the result is some level of disagreement within the body politic and among political leaders about the answer to the national security question. Normally, those periods are associated with less compelling, more unambiguous threats to the national existence and appropriate responses to them. In simplest terms, that is the condition in which the United States finds itself today. The most basic fact of the matter is that although the national security question may be perpetual, the answer is not: it is a variable that changes as the environment becomes different.

Introducing some of the factors that influence the current disagreement over national security policy and the possible range of solutions in the current environment are the purposes of this volume. It approaches this task through several lenses suggested in the title. Part of its framework

derives from the question of U.S. national security *strategy*. This broadly used term has its genesis in military affairs (the basis of the word strategy comes from the Greek word for "generalship"), but it has been appropriated by numerous other disciplines, notably business. As used here, the term refers to the broadest level of application, sometimes called "grand national strategy" (see Dennis M. Drew and Donald M. Snow, *Making 21st Century Strategy*) and refers to *a plan of action for achieving goals and resources for particular goals*, in this case national security.

A closely related concept is *policy*, defined here as *a course of action adopted or proposed by a government* to achieve strategically determined goals. Policies implement strategy by providing direction and substance to responses to strategic plans and especially challenges to them. These challenges normally come in the form of threats to interests the state has that are expressed in grand strategy. The results are policy *issues, problems with multiple policy alternatives*, among which national security concerns must be reconciled.

This process of translating strategy to policy applied to issues is relatively straightforward when there is broad agreement about the nature of the threat the country faces. World War II strategy and policies were directed at defeating fascism. The only major issue was in what order the major fascist states should be dispatched. Similarly, the Cold War focused on containing communism. There was consensus on these needs, and the result was widespread agreement on the general orientation (or *paradigm*) for dealing with it. With the partial exception of terrorism, there is no current overarching threat to provide such unity and thus direction for strategy, policy, and issue responses. The search for a new, options-clarifying paradigm is also part of the task of this volume.

One useful way to think about national security problems in need of solution is captured in the concept of *risk*. A common dictionary definition of risk is the "chance of harm or loss." Synonyms include hazard, peril, and jeopardy. So stated, the concept seems comparatively benign, because it does not include any assessment of the extent or gravity of risks one might encounter. In some cases, risks are minor and tolerable. There is some risk of getting a paper cut from turning the pages in this book, for instance, but neither the chance of this happening nor the consequences are particularly severe.

National security risks, on the other hand, can both be grave and have enormous potential consequences, and are thus of a different order of magnitude and concern. The possibility of national extinction as a result of an all-out Soviet nuclear attack against the United States was a grave and alarming risk to the American public brought home in 1962 during the Cuban missile crisis, and the brief confrontation between Russia and the United States in May 2014 over Russian actions in Ukraine was a reminder that this potential peril was still at least a distant possibility. A major difference between national security and other forms of risk is in the potential consequences.

These two instances provide a useful benchmark about the pervasive nature and impact of risk in national security. In 1962, the Soviet "missiles of October" (to borrow the title of Robert Smith Thompson's 1992 book) seemed an imminent and very deadly source of national and personal jeopardy, and the reaction to it helped congeal a national security paradigm and strategy for the Cold War (discussed in Chapter 4). In 2014, the danger of nuclear war seemed sufficiently far-fetched that hardly anyone took the physical risk seriously, and the outcome did nothing to relieve the general national disagreement about national security policy. A paradigm congealed around one threat, but not in today's environment. President Obama captured this salient difference in his address to the graduating cadets at West Point on May 28, 2014: "The odds of a direct threat against us by any nation are low," he said, "and do not come close to the dangers we faced during the Cold War." Situations change, and policy must change with them.

Risk can be thought of as consisting of two basic components: threats and capabilities. I have reduced the relationship between the two concepts to an intuitive, if not precisely mathematical formula (in *National Security for a New Era*, fifth edition) where Risk = Threat − Capability. Generally speaking, threats are promises to do something harmful in the absence of compliance with them, and they are made by or toward adversaries. There are a wide variety of threats and consequences of their realization, and they are the basic "stuff" with which national security deals. The purpose of national security policy is to negate or neutralize the most important threats so that the harm they promise does not occur or is mitigated.

The problem with threats is that they are both variable and subjective. Variability means they tend to change across time and circumstance, so that solving today's threats may solve current problems, but does not mean there will not be new (or even returned) issues with which one will have to deal in the future. The problem is perpetual. Subjectivity means that everyone is not equally affected physically or psychologically by particular threats: what is frightening to some (and fear is one emotion threats are intended to engender) does not necessarily frighten someone else as much or even at all. Thus, threats are matters of disagreement.

The second element in the risk "formula" is capability. For this purpose, capability is defined as the ability to negate or control threats—to make them less threatening or non-threatening. Operationally, what to do about threats is the problem of national security policy, which includes the consideration or actual use of military force as the means to reduce national risk.

This is all conceptually fairly neat and simple, but in actual application, it is not. If the answer to the national security question is risk reduction, the question is what threatens security (creates risk) and must be contained if the national security is to be maintained. The risk formula can be rephrased, where risk equals "what needs to be done to secure the country?" (threats) minus "what is the country able and willing to do to reduce

risk?" (capability). The variability of threats—few Americans had given much thought to international terrorism before September 11, 2001—and their subjectivity—how big and what kind of threat does terrorism represent?—demonstrate the major source of policy disagreement.

Particularly in the post-Iraq and -Afghanistan era, the exact nature of threat and what is necessary to deal with it are major questions with which policymakers must struggle. Americans are all concerned about terrorism, but they differ in the degree and intensity of their fear of this ongoing threat. Partly as a result, they also disagree both on what the country can do to negate or lessen the threat (reduce risk) and about what the country ought to do in different circumstances. These disagreements provide the yeast for a lively ongoing debate over national security policy.

It is the purpose of this volume to explore some of the factors that have been, are, and presumably will be parts of the ongoing debate. The purpose of these discussions is not to "solve" the problems by offering bold or innovative solutions, because doing so would be both presumptuous and probably extraordinarily ethereal. Rather, the intent is to help put something of a frame around the general debate by suggesting some of the prior influences on the situation, some of the current influences on the debate which may affect both its present and future status, and to offer a few suggestions about how that future may be shaped.

The text is divided into two parts. Part I: Context examines how the United States got to the policy position in which it now finds itself. It consists of four chapters, each of which looks at a different aspect of the environmental mix as it has evolved. Chapter 1, "U.S. Policy in Transition," argues that two major categories of factors largely shaping the situation come from the international environment: threats and opportunities that have arisen and to which the United States has responded; and the domestic environment in terms of changing capabilities and perceptions about when those capabilities should be employed. It examines in particular how uniquely American influences have a distinctive impact on how this country sees the world and its place in it. Chapter 2, "War... What Is It Good For?" examines how attitudes and circumstances about the utility of force have evolved. Chapter 3, "Humanitarian Intervention?" analyzes how contemporary rationales for using force are influenced by humanitarian concerns and how those changes affect support for the use of force. Chapter 4, "The Cold War Paradigm," focuses on the content and impact of the Cold War consensus on national security and it still influences American strategic attitudes and structures.

Part II: Influences consists of three chapters that look at aspects of the current environment that affect what the United States will do in the national security environment in the upcoming years. Chapter 5, "Factors in the New Environment," examines some dynamics that will help form parameters in the near future that are not always included in standard discussions. These include limits deriving from perceptions about recent

past American military activities, the ambivalent impact of the fruits of military technology (drones in particular), and military manpower in light of recent experiences. Chapter 6, "The Syrian Microcosm," focuses on the American decision not to involve itself with active armed forces in the Syrian civil war and what kind of precedent that may set for the future. Chapter 7, "Paradigm for a New Era," raises the question of whether American national security policy is adequately served by the conceptual framework it inherited from the Cold War period and whether a new paradigm is needed. It also raises some elements that might be included in such a reconstruction.

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Part I
Context

1 U.S. Policy in Transition

At the most basic conceptual level, national security is not all that complicated. Most national security problems can basically be understood and analyzed with principal reference to three core concepts suggested in the Introduction. National security issues can sometimes seem perplexing and unfathomable, but centering discussions on these basic notions allows a manageable conceptual economy and approach to the national security predicament.

This simplicity can be both beguiling and misleading. A good bit of the contextual setting of real life national security analysis tends to be either very technical (the detailed lethal characteristics of one's own and adversaries' weapons capabilities, for instance) or clandestine (such as intelligence analyses of adversary intent in particular situations) or both. While there are always important complicating influences that cannot be known or easily fathomed by the lay person, this should not obscure the fact that the basic dynamics of the national security equation can almost always be reduced to the core ideas. Because the devil is usually in the details, the average citizen may be at a disadvantage reaching detailed judgments in particular situations; it does *not* mean that citizens cannot reach sound judgments on core concerns. Those who suggest (and there are many of them) that national security judgments are beyond the grasp of the interested citizen are simply wrong or have some personal agenda that is served by shielding matters from public scrutiny.

The contemporary environment in which national security operates is highly contentious, largely on two grounds. The first and overarching source of disagreement stems from the general malaise of American politics. Among the consequences of that pathology is a tendency to polarize and make partisan all issues regardless of content. The area of national security is not exempt from the adversarial personalization and polarity of the public on all issues. Matters such as the ongoing controversy over the killing of American diplomats and intelligence officers in Benghazi and ongoing dissent about U.S. policy toward the Syrian Civil War are examples.

The impact of the hyperpartisan debate on discussions of national security may be largely artificial, born not so much out of concern over the topic *du jour* as it is with gaining political points in the partisan

bloodletting that marks so much political dialogue in this country. There is, however, a more fundamental and legitimate basis of disagreement that is always part of the national security dialogue. This disagreement is more deeply philosophical and reflects basic differences in judgment arising from the subjective nature of so much of the fundamental subject matter. While it is necessary to mention the partisan poison that hangs like an obscuring fog over political discussions, it is necessary to "burn away" that fog and to examine the more fundamental issues that divide Americans and that form the enduring basis for the national security debate.

In order to pursue that understanding, this introductory chapter will proceed sequentially through a series of conceptual building blocks that cumulatively form the basis for evaluating current and future issues. It will begin by defining and placing in context the basic concepts around which national security questions gravitate, including some discussion of the implications of the concepts, the relationships between them, and how the seemingly endless debate of American policy toward Iraq illustrates these dynamics. It then moves to an assessment of the current state of the debate, in the process trying to cull the wheat from the chaff of ongoing questions and disagreements. Because part of the perspective that the citizens of any country have toward national security is influenced by idiosyncratic experiences and interpretations of those experiences, the discussion moves to a section on uniquely American influences and how Americans frame national questions and answers. It concludes with a brief assessment of the national security "equation" for the United States.

The National Security Equation: Variables and Constants

The national security enterprise does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, its context lies within a competitive framework in which the United States interacts with other countries and groups within countries and where the major objective of all participants is to maximize their security. The common elements in dictionary definitions of security are safety and a *sense* of safety. This suggests that there are two basic elements to security: physical safety (the objective inability of hostile others to cause one harm) and the feeling (or sense) of security. The former element of security is physical and, generally speaking, fairly objective and agreed upon. Americans, for instance, did not worry much about being physically attacked and conquered or killed by their enemies after the British quit trying during the War of 1812 until the Soviets perfected nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles capable of attacking and destroying the country (if with awful consequences to themselves) after 1957. Americans were physically safe for 140 years of American history and thus had little reason to concern themselves with this most elemental form of security.

The conditions that make people *feel* safe are an entirely different matter and the cornerstone of most national disagreement over security

policy. The simple fact is that different conditions and situations affect different people in different ways. These differences form the basis of much honest (and occasionally not so honest) debate about what imperils the national condition and what must be done to rectify it. The disagreements at this level can often be very visceral and deeply felt and can inflame discussions among those who have them to the point of arousing the hyperpartisan passions that so trouble political discourse generally. As an example, the question of how important the physical security of Israel is to the *American* sense of safety is guaranteed to ignite very passionate advocacies on both sides of the issue of how important particular world conditions are to Americans.

There is another concern that is virtually unique to national security analysis and adds to the controversies that often surround it. That concern is the potential *physical consequences* of national security decisions. A bad judgment in most areas of politics may inconvenience or harm specific Americans and groups, but mistaken national security decisions could literally imperil the existences of Americans by placing them at irretrievable physical peril. Had John Kennedy guessed wrong during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the United States might have been largely destroyed and a significant part of the population killed. Such consequences hardly ever arise in any other policy area. The gravity of possible consequences very much colors the national security debate.

Within these parameters, the conceptual basis of national security can be laid out. Its basis is in the meaning and relationship between three basic concepts, *interests*, *threats*, and *risk*. Their relationship is sequential and cumulative. Understanding how they apply will not answer all the nuances of particular problems and situations, but they go a long way toward defining their meaning.

Interests

The idea of interests, or more specifically national interests, stands at the core of unraveling the rationale for national security concerns. The term "interest" is a difficult, slippery idea, because it is used to mean a variety of things, from a desire to know about something (have an interest in a topic) to a fee paid for the use of funds. In the parlance of international relations (and especially so-called realist interpretations of international dynamics), the qualifier "national" is normally attached to the core concept, helping to give it a specific meaning and establishing the idea at the base of national security concern. Within the hierarchy of things states seek to do in their relations with other states and groups are to maximize those conditions and situations in which they have interests. The most important interest a state has is its physical safety, and a variety of surrounding conditions and situations contributes to how safe a state's citizens feel about their situation. Thus, a link between interests and security is established.

As the term is used in international relations, an interest refers to a matter of national concern and importance, a condition or situation the state deems important to its health and well-being. The French term *raison d'etat* (purpose of state) is often used as a synonym and suggests that the major purpose of a country's government is to ensure that national interests are realized. National security strategy and policy is a basic avenue through which the national interest is pursued.

The problem with interests is that they are competitive. What this means is that not all interests of individuals and groups coincide: what one state or other entity views as a desirable, even necessary, condition may not be viewed in the same way by others. In some cases, this competition may take the form that the interests of the groups are mutually exclusive and conflicting: both cannot simultaneously enjoy their desirable conditions, and at worst, the realization of one group's interests may only be achievable at the expense of another group's interests. This condition is *conflict of interest*, and when the incompatibility between desired situations affects countries and has important, fundamental proportions and consequences, the results are very consequential and important to national governments. These kinds of situations are common within the relations between states and form the grist of national security concerns and efforts to ensure the national security. Without interests that come into conflict with the interests of others, national security would be a far less central concern than it is in a world where interests clash.

The idea of interest must, however, be refined with two additional, related qualifications. The first of these is the comparative importance of various interests in the national hierarchy of values: all interests are not of equal importance. The second, and related, qualification is the means that will be employed to realize particular interests: not all means are appropriate or proportional to the interests in whose defense they are proposed. Both qualifications are debatable and, to some extent, subjective, adding spice to the general cauldron of disagreement on national security topics.

Clearly, states have interests of varying importance, and this variation can be related to the basic distinctions regarding security more generally. Within the realm of national security, the most important interests relate to the physical security or safety of the country, and more debatable interests are attached to the conditions that make people *feel* safe. The importance of core, physical interests is generally well established and agreed upon; disagreement begins to occur when one moves to discussing the psychological conditions that make people feel safe and the degree of interest the state has in realizing those conditions, including what it may be willing to do in that realization. Much of the debate over national security can be isolated to this area of interests.

One of the most common ways to distinguish the importance of interests is through a simple dichotomy (that I have developed more extensively in the various editions of *National Security for a New Era* (Snow 2014))