

Eisenhower and US Grand Strategy

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ABSTRACT: Dwight D. Eisenhower infused deliberate planning processes into US grand strategy. Due to lack of consensus regarding how to address the Soviet threat, Eisenhower directed the formation of a six-week exercise (Solarium) to study three alternative strategies. Upon completion of the exercise, the National Security Council crafted the Basic National Security Policy over a period of three months, reviewing it annually and revising it as the international security environment changed.

As remarkable as it may seem, the only time the United States has had a formal grand strategy was during the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration. While some might scoff, recalling the National Security Council Report (NSC) 68, Flexible Response as implemented by President John F. Kennedy, and a host of other doctrines associated with presidents, none of these came close to assessing the strategic environment, developing and vetting various strategic options, and articulating an overarching strategic concept that promoted and protected US interests in a purposeful manner.

A product of the US Army's deliberative planning process, President Dwight D. Eisenhower brought a wealth of executive experience, organizational skill, and knowledge of strategy development to the White House. His first fundamental task as president was to design a National Security Council system to serve his leadership and management style needs. Once the NSC mechanism began to function in March 1953, Eisenhower had a system that provided him and the NSC with integrated staff work, education on the issues, and meaningful debate—all of which cultivated strategic thinking.

The development of the Basic National Security Policy (BNSP) was a much more involved process than many consider. It began with a six-week exercise (the Solarium Project), studying alternative policies to counter the Soviet objective of world domination. Upon completion of the exercise, the real work began with the NSC Planning Board and NSC Staff providing drafts over the next three months for NSC discussion. The final product was NSC 162/2—the BNSP. Contrary to popular speculation at the time, the BNSP continued to evolve throughout the Eisenhower administration as the strategic environment changed. The final section of this article explores some of the mischaracterizations and realities associated with the BNSP.

Project Solarium

While the Eisenhower Administration immediately began work on a national security policy (NSC 149/2, 29 April 1953), consensus remained

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elusive.¹ Of course, similar divisions over national security policy had erupted in the Truman Administration, but Eisenhower initially thought he could avoid this recurrence through NSC deliberations.² Still, fundamental differences remained. For example, while Eisenhower was in general agreement with Truman's containment strategy as reflected in NSC 149/2, Secretary of State Foster Dulles was dissatisfied with it, urging a more aggressive policy to contract Soviet power and influence; Republican congressmen opposed it because it implied a large defense budget; others wanted even greater defense expenditures to challenge the Soviet threat directly.³

The problem was not just a matter of consensus; other factors warranted a more comprehensive review of national security policy as well. The death of Stalin in March 1953 created uncertainties pursuant to Soviet designs, especially after the Kremlin's rebuff of Eisenhower's "The Chance for Peace" speech on 16 April 1953. The Korean War continued with no diplomatic breakthrough in sight. The autocratic, populist governments in Iran, Guatemala, and Egypt were candidates for Soviet opportunism. And at this stage of the Cold War, the advance of the Communist bloc appeared to be gaining momentum. Clearly, the United States needed to address these emerging national security challenges through a deliberative process.

Accordingly, on 8 May 1953, Eisenhower met informally with key advisers Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles (Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency [DIA]), George Humphrey (Treasury Secretary), Bedell Smith (Undersecretary of State), C. D. Jackson (Special Assistant for Cold War Psychology Planning), and Robert Cutler (Special Assistant for National Security Affairs) in the White House solarium to discuss the nature of the Soviet threat. During the discussion, Eisenhower proposed the formation of an exercise to "analyze competing national strategies for dealing with the Soviet Union." Eisenhower suggested forming three study teams from State, Defense, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to examine the following alternatives over a six-week period: continuing containment, drawing a line around the Soviet bloc, and diminishing the Soviet empire, particularly in Eastern Europe. Thus was born Project Solarium.⁴

Aside from the general desire to reexamine national security policy, Eisenhower had three ulterior objectives with the Solarium exercise. Foremost, he wanted to "provide a counter to his secretary of state's pessimism and more unilateralist proposals," in particular Dulles's public platform that the United States "regain the foreign policy initiative, seek

1 Robert R. Bowie provides the most comprehensive account of the BNSP development. Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Meena Bose provides an excellent synopsis of the New Look strategy development. Meena Bose, *Shaping and Signaling Presidential Policy: The National Security Decision Making of Eisenhower and Kennedy* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1998), 19-41.

2 Report to the National Security Council by Executive Secretary (Lay), "NSC 149/2," 29 April 1953, http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/pg_305.

3 Robert R. Bowie, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Interview by *Robert Gerald Livingston, Philipp Gassert, Richard Immerman, Paul Steege, Charles Stuart Kennedy*, February 18, 2008, The National Archives And Records Service Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

4 Bowie Interview, The Association For Diplomatic Studies And Training, March 15, 1988, 15, <http://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Bowie,%20Robert%20R.toc.pdf>; Bose, *Shaping and Signaling*, 29; Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 123-125.

a free, democratic, and unified Germany, and even ‘roll back’ communist control from Eastern Europe.”⁵ Second, he sought to bring together some of the best thinkers and most experienced individuals to explore dispassionately (and free from public scrutiny) the three most feasible approaches for the desired policy outcome. With access to the full array of intelligence tools, participants could debate among themselves and other teams during the preparation phase and argue their positions in front of the National Security Council. In short, he wanted to educate the participants on the issues at stake.⁶ Finally,

[T]he Solarium exercise served important administrative purposes—enabling Eisenhower to learn from and to brief his newly appointed national security officials and providing a common awareness of his purposes and expectations, a starting point for policy deliberations, and guidelines for action in the event of a crisis.⁷

In addition to these objectives, Eisenhower had a more expansive design for the NSC system: fostering a sense of teamwork among NSC officials and encouraging the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to think as a corporate body, rather than succumbing to service parochialisms. As Eisenhower was fond of saying, “The plans are nothing, but the planning is everything.”⁸ This design was infused in Solarium.

With these seeds planted, Eisenhower directed the formation of an NSC working committee (Robert Cutler, Bedell Smith, and Allen Dulles) to select a panel of five experts, provide the president’s guidance regarding the terms of reference, select the members of the three teams, and specify the parameters of each alternative for study.⁹ Accordingly, each team would study its assigned alternative strategy

[W]ith a real belief in it just the way a good advocate tackles a law case—and then when the teams are prepared, each should put on in some White House room, with maps, charts, all the basic supporting figures and estimates, just what each alternative would mean in terms of goal, risk, cost in money and men and world relations.¹⁰

The panel of experts (General James Doolittle—chairman; Robert Amory; Lieutenant General Lyman Lemnitzer; Dean Rusk; and Admiral Leslie C. Stevens) drafted the “precise and detailed terms of reference for each alternative.”¹¹ Since expertise was crucial to team member assignments, Eisenhower took particular interest in the selection process.

5 Bowie believed that Eisenhower wanted “to bury the rollback idea,” but it was bandied about during the presidential campaign, particularly by the press. “He wanted to make that clearly a thing of the past and finish it.” William B. Pickett, ed., *George F. Kennan and the Origins of Eisenhower’s New Look: An Oral History of Project Solarium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, 2004), 2-3, 10, 24, 30.

6 *Ibid.*, 11-12, 30.

7 *Ibid.*, 10.

8 As Goodpaster recalled, Eisenhower attributed this quotation to von Moltke the elder. Andrew Goodpaster, “Foreword,” in Bowie and Immerman, vii; Greenstein cited a similar Eisenhower quote: “Rely on planning, but never trust plans.” Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (Baltimore: Basic books, Inc., 1982; Johns Hopkins Paperbacks, 1992), 133.

9 Memorandum for the Record by the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Cutler), “Project Solarium,” 9 May 1953, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d62>

10 Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 125.

11 Memorandum for the Record by the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Cutler), “Solarium,” 15 May 1953, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d64>.

He personally enlisted the services of the National War College for its facilities, staff and administrative support, and temporary assignment of additional senior officers in support of Solarium. Naturally, strict secrecy complete with a cover story was mandated to give the teams time for study and reflection.¹² Completing its task on 1 June 1953, the Doolittle Committee provided the teams with National Intelligence Estimate No. 65 (along with supplemental intelligence and studies) and the terms of reference memorandum, which included 15 framework questions, assumptions, and each team's policy alternatives for study.¹³

In the meantime, Eisenhower shaped public opinion on national security policy with a national radio and television address on 19 May 1953. Similar to the themes expressed in his Inaugural Address and State of the Union message (among other speeches), Eisenhower stressed that national security policy must reflect a patient, steadfast commitment to a long-term strategy rather than reacting impulsively to every perceived threat. He warned that attempts to create complete national security would require substantial mobilization, the effects of which would create a garrison state mentality. In his judgment, a balanced military with sufficient force ceilings coupled with alliances would provide the necessary security for an enduring defense. He concluded that his administration would remain dedicated to deterring war rather than war-fighting—a theme which has always resonated with Americans.¹⁴

From 15 June to mid-July, the three study teams developed their alternative strategies. Team A, led by George Kennan, used NSC 153/1 (Restatement of National Security Policy, 10 June 1953) as the base document for analysis, which was a revision of the containment strategy. According to Kennan, the task of his team “was to clarify the general outlook of a new political administration and to prod a lot of people in the Washington bureaucracy—military and civilian—into taking a new look at the things we [the United States] had been trying to do, to see whether they could improve on the previous performance.”¹⁵

According to Robert Bowie (Chairman of the State Department's Policy Planning Board and a member of the NSC Planning Board), Team B under Major General James McCormack was tasked:

(1) to complete the line now drawn in the NATO area and the Western Pacific so as to form a continuous line around the Soviet bloc beyond which the U.S. will not permit Soviet or satellite military forces to advance without general war; (2) to make clear to the Soviet rulers in an appropriate and unmistakable way that the U.S. has established and determined to carry out this policy; and (3) to reserve freedom of action, in the event of indigenous Communist seizure of power in countries on our side of the line, to take all

12 Memorandum by the President to the Secretary of State, “Project Solarium,” May 20, 1953, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d66>.

13 National Intelligence Estimate, “NIE-65: Soviet Bloc Capabilities Through 1957,” June 16, 1953, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v08/d599>, 23 February 2014; Paper Prepared by the Directing Panel of Project Solarium, “Project Solarium,” 1 June 1953, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d68>

14 Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change 1952-1956: The White House Years, A Personal Account* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 122-124, 132-133, 145; Jean Edward Smith, *Eisenhower in War and Peace* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2012), 641.

15 George F. Kennan and the Origins of Eisenhower's New Look: *An Oral History of Project Solarium*, 15, 21, Paper Prepared by the Directing Panel of Project Solarium, “Project Solarium,” June 1, 1953, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d68>;

measures necessary to re-establish a situation compatible with the security interests of the U.S. and its allies.¹⁶

Finally, Vice Admiral Richard Conolly's Team C looked at a more assertive rollback strategy, which Bowie summarized: "(1) to increase efforts to disturb and weaken the Soviet bloc and to accelerate the consolidation and strengthening of the free world" and "(2) to create the maximum disruption and popular resistance throughout the Soviet Bloc."¹⁷ The Doolittle Committee informed Team C that it was aware this course of action carried a high risk of igniting a general war, but the team was not to examine a preventive war strategy because Soviet advancements in its nuclear forces made this option problematic.¹⁸ The committee might have added that preventive war also contravened American strategic values.

On 26 June 1953, each team presented its line of thinking in a plenary session (that is, a dress rehearsal), which helped the teams articulate their findings and listen to the other teams' presentations.¹⁹ Subsequently, the teams made their presentations to the NSC on 16 July, after which Eisenhower expressed how impressed he was by the staff work and the presentations, stating they were the best and most persuasive arguments he had ever experienced. From Bowie's perspective, "No president before or after Eisenhower . . . ever received such a systematic and focused briefing on the threats facing the nation's security and the possible strategies for coping with them."²⁰

At the end of the presentations, Eisenhower shared his thoughts in the form of initial guidance:

- The only thing worse than losing a global war was winning one; there would be no individual freedom after the next global war.
- To demand of a free people over a long period of time more than they want to give, one can obtain what one wants only by using more and more controls; and the more one does this, the more one loses individual liberties and becomes a garrison state (American model).
- The American people have demonstrated their reluctance after a war is ended to take the necessary action properly to occupy the territory conquered in order to gain our legitimate ends. What would we do with Russia, if we should win in a global war?
- The United States has to persuade her allies to go along with her, because American forward bases are in the territories of US allies.
- To obtain more money in taxes, there must be a vigorous campaign to

16 Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 126; The other members were Major General J. R. Deane, James K. Penfield, Philip Mosely, Calvin Hoover, J.C. Campbell, and Colonel E. S. Ligon. George F. Kennan and the Origins of Eisenhower's New Look: An Oral History of Project Solarium, 15; Paper Prepared by the Directing Panel of Project Solarium, "Project Solarium," 1 June 1953, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d68>.

17 Interview with Bowie, Episode 7: *After Stalin*.

18 Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 126.

19 Notes Taken at the First Plenary Session of Project Solarium, Washington, June 26, 1953, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d75>.

20 Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 127, 137, 139-140; Bose, *Shaping and Signaling*, 33.

educate the people—and to educate the people of US allies.²¹

According to Bowie, Eisenhower made it clear the Solarium exercise was not an end in itself but only "input to making strategy." Accordingly, the President instructed Cutler to have the NSC special staff and the Planning Board integrate the primary parts of all three reports into a draft policy paper as a starting point for NSC discussion.²² The concept paper titled "Proposed New Basic Concept," rendered the three presentations into five key components for NSC study and comment:

- A capability for a strong retaliatory offensive, a base for mobilization, and continental defense;
- Creating strong, friendly groupings centered on Western Europe (including [West] Germany) and on Japan in the Far East;
- Restricting U.S. foreign aid to such groupings and designated other free nations;
- Defining where Soviet bloc aggression would trigger general war;
- Taking selected aggressive actions of a limited scope, involving moderately increased risks of general war, to eliminate Soviet-dominated areas within the free world and to reduce Soviet power in the Satellite periphery.

After receiving initial comments on this paper, Cutler returned to the Planning Board, presenting a paper titled "Points for Consideration in Drafting New Policy." Thus, began the policy formulation process in earnest.²³

The Basic National Security Policy

The development of the Basic National Security Policy (BNSP) spanned from 30 July to 30 October 1953 with the adoption of NSC 162/2.²⁴ Resolving policy splits (irreconcilable differences)—in regards to defense spending, threats to the economy, the proper course for reducing the Soviet threat, the question of redeploying US forces abroad, and the issue of reducing foreign assistance—were the central issues of NSC discussions and presidential decisions. Political scientist Mena Bose and Robert Bowie noted that NSC 162/2 was an amalgam of the best features of the three study teams. It confirmed Team A's framework of containment to resist Soviet aggression and domination of countries outside its sphere, but it would not interfere with Soviet internal political and economic structures. While it rejected Team B's circumscribed line as a statement of US policy, it did advocate the use of military force, to include nuclear weapons, against Soviet military aggression in Europe. Lastly, it adopted Team C's use of propaganda and covert actions to exploit Soviet problems and complicate governance in Soviet-dominated countries. Even with the completion of NSC 162/2, policy split issues continued to arise in discussions, signifying that though the BNSP was

21 Minutes of the 155th Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, July 16, 1953, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d78>.

22 Ibid.; Bowie Interview, February 18, 2008, ADST, 15; Bowie and Immerman,, *Waging Peace*, 137-138.

23 Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 139.

24 A Report of the National Security Council: Basic National Security Policy, "NSC 162/2," October 30, 1953, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d100>.

accepted policy, the NSC continued to seek improvements through subsequent security policies and reviews of the BNSP.²⁵

It bears noting that development of the BNSP coincided with US demobilization following the Korean War armistice on 27 July 1953. From his experiences as Chief of Staff of the Army during the precipitous post-World War II demobilization, President Eisenhower wanted a balanced restructuring of the military forces to meet Cold War challenges, but without incurring exorbitant military expenditures. Unlike previous post-war demobilizations, the size and composition of the US armed forces would be based on a rationally considered national security policy, and not political parochialism or whim.

Popularly coined as the “New Look” strategy, Eisenhower described the policy as a “horizontal analysis,” aligning national security requirements with necessary military capabilities without regard to service parochialism. The analysis included nuclear retaliatory forces, deployed forces overseas, forces to secure strategic sea lanes, forces to protect the continental United States from air attack, and reserve forces. Eisenhower explained that the assessment called for a reallocation of resources to rationalize national defense. Thus, the administration placed greater emphasis on deterrent forces through improved nuclear capabilities, better delivery systems, and increased air defense capabilities. Active duty combat units would modernize with emphasis on greater readiness and mobility, decreased manpower, and lower readiness for the reserves. In short, the post-Korean War realignment meant an increase in Air Force capabilities, downsizing of the Army, and a slight decrease in the Navy and Marine Corps.²⁶

The evolution of the Soviet nuclear arsenal and delivery systems required the NSC to review and revise the BNSP annually. As a consequence of these reviews, supplemented occasionally by outside consultative committees (namely, Killian, von Neumann, and Gaither), the NSC revised NSC 162/2, first with NSC 5810/1 (5 May 1958), and finally with NSC 5906/1 (5 August 1958), each showing the evolution of strategy as the strategic environment changed.²⁷ Each BNSP recognized the Soviet and Chinese communist threats, which were devoting military and economic power in support of an expansionist foreign policy. Each BNSP acknowledged the growth of the Soviet nuclear arsenal, but underscored the US unequivocal commitment to deterrence as an appropriate response. Each BNSP assessment concluded that the Soviets did not seek to start a general war but were committed to continuing political division and subversion of the free world. NSC 162/2 judged that deterring Soviet designs would profit the United States in the long run as the Soviet regime experienced “the slackening of revolutionary zeal, the growth of vested managerial and bureaucratic interests, and popular

25 Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 144-146; Bose, *Shaping and Signaling*, 34-41; Bowie said that Eisenhower placed great worth in covert action and propaganda against the Soviet hold on its satellites in Eastern Europe and in countries where the Soviets were trying to extend their influence, like Iran and Guatemala. Covert action was not used against the Soviet Union directly and was used sparingly. CNN *Cold War* Episode 7, Interview with Bowie: “After Stalin”; Jim Newton, *Eisenhower: The White House Years* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 128-129.

26 Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, 449-451.

27 NSC 162/2; A Report of the National Security Council: Basic National Security Policy, “NSC 5810/1,” May 5 1958, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v03/d24>; National Security Council Report, “NSC 5906/1,” August 5, 1959, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v03/d70>.

pressures for consumption goods . . . [as well as] the growing strength of the free world and the failure to break its cohesion and possible aggravation of weaknesses within the Soviet bloc.”²⁸ The overarching expectation was that successful containment would ameliorate Soviet behavior or it would collapse from its inherent contradictions. While NSC 5810/1 acknowledged nuclear parity was inevitable, it specifically rejected preventive war as a means of forestalling parity, implying it contradicted Western strategic values. Instead, the document regarded nonmilitary initiatives, such as arms control, as more pragmatic. NSC 5906/1 resolved that future conflicts were more likely in underdeveloped countries, so the United States needed an appropriate means to prevent or keep them from escalating. Here, economic and military assistance received greater attention.²⁹ All three policies formally recognized that maintaining the trinity of a vibrant economy, free institutions, and American morale was a national security imperative.³⁰

Despite charges the New Look depended overly on massive retaliation for the West’s national security, the BNSP was actually intellectually agile. Eisenhower intended that massive retaliation apply only to deterrence in Europe—not everywhere.³¹ In NSC 162/2, defense of the free world would depend on the maintenance of a:

[S]trong military posture, with emphasis on the capability of inflicting massive retaliatory damage by offensive striking power . . . U.S. and allied forces in readiness to move rapidly initially to counter aggression by Soviet bloc forces and to hold vital areas and lines of communication . . . and a mobilization base, and its protection against crippling damage, adequate to insure victory in the event of general war.³²

Eisenhower recognized the limitations of the US nuclear arsenal, especially once the Soviet Union neared nuclear parity. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Arleigh Burke recalled the president addressing the issue with the Joint Chiefs of Staff: “We’ve got to have a military force that can handle any situation. And that means, in a small situation we’ve got to have the proper equipment and proper plans to it, and it doesn’t mean that we will have to launch for everything.”³³

Accordingly, NSC 5810/1 addressed the need “to place main, but not sole, reliance on nuclear weapons; to integrate nuclear weapons with other weapons in the arsenal . . . to consider them as conventional weapons from a military point of view . . . to provide flexible and selective capabilities for general or limited war, as may be required to achieve national objectives.”³⁴ Adapting to changes in the strategic environment, NSC 5810/1 underscored the need for a *flexible response*, in which

28 NSC 162/2, 5.

29 NSC 162/2, 2, 4; NSC 5810/1, 2, 4, 8; NSC 5906/1, 7-9.

30 NSC 5810/1 sought to extend this trinity to other free world states. NSC 162/2, 6, 14-16, 17; NSC 5810/1, 3, 9-12.

31 In regards to the famous Dulles speech on massive retaliation, Bowie said it was Eisenhower who had written the sentence that caused confusion. He had not intended it to mean massive retaliation would be used anywhere. Nonetheless, it was Eisenhower who wrote it, not Dulles. Interview with Robert Bowie, Episode 7: “After Stalin.”

32 NSC 162/2, 5.

33 Arleigh A. Burke, Oral History Interview with Arleigh A. Burke: 2 of 4, Interview by John T. Mason Jr., Columbia Oral History Interview, November 14 1972 (OH-284), Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, 71-72.

34 NSC 5810/1, 4.

US military readiness would serve to counter local threats. If deterrence failed, US expeditionary forces in conjunction with indigenous and allied forces would defeat local aggression. The final BNSP, NSC 5906/1, also emphasized flexible response and was formally provided to the incoming John F. Kennedy administration for study.

The BNSP placed great value on collective defense and providing economic and military assistance, not only to allies but also to vulnerable states in key regions as an alternative to their accepting Soviet aid and entanglement. Another essential element of the security policy was investment in research and development without fielding weapons or equipment other than prototypes. This approach not only minimized military expenditures, but also ensured the military would have the most modern and sophisticated equipment in the event of sustained hostilities.³⁵ Moreover, the BNSP served as the foundational policy for the development of supporting policies and strategies within the government bureaucracy (for example, departments, agencies, and bureaus).

What is unique about the development, implementation, and revision of the BNSP is the fact that no other presidency has devoted such focused discipline, energy, and thought to US national security strategy.

Separating Myth from Reality

Not everyone agreed with the policy conclusions of the BNSP, regardless of its rational approach. The most prevalent charge was that military cuts weakened US national security. Army Chief of Staff General Matthew Ridgeway, for one, disagreed passionately with any reductions in the Army, believing anything less than a large standing army would increase the probability of war. Ridgeway never specified the size needed to deter communist aggression, but in view of the millions in Soviet ranks (not to mention China), a very large standing force in his opinion would be needed for an indeterminate number of years.³⁶ Eisenhower reasoned that alliances buttressed by nuclear forces were sufficient to deter Soviet overt aggression. Because US commitment to allies was based on several forward-based divisions, naval and air power, as well as forward deployed nuclear weapons, the Soviets could never be certain that even minor aggression would not escalate into general war, including the use of nuclear weapons; to underscore this uncertainty, Eisenhower never revealed under what conditions he would use nuclear weapons—this uncertainty was the cornerstone of credible deterrence.³⁷ Hence, containment of the Soviet bloc relied on a holistic deterrence of a diverse nuclear arsenal, collective defense, sufficient conventional forces held at high readiness, a robust mobilization base, and a strong economy.

The starkest difference between Eisenhower and Ridgeway (and Ridgeway's successor General Maxwell Taylor) was in perspective. Ridgeway's focus was on fighting wars; Eisenhower's focus was on deterring them. To him, a general war would be catastrophic regardless of who the victor was.³⁸ Ironically, General Maxwell Taylor, was "struck

35 NSC 162/2, 7-8, 11-16; NSC 5810/1, 6-7, 8-13.

36 Matthew B. Ridgeway and Harold H. Martin, *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgeway* (New York: Harper, 1956), 272-273, 288, 290-294, 319.

37 Evan Thomas, *Ike's Bluff: President Eisenhower's Secret Battle to Save the World* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2012), 300, 321, 396-397, 408, 413.

38 Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 179, 200.

by the breadth of its [the BNSP] language and the degree of departure from the dogma of Massive Retaliation,” writing a supporting paper in October 1955 titled *A National Military Program* introducing the concept of flexible response.³⁹ Like Ridgway, Taylor took issue with what he deemed excessive manpower cuts, which he felt undermined the flexible response aspects of the BNSP. Specifically, Taylor wanted a capability to fight small brushfire wars even in Europe, an idea which appalled Eisenhower because it undercut deterrence in Europe.⁴⁰

Robert Cutler recalled the Pentagon’s main complaint with the BNSP was the lack of specificity, permitting subordinates to interpret policy as they liked. Cutler countered that this complaint was a ploy to resist policies the Pentagon did not like.⁴¹ Cutler had a point, since the mandate of the NSC Operations Coordinating Board was to assist in the coordination of presidential policy decisions, provide policy clarifications, and elicit feedback from the government bureaucracy on policy implementation. This was undoubtedly true, but the Pentagon abhorred the budget restrictions imposed by the BNSP, so its argument was decreased military spending meant decreased security. Since the BNSP was a classified document, the Eisenhower administration could not counter public accusations without disclosing the classified details of the policy. Therefore, military officials, politicians, and pundits could mischaracterize the contents of the BNSP to further their own agendas.

During the period of demobilization and reorganization of the military, criticism was unavoidable as partisans denounced favored service cuts, military installation closures, or lost defense contracts. Eisenhower pointed out that peacetime readiness was unprecedented for all three services, and that his proposed defense budget was three times that of Truman’s pre-Korean War budget. The president also counseled critics not to become prisoners of unwarranted fears, demanding large conventional forces to intervene in every possible conflict. Specifically, Eisenhower insisted on maintaining “an adequate but not extravagant defense establishment over an extended period of time (perhaps, half a century) . . . that we do our best to create a national climate favorable to dynamic industrial effort.”⁴² Eisenhower often repeated that, as opposed to the Soviet maintenance of 175 divisions in Europe, the United States maintained twenty divisions, five of which were stationed in Europe. Against this correlation of ground forces, two or even ten more US divisions would not make much difference. Hence, a nuclear—instead of conventional—deterrent would have to serve to prevent a general war in Europe.⁴³

Apparently, this ratio was a myth Eisenhower conveniently allowed to perpetuate. The purported Soviet conventional superiority was vastly exaggerated, a fact the president most likely knew but never divulged.

39 General Maxwell D. Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet* (New York: Harper, 1960), 29-30, 37.

40 Taylor wrote that the administration clung to the strategy of Massive Retaliation throughout Eisenhower’s Presidency, stating “it was doubtful whether either the Soviets or our allies believed that we would use our retaliatory power for anything other than to preserve our own existence.” Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet*, 61.

41 Robert Cutler, “The National Security Council under President Eisenhower,” in *The National Security Council: Jackson Subcommittee Papers on Policy-Making at the Presidential Level*, ed. Senator Henry M. Jackson (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 125.

42 Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, 452.

43 *Ibid.*, 451-454.

Instead of 175 combat-ready divisions, the Soviets maintained approximately 50, which was equivalent to NATO's strength.⁴⁴ It suited the commander-in-chief's purposes to preserve this fiction for two reasons: the truth would likely induce the European allies to relax defensive efforts; worse, near conventional parity might encourage the Pentagon to clamor for conventional superiority and roll-back strategies. Below the threshold of a general war in Europe, Eisenhower reasoned that the size of US ground forces was sufficient to fight and win small wars, but also warned that "seeing danger behind every tree or bush" was an unwarranted fear of threats rather than a national security strategy. He refused to turn America into an armed camp in a myopic quest of absolute security.⁴⁵

The underpinnings of American national security, however, transcended the parochialism of the service chiefs. Eisenhower waged a multidimensional struggle to curb military expenditures because he understood the multi-ordered effects of large conventional forces. The military-industrial complex (Congress was complicit in this relationship) as articulated in his farewell address needlessly diverted revenues, scientific pursuit, and intellectual thinking away from the betterment of democratic society. If left unbridled, the United States could descend into an Orwellian state of perpetual conflict. Thus, nuclear deterrence dovetailed with the vision of the New Look by limiting the size of conventional forces.

Eisenhower never highlighted the flexible response features in the BNSP publicly because these features were inherently destabilizing. It was a nuanced argument. A flexible response policy was beguiling, promising that expansive conventional forces would enhance national security by permitting the United States to counter the full spectrum of aggression. Yet it signaled to the Soviets that the United States might be willing to fight a conventional war in Europe rather than offering an automatic nuclear response, thereby increasing the probability of conflict through miscalculation. Greater conventional capabilities incentivized policymakers to gravitate towards military solutions because increased investment in the military clamored for its use, because they promised silver bullet solutions to otherwise complex problems, and because they offered senior political and military leaders with a way to counter lower-level aggression with less risk of escalation. Perhaps, but military solutions tend to gravitate towards adventurism and entanglement in local conflicts—conflicts which the New Look vision sought to avoid because this was a realm in which the Communists held the initiative. Even a prudent president, following the logic of a military solution, could find himself fighting the wrong war, at the wrong place, and against the wrong enemy.⁴⁶

The development of the BNSP was intimately tied to the NSC mechanism, which the president painstakingly organized. The cultivation of

44 Matthew A. Evangelista, "Stalin's Postwar Army Reappraised," *International Security* 7, no 3 (Winter, 1982-1983): 110-138.

45 Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, 451-454.

46 "Eisenhower sought a structural solution to the problems of service parochialism and inefficiency. The Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 aimed to centralize control over the services, remove redundancies, streamline command channels, and provide for tighter civilian control at the Pentagon." H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, The Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 14.

strategic thinking set the Eisenhower administration apart from other presidencies. Eisenhower's NSC mechanism serviced the president with the information and diverse viewpoints he needed to optimize decisions regardless of circumstances and obstacles. Like other presidents, Eisenhower devoted his speeches, messages, and addresses to inspire and inform both domestic and foreign audiences, but they were based on a process of staffed initiatives, discussion, and practical feedback. Strategy and policy formulations are often tedious, unexciting work, and while the substance is vitally important, it is unlikely to excite the imagination. However, without a foundation of rationally derived policy, inspirational speeches do not just amount to more than hot air; such rhetoric can lead a nation to rash policy decisions or even a national disaster, create social unrest as rising expectations are not met, and result in frivolous spending. In short, inspirational speeches do not necessarily translate to good policy.

A crucial benefit of the Eisenhower NSC mechanism lay in the continuity of policies, procedures, and knowledge for successive administrations. Through the NSC mechanism, the government bureaucracy could provide an orderly continuity of information and processes on national policies and strategies for new administrations, permitting a seamless transition. Fully acquainted with the system, the government bureaucracy could continue to fulfill the needs of a new administration without pause. Through the NSC system, successive administrations could access information on old reforms, initiatives, and studies as a check on new ideas that are bound to crop up in a new administration. Lastly, the new president could adapt the NSC mechanism to his leadership and management style once he became familiar with it, but keeping the fundamental parts intact.

Conclusion

The Solarium exercise was an essential start point for the development of the BNSP. As this article has demonstrated, the exercise was highly organized with the NSC working committee and the Doolittle Committee developing the terms of reference for the three study teams. As a useful insight, such preparations permitted the three teams to study their policy alternatives with the full support of the engaged agencies and without distractions. Solarium also demonstrated Eisenhower's deep involvement in the process and the derived objectives he desired.

As Eisenhower stated at the end of the exercise, the process had just begun, with the BNSP formulation phase lasting another three months. Accordingly, multiple drafts of NSC 161 by the NSC Planning Board, NSC deliberations on each draft, and the final NSC 161/2 illustrate the deliberative process which epitomized the Eisenhower NSC system. More importantly, the NSC reviewed the BNSP annually and revised it when the strategic environment changed.

While the New Look strategy was much maligned and mischaracterized throughout the Eisenhower administration, it did set the foundation for US Cold War strategy. Eisenhower believed avoiding a general war was the surest way to persevere over the Soviet Union in the long term. Accordingly, a balanced military with high readiness and buttressed by alliances would be sufficient to deter the Soviet bloc and

safeguard against Communist miscalculation. Despite the near hysterical claims of Soviet domination, there was no bomber, missile, or industrial gap. American missile and space programs were much more robust than their Soviet counterparts, creating the nuclear triad, intelligence surveillance satellites, and the NASA space program in far greater numbers and sophistication. The administration accomplished these without crash programs and immense budget expenditures. Eisenhower's policy successes were a result of superb organization, the deliberative process, and his cultivation of strategic thinking.

Eisenhower weaved his political philosophy into the BNSP. Economic prosperity through the free market, protection of democratic institutions and American morale, and adherence to Western values represented the strategic pillars of the US grand strategy which cultivated American prosperity, freedom, and optimism. Hence, these pillars—not an excessive military-industrial complex—eventually paid off with the collapse of the Soviet political system.

