

Policy, Strategy, and the President

**THE NATIONAL
SECURITY STRATEGY
AS A GENRE
DYNAMIC AND ADAPTABLE
OR CONSTRAINING
CREATIVITY?**

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This article provides a framework for analysis of the national security strategy as a genre. Employing theories from rhetorical genre studies, complex system theories, and post-humanist studies, the analysis finds that while each iteration of the strategy reflects the individual worldview and priorities of its presidential author, as a genre, the national security strategy is directly responsive to and constructive of our recurring national security situation.

Scholars in rhetorical genre studies (RGS) accept that genres are profoundly ideological; they are responsive to and constructive of social situations. Likewise, the US national security strategy (NSS) is accepted as a political statement representative of the current administration; the document constructs a shared global security environment while also responding to that environment. This study analyzes the unique recurrent situation of composing and publishing the NSS broadly from the ecological perspective and specifically through the lens of rhetorical genre studies. This approach sheds light on the epistemological features and functions of the NSS.

In support of building a “unique body of knowledge” for the discipline of strategic communications, this article positions the national security strategy of the United States as a specific research object to be studied from the research perspective of ecologies of composition.¹ The NSS, produced by the executive branch, is the foundation for the national defense strategy and the national military strategy. This hierarchy represents an ecology of composition and a system of genres. These documents, taken together as a constellation of genres, represent the US approach to security and defense. They embody the shared goals of the security establishment while enabling users, participants, or members of the discourse community to take action congruent with those shared goals.

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1. Ansgar Zerfass et al., “Strategic Communication: Defining the Field and Its Contribution to Research and Practice,” *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 12, no. 4 (2018): 487, <https://www.tandfonline.com/>.

Background

Recent updates to the process of formulating the NSS were mandated by Congress in 2017.² Section 603 of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 mandated the annual publication of the US national security strategy, although previous documents were created for similar purposes, notably the National Security Council paper NSC-68: *United States Objectives and Programs for National Security*.³ NSC-68 was a classified top-secret document in 1950 and characterized the Soviet threat and how the United States should respond.

The issue of classification was taken up in the 2017 changes to the NSS, which amended US code by changing the requirement of a classified and unclassified version of the document to one that is classified "but may include an unclassified summary."⁴

As mandated by Congress, the overall purpose of the NSS is the communication of the president's vision of national security to Congress.

The NSS provides discussion on proposed uses of all facets of US power needed to achieve the nation's security goals. The report is obligated to include a discussion of the United States' international interests, commitments, objectives, and policies, along with defense capabilities necessary to deter threats and implement US security plans.⁵

The NSS as a genre precipitates the national military strategy and other genres such as the quadrennial defense review, which was replaced by the national defense strategy in 2017 (although the first national defense strategy was issued in 2005). Both the national military strategy and the national defense strategy respond directly to the NSS and provide a framework for how the armed forces will be used to accomplish the goals articulated in the NSS. In theory, the strategy flows from the president through the secretary of defense to the military services.

Rhetorical Ecology

Analyzing the NSS among the constellation of strategy documents requires a broad perspective of the rhetorical ecology. (Of note, rhetorical ecology refers to a model of writing as a socially situated and constructed task within a larger system of customs and cultures.) Several interconnected fields, including rhetorical genre studies, complex systems theory, and posthumanist scholarship encompass this ecology.

2. Mark F. Cancian, *Formulating National Security Strategy: Past Experience and Future Choices* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), October 6, 2017), x, <https://www.csis.org/>.

3. US National Security Council (NSC), NSC 68: *United States Objectives and Programs for National Security* (Washington DC: NSC, April 7, 1950), <https://irp.fas.org/>; and Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-433, 100 Stat. 992 (1986), <https://www.congress.gov/>.

4. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, Pub. L. No. 114-328, 130 Stat. 2371 (2016), <https://www.congress.gov/>.

5. "National Security Strategy," Office of the Secretary of Defense, Historical Office (website), n.d., accessed July 19, 2022, <https://history.defense.gov/>.

Theories of complex systems as they apply to language use include the principles of dynamic activity, random interaction, information exchange with feedback, reinforcement of behaviors, and the emergence of stable patterns without central control.⁶ The result is communication as a complex system, a rhetorical ecology full of dynamic activity and distributed agency. Posthumanist scholarship in the area of technical communication also takes up the concept of distributed agency in complex rhetorical situations.⁷

Rhetorical genre studies offer much in support of this research, connecting kinds of texts to kinds of social actions while trying to understand how genres help users reproduce and navigate recurrent situations. More than viewing genre as simply a classificatory tool that helps sort and organize kinds of texts, RGS scholars explore the epistemological functions of genre and how genres can actively shape meaning and action. Genres are both sites of action and ways of acting. A stable genre must accommodate both stability and change; it must respond to variation within the recurrent situation.⁸ Rhetorical genre studies enable studying how the NSS has developed and responded to varied, yet recurrent, situations.

Posthumanism is an undercurrent of all this scholarship and has been embraced by technical communicators to understand how agency and cognition are distributed in rhetorical situations rather than individually held constructs. Distributed agency is a theme throughout these three fields—complex systems theory, RGS, and posthumanist scholarship—as all attempt to understand the interplay of text, individual, and environment or context. Analyzing the national security strategy from this perspective, as a noun—the NSS as a site, an inhabitable textual space—and as a verb—a way of acting in congruence with the established genre—allows researchers to analyze the epistemological power of the genre itself.

National Security Strategy as Genre

In October 2017, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) published its congressionally mandated report on the national security strategy, citing “lack of clear priorities; lowest-common-denominator recommendations; slowness in responding to changes in the national security environment,” among other concerns.⁹ In response, the Fiscal Year 2017 National Defense Authorization Act made substantial changes to the genre conventions and expectations of the document that focused on unification, simplification, and classification. “Unification means developing strategy with a single voice rather than being the consensus product of a committee.

6. William A. Kretzschmar, *Language and Complex Systems* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

7. Jason Barrett-Fox and Geoffrey Clegg, “Beyond Hearts and Minds: Posthumanism, *Kairos*, and Technical Communication in US Army Field Manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency,” in *Posthuman Praxis in Technical Communication*, ed. Kristen R. Moore and Daniel P. Richards (New York: Routledge, 2018), 237.

8. Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff, *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy* (Indiana: Parlor Press, 2010), 4.

9. Cancian, *National Security Strategy*, 20.

Simplification means focusing guidance on the big issues and away from details about specific topics. Classification allows more candid discussion about tradeoffs and priorities without risking public backlash from affected groups and interests.”¹⁰

The report cautions, however, that there is no perfect process for creating the NSS. Rather, the process must be dynamic and adaptable to perturbations that arise in the ecology of composition. In addition to being adaptable to unique but recurrent situations, the NSS, as a genre, carries authority across different administrations, no matter the individual signatory. Rhetorically, it represents the executive branch of the government and the civilian control of the military.

Irrespective of the sitting president, the document itself carries weight because it is an established genre. The document couples the authority of the office of the president and 70 years of history and precedent—context—to create and respond to a recurring situation that is profoundly ideological. As a genre, the NSS is responsive to and constructive of the situation of our national security, in concert with other strategy documents.

Moreover, the NSS as a genre exists in an ecology of other genres, including the national defense strategy and national military strategy. From this perspective, the genre is more than simply a classificatory tool. For RGS scholars, genre is inextricably tied to situation and in the situation of the NSS, genre knowledge means “knowledge of what and whose purposes genres serves; how to negotiate one’s intentions in relation to genres’ social expectations and motives; when and why and where to use genre; what reader/writer relationships genres maintain; and how genres relate to other genres in the coordination of social life.”¹¹

In short, genres are both sites of action and ways of acting—habitations and habits. From this perspective, the NSS can be defined as a way of recognizing, responding to, acting meaningfully and consequentially within, and helping to reproduce recurrent situations.¹² Furthermore, we can connect this kind of text to kinds of social actions.

Genres themselves are epistemological and play a critical role in meaning making. Genre is obviously a classificatory tool, but it is also active, shaping meaning and action. In the case of the NSS, habitual rhetorical forms and strategies influence and shape the perception of the current reality of the United States from a security standpoint.

The national security strategy creates the situation, or context, in which it responds. The genre establishes the rhetorical situation that calls for response, delimits the rhetorical responses available in that situation, and enacts that response. It is both enabling and constraining, and the forms established in the genre of the NSS mediate how a presidential administration perceives and responds to this recurrent situation.

Moreover, the NSS as a genre mediates the relations between government entities (the president, the secretary of defense, Congress), the enactment of these roles, and the context or social reality in which all of this takes place. In other words, “these forms come to mediate how individuals perceive and respond to recurrent

10. Cancian, *National Security Strategy*, 20.

11. Bawarshi and Reiff, *Genre*, 4.

12. Bawarshi and Reiff, 4.

situations.”¹³ The NSS is how the United States defines and acts within a situation, creating a shared definition and interpretation of that situation. The NSS, the genre, functions as a shared, recognizable exigence, and objectifies our shared values, motives, and intentions as a nation.

This is a description of the intention of the process in which the secretary of defense and the Department of Defense invest their trust, which is necessary to coordinate defense and military strategies with the NSS. In practice the genre reaches a global audience as an explicit articulation of “a country’s public, authoritative declarations about the manner in which it intends to achieve its security objectives within the international security environment.”¹⁴

Richard Doyle, writing in 2007, posed this question: “Should a country’s official, published strategy be congruent with what experts say about the defense policies and practices actually carried out by that country?”¹⁵ This is essentially a question of theory versus practice, or intention versus implementation. He argues official strategy documents like the NSS “tell the world what a government intends to do, strategically. Whether it consistently acts on these principles is another matter.”¹⁶

The NSS is what is made available to civilian and military decisionmakers, and in theory guides their actions. Doyle and the authors of the Center for Strategic and International Studies review discuss the burst of national strategy documents attempting to guide decisionmakers—a “strategy stew” of institutionalized documents, or genres, that add to the complexity of the constellation of genres.¹⁷ Though the influx of strategy documents can dilute the epistemological force of any one genre, there is consensus that in the hierarchy of strategy documents, the NSS is the strategic touchstone. The other documents should be logically related to it, if not derived from it.

Doyle warns that though “the assumption is that [these strategic documents] reflect a common strategic template. . . . Given the scope of the problems they address, the processes used to produce them, and the agencies involved in the production, that may be a heroic assumption.”¹⁸ Ten years after Doyle’s essay, CSIS came to similar conclusions about the seemingly impossible intentions of the genre, acknowledging the complicated nature of the process, and responding to Doyle’s lament that “there is scant information on the precise manner in which the federal government produces the NSS.”¹⁹ But, as Doyle also noted, we do know why it is produced and where. In other words, we can analyze the context and genre conventions of the NSS, in spite of the process being what the CSIS characterized as a “sprawling affair.”

13. Bawarshi and Reiff, *Genre*, 70.

14. Richard B Doyle, “The US National Security Strategy: Policy, Process, Problems,” *Public Administration Review* 67, no. 4 (July/August 2007): 624, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/>.

15. Doyle, “National Security Strategy,” 623.

16. Doyle, 624.

17. Doyle, 625.

18. Doyle, 625.

19. Doyle, 625.

The genre conventions of the NSS do some heavy lifting. The strategic ends of the document remain constant, but the strategic ways undergo revisions from administration to administration. There is constant variation and adjustment. Some strategies have been foreign policy failures, such as Johnson's Vietnam strategy, while others, such as the strategy of containment during the Cold War, have been successful. But the genre is both stable and dynamic, creating a recurring, yet unique, rhetorical exigence. (In rhetoric, exigence is defined as "an issue, problem, or situation that causes or prompts someone to write or speak.")²⁰

The Strategy and Exigence

While the "US strategic process has been criticized for being slow and unable to adequately respond to a changing global environment," the genre provides all participants with a guide to its creation, including "marching orders" for users of the document such as the Departments of Defense, State, and Homeland Security.²¹ As a genre, the NSS itself comes to mediate how the individuals involved in the process of creating it and its intended audience perceive and respond to the recurrent situation. Genre scholars note, "variation is an inherent part of recurrence, and so genres must be able to accommodate that variation."²² The national security strategy must accommodate stability and change as a site of social and ideological action.

Carolyn Miller defined genre as social action. "Exigence is a form of social knowledge—a mutual construing of objects, events, and interests and purposes that not only links them but makes them what they are: an objectified social need."²³ An exigence does not exist as an ontological fact, rather, "how we define and act within a situation depends on how we recognize the exigence it offers, and this process of recognition is socially learned and maintained."²⁴

What we perceive as an exigence requiring a certain response is predicated on how we have learned to construe it as such. Within the recurrent situation of producing the NSS, it is the genre that maintains social motives for acting and provides those who produce it with typified rhetorical strategies for doing so. For example, the usual first rhetorical move in the national security strategy is for the president to identify key threats and then provide strategies which serve as guides for prominent government leaders.

Another genre convention is how the NSS works to leverage our value similarities through diplomacy; the NSS attempts to get other nations to identify with our values,

20. Richard Nordquist, "Exigence in Rhetoric," ThoughtCo., updated July 16, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/>.

21. Cancian, *National Security Strategy*, 10.

22. Bawarshi and Reiff, *Genre*, 79.

23. Carolyn R. Miller, "Genre as Social Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70, no. 2 (1984): 157, <https://www.tandfonline.com/>.

24. Bawarshi and Reiff, *Genre*, 80.

too.²⁵ In this way, the NSS embodies the American government's ways of knowing, being, and acting in the world and cannot be severed from its context. Part of what defines a genre system is "the actions that these genres, working in dynamic interaction with each other, enable individuals to perform over time, within different contexts of activity."²⁶ The NSS arguably enables the United States to exist in a global environment and defines the social roles, social relationships, and power dynamics of our country in the context of geopolitics.

The Power and Limitations of Recurrence

As previously mentioned, genres are inherently ideological, and the NSS is inherently political. One scholar notes "the US has turned to Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy to engage key audiences in ways that advance US interests and to win the political-ideological contest for domestic and international legitimacy."²⁷ Logically these efforts in strategic communication and public diplomacy should be informed by the national security strategy. They should support the NSS, as all are part of the war of ideas. "If public diplomacy is essentially about creating common definitions of international problems as a pretext to finding common solutions, strategic narratives can be a central toolset for establishing consensus."²⁸

Through the lens of RGS, genres such as the NSS orient us toward a shared mentally constructed space that contributes to our sense making and decision making. These genres tell us how to think and act and recognize the situation in a particular way. The range of rhetorical responses are constrained by the nature of the situation, and a genre, or typified way of responding, emerges as the situation recurs. One RGS scholar notes the power of recurrence:

From day to day, year to year, comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses; hence rhetorical forms are born and a special vocabulary, grammar, and style are established. This is true also for the situation which invites the inaugural address of a President. The situation recurs and, because we experience situations and the rhetorical responses to them, a form of discourse is not only established *but comes to have a power of its own*—the tradition itself tends to function as a constraint upon any new response in the form. (emphasis added)²⁹

The aforementioned flaws in the process and product of the NSS are the result of the genre predisposing future audience expectations. The genre limits the socially available rhetorical forms that subsequent authors can use to define and experience the recurrent situation.

25. John M. Weaver, "The 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States," *Journal of Strategic Security* 11, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/>.

26. Bawarshi and Reiff, *Genre*, 87.

27. Michael H. Creswell, "Wasted Words? The Limitations of US Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, no. 5 (2019): 464, <https://doi.org/>.

28. Creswell, "Wasted Words?" 466.

29. Bawarshi and Reiff, *Genre*, 64.

Michael Creswell points out how difficult it would be to change how the United States approaches the genre of the NSS or any other strategic communication or public diplomacy effort, requiring “fundamentally changing the political system of the US, the way in which news is collected and disseminated, and the way in which the US armed forces operate.”³⁰ He argues the primary reason for the executive branch’s inability to control the message stems from the pluralistic political structure of the United States. To this we can add the limiting factors of the NSS as an institutionalized genre with limited appropriate ways of responding to a recurrent situation.

Genres rely on our “stocks of knowledge,” which are “socially derived and confirmed rules, maxims, strategies, and recipes for behaving and acting in typical situations.”³¹ These are socially derived strategies and forms for recognizing and acting within familiar situations. The national security strategy is a typified reaction to a recurrent situation, but what are its epistemological limitations to accurately identify and participate in the construction of the situation to which it responds? Is the instrument of the NSS unsuited to the task given to it? Does it successfully mediate the relationship between the situation and the response?

One aspect of this mediation is that it is “our shared interpretation of a situation, through available typifications such as genres, that makes it recognizable as recurrent and that gives it meaning and value.”³² In this respect, the NSS is successful in and of itself. While agreeing with Creswell’s argument that the executive branch never has a monopoly over the message that this country communicates, nor can it always count on receiving significant domestic or international support for a policy no matter how eloquently that policy is presented, the NSS succeeds in providing “a mutual construing of objects, events, interests and purposes that not only links them but makes them what they are: an objectified social need.”³³

This mutual construing of exigence is how we come to shared agreement on what situations require, what they mean, and how to act within them. The genre becomes an objectified need to respond to the situation, and in this way is epistemological, creating our need to respond and becoming the response itself. The NSS enacts its own motives onto administrations and the participants responsible for its creation.

These “social motives” tell us that “at the level of genre, motive becomes a conventionalized social purpose, or exigence, within the recurrent situation.”³⁴ Individual national security strategy documents articulate the motives of individual presidents; the NSS as a genre reveals our culturally shared definition of our country’s social purpose, or motives, across a timeline of varied yet recurrent situations.

Indeed, RGS scholars agree variation is an inherent part of recurrence, and successful genres must be able to accommodate that variation. This includes being responsive to the genre’s authors’ “individually formed inclinations and dispositions—balancing

30. Creswell, “Wasted Words?,” 476.

31. Bawarshi and Reiff, *Genre*, 67.

32. Bawarshi and Reiff, 70.

33. Bawarshi and Reiff, 70.

34. Miller, “Social Action,” 162.

individuals' own uniquely formed knowledge of the world with socially induced perceptions of commonality."³⁵

Conclusion

The NSS has accommodated both stability and change quite successfully over time as a “stabilized-enough” site of social and ideological action.³⁶ The “stabilized-for-now” or “stabilized-enough” characterization applies to the NSS as a dynamic and adaptive genre over time, constantly mediating relations between a constellation of genres—different strategy documents and different contexts. As a typified way of acting within recurrent situations, the NSS is a site of study that can tell us more than the motives of the current sitting president. It reveals how the nation perceives the national security situation and ways of acting and responding in that context.

Some RGS scholars offer the notion that “genres dynamically embody a community’s ways of knowing, being, and acting,” while serving to “stabilize experience and give it coherence and meaning.”³⁷ The genre conventions of the NSS enable the members of the community who produce it to participate in the activity in fairly predictable, familiar ways in order to create it.

At the same time however, scholarship warns genres must change along with their conditions of use, such as changes in community membership, technology, or values, or risk becoming obsolete.³⁸ In the case of the NSS, it has faced charges of not being agile enough to respond to a dynamic security environment and of constraining creativity and innovation. These charges led to Congress making substantial changes to the genre, one of which includes the transmittal of the NSS to Congress in both a classified and an unclassified form.

This change presumably will have an effect on the authors’ motives—they may hope the classified version will be more strategic and also avoid the pitfalls of trying to please everyone—the problem of consensus can dilute the content. Nevertheless, the national security strategy remains a cultural artifact that embodies our shared perspective of the world and the United States’ position in it, and enacts our agreed-upon response to that context. **Æ**

35. Bawarshi and Reiff, *Genre*, 79.

36. Catherine Schryer, “The Lab vs. the Clinic: Sites of Competing Genres,” in *Genre and the New Rhetoric*, ed. Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 108.

37. Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas N. Huckin, “Rethinking Genre from a Sociocognitive Perspective,” *Written Communication* 10, no. 4 (1993): 479, <https://journals.sagepub.com/>.

38. Charles Bazerman, *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 61.

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