NSC-68

First Name, Surname

Course/Subject

Date

NSC-68

**Introduction**

After the defeat of Germany and the subsequent culmination of the Second World War, there was a shift in the world order, which was typified by the rise of two superpowers: the United States (U.S) and the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). Unlike the previous trends that had traditionally comprised of a balance of power between many different countries, the aftermath of World War II saw power distributed in a bipolar fashion, which pitted the US (capitalist) against the USSR (socialist). Both sides tried to dominate each other through proxy wars and by trying to disseminate their ideology internationally. On April 7th, 1950, the Department of Defense, in conjunction with the State Department, presented a top-secret National Security Council document, which was dubbed the United States Objectives and Programs for National Security, colloquially known as NSC-68.[[1]](#footnote-1) The contents of the 66-page long document heavily influenced and guided the subsequent U.S. interactions with the USSR and foreign policy from the 1950s up to the disintegration of the Soviet Republic. In addition, the document played a critical role in U.S. engagement in Vietnam. This paper will specifically analyze how the NSC-68 addressed and characterized the U.S. national interests. It will additionally highlight how the document influenced the U.S. national foreign policy, particularly during the period of the Cold War and how it guided its interaction with USSR as part of the U.S-led international order.

**Analysis of the NSC-68**

After Mao Zedong emerged victorious in China with the help of the Soviets and the subsequent successful detonation of the atomic bomb by the USSR in 1949, Dean Acheson, the then Secretary of State of the United States tasked members of staff working at the Policy Planning offices to re-evaluate the National Security Strategy of the United States.[[2]](#footnote-2) Paul Nitze headed the team, and as a result of that tasking, they emerged with the NSC-68, a 66 page-long report founded on the perceptions and interpretations of the foreign policy behavior of the USSR.[[3]](#footnote-3) On April 11th, 1950, the team handed over the report to President Truman, and for the next four and a have years, it became the statement and standard of America's national policy. NSC-68 stated that USSR had positioned itself formidably for purposes of retaining and solidifying absolute power with the Kremlin being the center of such power. The report issued a warning that the USSR's plan comprised of complete subversion of governments and states that existed outside the jurisdiction of the Soviet Republic. The intention was to replace them with governments that they could control. The report also stated that for the Kremlin to attain its primary objectives, it had to destroy or subvert the U.S. is the center of power in the non-Soviet world.[[4]](#footnote-4)

NSC-68 outlined how Kremlin's foreign policies had been formulated, particularly the areas that were not under its control. It emerged that USSR's tactical and strategic policies were influenced by Kremlin's concerns towards U.S. military capabilities. The report indicated that USSR had acknowledged that the U.S. was the greatest and the only obstacle preventing it from dominating the world. The report also noted that the USSR had acknowledged that the U.S. was the only country strong enough to use force against the USSR and even destroy it by the use of nuclear weapons. As a result, the NSC-68 made a number of recommendations: either to continue with the present policies; or for the U.S. to isolate itself against the USSR and the rest of the world; or to go to war; or to engage in a rapid buildup of its military, economic, and political strength. The rapid buildup was for purposes of reaching if attainable a tolerable state of mutual respect and world order among countries devoid of going to war and enabling them to defend themselves in the event they faced attacks.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The report further analyzed each option stating that isolation would allow the USSR to dominate other parts of the world, such as Eurasia, without facing any resistance. The report noted that this was dangerous because, with time, it would outmatch the U.S. both in size and in power. The acquisition of too much power would then result in the disposition of the U.S. and would give USSR the necessary tools to annihilate the U.S. on its journey towards global supremacy.[[6]](#footnote-6) With regard to the option of war, the report indicated that at that time, the U.S. was ill-equipped to sustain a war located too far from its geographical proximity. In addition, the suggestion of using atomic weapons was proposed, but the report further stated that such a strike would not dissuade or force the USSR to surrender. Going to war was also a risky option and would not benefit any party both in the short-term and in the long-term. In addition, maintaining the present policies from a military strategic point of view would expose the U.S. in the future as the military would not be strong enough or effective if war erupted. As such, state readiness was seen as of paramount importance for purposes of preventing the USSR from successfully launching and conducting war against the U.S. In light of this, the fourth option proposed by NSC-68 was building the military, economic, and political strength in the free world. The purpose of adopting this option was to avert and postpone the calamitous circumstances, which the report projected would potentially arise in 1954, given the USSR's predicted thermonuclear and fission capabilities.[[7]](#footnote-7) The report argued that the development of a strong political and economic system supported by an enhanced military would discourage the USSR from engaging the U.S. in any protracted aggression.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Impact of the NSC-68 on the U.S. Foreign Policy**

After the National Security Council adopted the NSC-68 report in 1950, the Truman Administration ordered all agencies and executive departments to implement its conclusions and to incorporate them into their policies. Based on the report, the U.S. modeled a new foreign policy that concentrated on three major aspects: improving and enlarging its military capacity, containment of the Soviet Union, and the expansion of foreign assistance directed towards allies in Western Europe. Almost immediately, the American President launched a massive drive to build and enhance the capacity of the U.S. military both in terms of technology and personnel. The Korean War aggravated the fears that the Soviets were planning to expand into the free world, and as a result, the President ordered the buildup of American conventional forces.

In just two years after the adoption of the report, America doubled its military human capacity, and Congress increased military budgetary allocations from $13.5 billion to $48 billion by the year 1951.[[9]](#footnote-9) Besides the expansion of the material and human capacity of the military, the President recommended research and development towards the creation of a thermonuclear bomb. Thermonuclear bombs are ten times more powerful than atomic bombs. This was in line with the recommendations of NSC-68 that had stated that should the USSR gain capacity to develop a thermonuclear weapon before the U.S., then the U.S. would be coerced to subject to the will of the Soviets. Additional budgetary allocations were done towards research in thermonuclear weapons. Initially, the budgetary allocation was only $39 billion, but by the year 1951, funds meant for research on thermonuclear weapons were increased to $102 billion.[[10]](#footnote-10)

With regard to the containment of the Soviet Union, the NSC-68 report advocated for the enhancement of conventional armaments in countries located in Western Europe.[[11]](#footnote-11) As noted by the Director of Policy Planning – Paul Nitze, the main objective of the U.S. foreign policy in relation to containment was to arm Europe in order to prevent any threats in terms of military attacks or invasion by the Soviet Union. As a result, the President ordered the creation and deployment of American bases for its troops in Western Europe as one of the methods for deterrence.[[12]](#footnote-12) By the end of the year 1951, the U.S. had already deployed more than 250,000 soldiers throughout Europe, and most were stationed in West Germany.

The U.S. additionally embarked on a massive supply of foreign aid to Western European countries and other countries that are deemed to be at risk and vulnerable to the risk of communism. This was also part of the recommendations contained in NSC-68. Foreign aid was provided in the form of financial assistance for purposes of developing stable economies abroad and helping them to recover from the effects of the Second World War. In 1951, the President ratified the Mutual Security Act, effectively replacing the European Recovery Program, and this marked a new era for U.S. international assistance. The new policy entailed providing technical, economic, and military assistance to non-communist countries. Yugoslavia was the first beneficiary of the Military Assistance Agreement in 1951, which saw the country benefit from military equipment and financial assistance supplied by the U.S.[[13]](#footnote-13)

It is clear from the reviewed literature that the U.S. foreign policy was largely influenced by NSC-68 from 1950 all through the period of the Cold War. The policies contained within the report played a critical role in the creation of a distinct and new American foreign policy following the culmination of the Second World War. The proposals provided within the report enabled the U.S. to leapfrog the Soviet Union, and the strategies adopted of enhancing its economic, political, and military capacities were sufficient to deter the Soviet Union from engaging the U.S. directly in any form of direct aggression. The deployment of soldiers to strategic locations in Europe also played a critical role in preventing the Soviet Union from advancing and expanding its communist empire. With significant budgetary allocations committed to research, the U.S. continuously increased its capacity and thereby achieved its national objective of preventing the expansion of the Soviet Union to the free world.

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2. Luke, Fletcher, "The Collapse of the Western World: Acheson, Nitze, and the NSC 68/Rearmament Decision," *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 4, 2016, p.750. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Paul, Nitze. H., Forging The Strategy of Containment, (Washington: National Defence University Press, 1994, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. National Security Council Report, NSC 68, "United States Objectives and Programs for National Security," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, 1950, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. George, Kennan, F, "The sources of Soviet conduct," In *Geopolitics*, Routledge, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. National, “'United States Objectives and Programs for National Security,” 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Raymond Ojeserkis, "The United States and the beginning of the Cold War arms race: the Truman administration and the arms build-up of 1950-51," PhD dissertation., London School of Economics and Political Science (University of London), 1998, 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. National, “'United States Objectives and Programs for National Security’” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Fletcher, “The Collapse of the Western World,” 770. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Christopher, Hemmer, *American pendulum: recurring debates in US grand strategy*, Cornell University Press, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)