



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 648

January 19, 2026

Parsing the New National Security Strategy: A Remarkable About Face

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Introduction

After nearly a year in office, the Trump Administration finally issued its long-awaited *National Security Strategy* (NSS), the first of a series of strategy documents typically released by every new administration explaining its worldview and approach to the most serious national security issues confronting the United States. Much commentary on the NSS has already been written, with some extolling its virtues, others criticizing its shortcomings, and some observers describing it as a compilation of the good, the bad, and the ugly.¹ Unfortunately, there is more ugliness than goodness to the strategy, which in many ways reflects a significant retreat from the approach taken by the *National Security Strategy* issued in President Trump's first term.

A Tale of Two Strategies

The 2017 NSS issued during the first Trump Administration correctly focused on the reemergence of great power rivalries in world affairs, highlighting the rise of China as the preeminent external threat to American security and the resurgence of a revisionist Russia threatening U.S. interests and allies. The prescience of refocusing U.S. national security strategy on America's two most powerful nuclear-armed adversaries was confirmed by the provocative actions and growing aggressiveness of both Moscow and Beijing. This focus was repeated in the Biden Administration's 2022 *National Security Strategy*. Yet, the Trump Administration's



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2025 NSS virtually ignores its earlier warnings during President Trump's first term of the dangers to U.S. security posed by China and Russia, acting independently or in concert. These threats have greatly increased since 2017, but, inexplicably, they now no longer command any attention in this strategy document. Ironically, the message that apparent denial of realities sends to foes and friends alike can only be described as dangerous for U.S. security.

Indeed, Russia's expansionist designs, its war of aggression against Ukraine, its nuclear threats against the United States and the West, its development of a plethora of new and sophisticated strategic nuclear weapons systems, its violations of the New START Treaty, its joint political and military collaboration with China under a friendship treaty with "no limits," and its solidifying relationship with the world's worst aggressors and human rights offenders, including North Korea and Iran—have all taken place since the first Trump Administration's 2017 NSS. Yet, none of these developments is even mentioned in the new NSS. Likewise, China's massive expansion of its own nuclear arsenal, including the building of some 300 new ICBM silos, its repeated threats against Taiwan's autonomy, its buildup of military bases in the South China Sea, its aggressive actions against regional neighbors such as the Philippines, its intellectual property theft, its massive propaganda and influence operations targeting the West, its cyber warfare activities, and its flouting of international norms and legal conventions are unmentioned and unaddressed in the current NSS.

These mounting threats have not disappeared from the world stage, just from the fundamental U.S. policy document that should call them out. It is true, as the NSS notes, that prior assumptions that economic engagement with China "would facilitate China's entry into the so-called 'rules-based international order'" proved fallacious.² This conclusion was also evident in the 2017 NSS. Yet, the 2025 NSS declares, "Going forward, we will rebalance America's economic relationship with China," as though such economic "rebalancing" will reduce or eliminate the national security threats to the United States that Beijing poses.³ And though the strategy acknowledges that "the potential for any competitor to control the South China Sea" poses a "security challenge" for the United States,⁴ the NSS lacks important details such as *who* that competitor is or *how* the United States plans to prevent this. It argues only that the United States will build a strong military to deter and deny aggression, while calling on U.S. regional allies to "step up and spend—and more importantly do—much more for collective defense."⁵ This is a far cry from the warnings in the 2017 NSS that "China is expanding its economic and military presence in Africa,"⁶ that "China is gaining a strategic foothold in Europe,"⁷ and that "China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor."⁸

With respect to Russia, the 2025 NSS ignores Moscow's responsibility for its aggression against Ukraine and its constant nuclear threats. It reserves its fire for America's European allies who see Russia as an "existential threat" that requires "significant U.S. diplomatic engagement" for "managing European relations with Russia."⁹ Indeed, the strategy openly acknowledges that "The Trump Administration finds itself at odds with European officials who hold unrealistic expectations for the [Russia-Ukraine] war perched in unstable minority



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governments, many of which trample on basic principles of democracy to suppress opposition.”¹⁰ It argues that Europe faces “civilizational erasure” due to lax immigration policies and questions “whether certain European countries will have economies and militaries strong enough to remain reliable allies,”¹¹ calls on Europe to “regain its civilizational self-confidence,”¹² and declares that “Our goal should be to help Europe correct its current trajectory,”¹³ foreshadowing some sort of direct intervention in Europe’s affairs. It argues for shifting the burden of defending the European continent from the United States to Europe itself. And importantly, the strategy calls for reestablishing “strategic stability with Russia,”¹⁴ a concept that is undefined and often equated with minimal U.S. nuclear capabilities and an arms control approach that eschews defending the U.S. homeland against the prospect of crippling Russian strategic nuclear strikes—contrary to the president’s own Golden Dome initiative. This apparent inconsistency is left unexplained.

In addition to the different approaches taken to China and Russia in the 2017 and 2025 NSS documents, there are other concerning features. In some cases, what the document does not say about the national security threats to the United States posed by external actors such as Iran and North Korea is more telling than what it does say. For example, the 2017 NSS stated:

We are rallying the world against the rogue regime in North Korea and confronting the danger posed by the dictatorship in Iran.... North Korea—a country that starves its own people—has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons that could threaten our homeland.... North Korea seeks the capability to kill millions of Americans with nuclear weapons. Iran supports terrorist groups and openly calls for our destruction.... The Iranian regime sponsors terrorism around the world. It is developing more capable ballistic missiles and has the potential to resume its work on nuclear weapons that could threaten the United States and our partners.... We will work with partners to deny the Iranian regime all paths to a nuclear weapon and neutralize Iranian malign influence.¹⁵

Interestingly, there is no mention in the 2025 NSS of the threats posed by either North Korea or Iran to the U.S. homeland. In fact, the words “North Korea” do not appear even once in the document. This is an odd omission for a national security strategy, as the rudimentary missile defense system deployed in the United States since 2004 is deliberately designed to defend the nation against rogue state missile threats emanating from North Korea and potentially Iran.

With respect to Iran, there are also internal inconsistencies. For example, in the introductory preface to the document, the president states, “In Operation Midnight Hammer, we obliterated Iran’s nuclear enrichment capacity.”¹⁶ Yet, the strategy document itself draws a more nuanced conclusion, stating that Operation Midnight Hammer “significantly degraded Iran’s nuclear program.”¹⁷ Clearly, the terms “obliterated” and “significantly degraded” are not synonymous.



The Law of Unintended Consequences

The abrupt policy about face reflected in the current U.S. NSS has led America's allies – already increasingly skeptical of the U.S. commitment to their own security – to question further not only the direction of U.S. foreign and national security policy but the reliability and credibility of the United States as an ally. Indeed, it has fostered calls in some quarters for Europe to consider the transatlantic alliance that has deterred major war on the continent for more than eight decades to be over. The deterrence, extended deterrence, and proliferation implications of this are grave.

An American retrenchment from Europe, however characterized and publicly articulated, would have cascading effects that increase the risk of conflict, as allies seek alternative security arrangements and expansionist powers such as Russia salivate at the prospect of an ending to the U.S. role as the bulwark against continental aggression. In such a situation, there is a greater risk that the edifice of extended nuclear deterrence that has prevented the outbreak of major conflict in Europe for the past eight decades will crumble. Moreover, the apparent U.S. retrenchment from much of the world may lead multiple countries, including those who have counted on the United States and the NATO alliance for their ultimate security, to consider the acquisition of their own independent nuclear capabilities to offset a folding of the American “nuclear umbrella.” If so, this will lead to an unprecedented cascade of nuclear proliferation that would undermine and overturn decades of American nonproliferation policy.

A Strategy... or Not?

Strategy has been defined as “the intelligent allocation of resources through a unique system of activities to achieve a goal.”¹⁸ With this in mind, the 2025 NSS is more of an aspirational document than a strategy. Its goal is “to strengthen American power and preeminence and make our country even greater than it has ever been.”¹⁹ Yet, it says nothing about *how* the United States intends to align means with ends in order to accomplish the aspirational objectives it articulates.

It advocates for “peace through strength,” saying that the United States “must maintain... the world's most capable military,”²⁰ while it is silent on the nature of looming threats or what resources are necessary to achieve this. It advocates for a policy of “non-interventionism,” yet acknowledges that “rigid adherence to non-interventionism is not possible”²¹ and provides no standards, metrics, criteria, or framework for judging when U.S. intervention would be acceptable, necessary, or successful (though apparently the aforementioned effort to correct Europe's civilizational missteps meets this undeclared standard). It declares U.S. policy to be based on a principle of “flexible realism.”²² However, it offers no definition of the term, yardstick by which to assess its implementation, or any explanation of why or when something other than “realism” should prevail. It asserts that “the United States cannot allow any nation to become so dominant that it could threaten our interests,”²³ yet it is silent on Russia's and China's ongoing and expanding efforts to do just that. Indeed, it calls for a “readjustment of



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our global military presence to address urgent threats in our Hemisphere... and away from theaters whose relative import to American national security has declined in recent decades or years” (e.g., Europe).²⁴ Such an approach reflects a repudiation of the prescient 2017 NSS, which warned, for example, of the dangers of China’s growing global political, economic, and military presence.

Conclusion

In short, the 2025 NSS leaves much to be desired and many questions unanswered. Perhaps at least some of those answers will be forthcoming when the long-delayed *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) is finally released. Certainly, the NDS should be nested under and consistent with the NSS. Hopefully, the NDS will reflect a more coherent view of the national security challenges facing the United States and how the administration plans to confront them.

Of course, no strategy is worth its weight in paper without the necessary resources to implement it. In this regard, the Congress should carefully examine the new NSS, ask the tough questions, and assess whether the strategy itself makes sense, and, if so, how the administration intends to implement it, what programmatic adjustments are needed to support it, and what level of funding is required to resource it successfully. In addition, a full examination of the implications of the new NSS on both allies and adversaries is warranted. Ultimately, it is Congress’ responsibility to ensure that the course set by the executive branch is adequate to the task of defending the nation in an increasingly dynamic and dangerous international environment.

¹ See, for example, Rebecca Heinrichs, “What Trump’s National Security Strategy Gets Right,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 15, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/what-trumps-national-security-strategy-gets-right>; Anne Applebaum, “The Longest Suicide Note in American History,” *The Atlantic*, December 16, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/2025/12/national-security-strategy-democracy/685270/>; Matthew Kroenig, “Two Cheers for the National Security Strategy,” *Foreign Policy*, December 11, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/12/11/national-security-strategy-trump-economic-political-democracy/>; Emily Harding, “The National Security Strategy: The Good, the Not So Great, and the Alarm Bells,” *CSIS Commentary*, December 5, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/national-security-strategy-good-not-so-great-and-alarm-bells>.

² The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, p. 19, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, p. 52, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, *op. cit.*, p. 25.



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¹⁰ Ibid., p. 26.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 25, 27.

¹⁵ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, op. cit., pp. 1, 3, 7, 26, 49.

¹⁶ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, op. cit., p.i.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 28.

¹⁸ Rich Horwath, "What is Strategy?," Strategic Thinking Institute, September 23, 2020, <https://www.strategyskills.com/what-is-strategy/>.

¹⁹ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, op. cit., p. 7.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

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