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### **Parsing the New National Defense Strategy: Upending Bipartisan Tradition**

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#### **Introduction**

After a prolonged delay, the Trump Administration finally issued the unclassified version of its long-anticipated *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) in January – the second such security strategy document released in the Trump Administration’s second term. The 2026 document is a significant departure from prior NDSs in many ways. As the NDS itself admits, the new strategy requires “a sharp shift—in approach, focus, and tone” from previous strategy documents promulgated by prior administrations.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the NDS chastises the “grandiose strategies of the past post-Cold War administrations” for being “untethered...from a concrete focus on Americans’ practical interest.”<sup>2</sup> One wonders if this includes the Trump Administration’s first term NDS, which was also decidedly different than the current 2026 strategy.

In the memo of transmittal accompanying the NDS, the “Secretary of War” notes that the strategy is focused on ensuring the United States can accomplish its national security objectives “for decades to come” and states, “The 2026 National Defense Strategy shows how.”<sup>3</sup> Regrettably, the NDS does no such thing. It acknowledges that an “America First” strategy “must practically correlate ends, ways, and means in a realistic fashion,”<sup>4</sup> but it does not explain how budgetary and programmatic means will align with its aspirational ends. Of course, no strategy can be expected to provide that level of detail, but its smorgasbord of



generalities and statements of good intentions should at least be accompanied by a hint of what it will take to implement the strategy.

### **Less Continuity, More Change**

The NDS is supposed to be nested under and consistent with the *National Security Strategy* (NSS), which was released in December 2025. And indeed, the NDS reflects a similar change in “approach, focus, and tone” adopted in the NSS. It articulates a policy of “peace through strength,” prioritizes defense of the homeland over all other security issues, highlights China’s rise as a global power and the need to deter it, reinforces the “Trump Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine, and demands U.S. allies, particularly in Europe, do more for their own security. These basic principles align with the focus of the NSS.

Yet, there are disturbing undercurrents in the document that suggest a lack of understanding and appreciation of Europe’s importance to U.S. security and the second and third order implications of the overall change in approach, focus, and tone reflected in the NDS. For example, the document says that other NATO allies should take “primary responsibility for Europe’s conventional defense” with the United States playing a “more limited” role.<sup>5</sup> This includes Europe “taking the lead in supporting Ukraine’s defense.”<sup>6</sup> Such statements would likely resonate with most Americans.

It is true that European nations have neglected their defense responsibilities to focus on domestic priorities. It is also the case that the Trump Administration deserves credit for prompting NATO to increase its defense spending. However, downgrading the U.S. focus on Europe downplays the importance of the continent to America’s own national security – a linkage that has been recognized by every U.S. administration since the end of World War II – and may create opportunities for adversaries such as Russia to expand their sphere of influence on the continent at America’s expense. This is hardly the “flexible, practical realism” called for in the NDS.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, this “more limited” U.S. role in Europe’s defense may sow greater doubts about the future of the U.S. extended deterrence commitment to NATO. Indeed, the document does not even mention extended deterrence as part of U.S. defense strategy – something that every post-World War II administration has validated on a bipartisan basis. This reflects a significant departure from the tone of the Trump Administration’s 2018 NDS, which, while calling on U.S. allies to “to contribute an equitable share to our mutually beneficial collective security,” recognized the importance of alliances and advocated for partnerships built on “a foundation of mutual respect.”<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere, the document extends this principle to other regions, calling on allies and partners to assume “primary responsibility for their own defense in Europe, the Middle East, and on the Korean Peninsula...”<sup>9</sup> Although the NDS asserts, “This does not mean isolationism,”<sup>10</sup> it is nevertheless likely to confirm the worst fears of U.S. allies abroad that the United States can no longer be counted on to come to their defense if push comes to shove. Such an approach is also likely to fuel pressures for countries like South Korea to obtain their



own nuclear weapons as a deterrent to enemy aggression. Ironically, the NDS may therefore upend decades of bipartisan U.S. nonproliferation policy by inadvertently encouraging other states to go nuclear. Yet, the strategy says nothing about the risks or implications of nuclear proliferation and does not even mention the term.

### The Nuclear Conundrum

The NDS is also deficient in its approach to U.S. nuclear posture. Various administrations of both political parties have long stated that nuclear deterrence is “Job #1” when it comes to U.S. national defense. Yet, the strategy document only devotes a handful of sentences to this critical issue, declaring, “We will maintain a robust and modern nuclear deterrent capable of addressing the strategic threats to our country.... We will modernize and adapt our nuclear forces accordingly with focused attention on deterrence and escalation management amidst the changing global nuclear landscape. The United States should never—*will* never—be left vulnerable to nuclear blackmail.”<sup>11</sup>

Just *how* the United States will adapt its nuclear forces to meet dynamic nuclear challenges is left unsaid. Will the United States simply continue with the nuclear modernization program of record initiated more than 15 years ago by the Obama Administration? In light of the growing nuclear threats to the U.S. homeland explicitly acknowledged by the NDS, does the strategy support the development and acquisition of additional nuclear capabilities to strengthen deterrence, in addition to the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) proposed by the first Trump Administration? The document is noticeably deficient in explaining what nuclear programs are necessary to implement the deterrence and “escalation management” approaches it advocates and what resources it will take to accomplish this. Again, the “ways and means” for achieving the “ends” articulated in the NDS are unspecified.

Moreover, some confusion appears to exist over the nature of nuclear threats posed by U.S. adversaries. For example, the strategy document unequivocally states, “By any measure, China is already the second most powerful country in the world—behind only the United States—and the most powerful state relative to us since the 19th century.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps nuclear weapons capabilities were not considered by the authors to be a measure of national power. If they were, this statement would be patently false, as a subsequent passage in the NDS makes clear by noting that “Russia...possesses the world’s largest nuclear arsenal....”<sup>13</sup> Such inconsistencies contribute to confusion rather than clarity.

Although the document acknowledges that Russia “continues to modernize and diversify” its nuclear arsenal, the NDS nevertheless declares Russia’s threat to NATO’s front-line states “manageable,” stating that “Russia is in no position to make a bid for European hegemony.”<sup>14</sup> While true in substance, European NATO nations will hardly be assured, particularly those that have suffered from Russian drone incursions, been victimized by Russian information operations, irregular and “hybrid” warfare, and cyber attacks, and have been subjected to a plethora of Russian nuclear threats. In fact, the risks of nuclear coercion are not discussed, and the term itself does not even appear in the document despite Russia repeatedly issuing nuclear



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threats against NATO allies. This stands in stark contrast to the 2018 NDS, which stated, “Modernization of the nuclear force includes developing options to counter competitors’ coercive strategies, predicated on the threatened use of nuclear or strategic non-nuclear attack.”<sup>15</sup>

Other aspects of U.S. nuclear posture are also unmentioned, which include any changes or adaptations to declaratory policy, such as “no first use” or “sole purpose” policies, or any discussion of deterrence requirements given the increased dangers of the international security environment acknowledged by the NDS. The administration has indicated it will not release a separate Nuclear Posture Review,<sup>16</sup> so ignoring these issues in the NDS seems shortsighted given their critical relevance to national security.

### Other Unaddressed Concerns

The NDS correctly notes increased threats to the U.S. homeland from “a variety of conventional strike and space, cyber, [and] electromagnetic warfare capabilities.”<sup>17</sup> It states that the United States “will prioritize bolstering cyber defenses” and “develop other options” to defend against cyber threats.<sup>18</sup> It also declares, “We will also ensure that U.S. forces have access to the electromagnetic spectrum required to defend the Homeland.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, *how* the United States plans to defend its space assets and protect its critical infrastructures against electromagnetic warfare capabilities is left unaddressed.

Other unaddressed concerns deal with the national security ramifications of China’s expanding global influence. For example, the strategy states, “The Department’s priority in Africa is to prevent Islamic terrorists from using regional safe havens to strike the U.S. Homeland.”<sup>20</sup> While a necessary and important priority, the document is silent on China’s burgeoning role in Africa and the implications of its growing footprint there for U.S. national security interests. By contrast, the 2018 NDS called for limiting “the malign influence of non-African powers” on the continent.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, while the strategy talks about maintaining a viable defense posture along the First Island Chain in the Pacific, Taiwan is never mentioned by name.

In addition, the strategy devotes but a single paragraph to North Korea (which is one paragraph more than was present in the NSS), acknowledging that Pyongyang’s nuclear forces “present a clear and present danger of nuclear attack on the American Homeland” without describing how the United States plans to deter North Korea or reiterating the first Trump Administration’s call for the “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the 2018 NDS explicitly identified U.S. missile defenses as tailored to address North Korean ballistic missile threats.<sup>23</sup>

### Missile Defense

To defend against missile and advanced aerial threats, the NDS supports President Trump’s Golden Dome initiative. However, it states that this effort will “focus on options to cost-



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effectively defeat large missile barrages and other advanced aerial attacks.”<sup>24</sup> The use of the term “cost-effectively” raises questions over how the issue of cost effectiveness will be defined and determined and what effect it will have on programmatic decisions. In the past, missile defenses were criticized as being cost ineffective. President Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative was torpedoed in part because it did not meet the so-called “Nitze criteria” of being “cost effective at the margin,” meaning that the cost to an attacker of adding offensive missiles was cheaper than the cost to the defender of adding missile defense interceptors.<sup>25</sup> As Israel’s Iron Dome experience demonstrated, such cost effectiveness criteria are inappropriate and ignore the fact that the cost of rebuilding a city would be infinitely more expensive than the cost of a defensive system protecting it. The administration should take care to ensure that the “cost effectiveness” criterion is not used to stymie the development of Golden Dome.

In addition, the document expresses support for “strategic stability” with China<sup>26</sup> – typically a euphemism for strategic vulnerability consistent with the canonical Cold War “balance of terror” philosophy that equates vulnerability with stability. Indeed, the United States has deliberately refrained from building defenses against strategic missile attacks from China or Russia, believing such defenses to be “destabilizing.” The president’s Golden Dome initiative is intended to overturn the illogic of national societal vulnerability and is a positive step forward. However, it is unclear how the administration defines strategic stability. One can only assume that the administration has cast aside the Cold War assumption that the term connotes a situation of mutual vulnerability given the Golden Dome’s mission of developing and deploying a robust missile defense capability intended to deter and defeat missile attacks of any size and from any country, including China.

### **Some Positive Aspects**

Support for Golden Dome is a positive shift toward accepting the value missile defenses can provide in strengthening deterrence and protecting the homeland in the event deterrence fails, and the Trump Administration deserves credit for seeking to move beyond antiquated Cold War notions of missile defenses as provocative and destabilizing. Although the NDS lacks specific details on how the Golden Dome initiative will be implemented and what programmatic elements will be included – topics better addressed in subordinate implementing directives – the general support it expresses is welcome.

Another somewhat positive area is explicit recognition of the possibility of opportunistic or coordinated aggression by U.S. adversaries. The NDS refers to this as “the simultaneity problem.”<sup>27</sup> However, instead of discussing how the United States will address this issue, the NDS chastises U.S. allies for exacerbating the problem by underinvesting in defense for decades and criticizes U.S. policy makers “who imprudently believed that the United States benefited from allies who were more dependencies than they were partners.”<sup>28</sup> Such language is unlikely to generate sympathy from those whose support is necessary to help deter the prospect of opportunistic or coordinated aggression, including by Moscow and Beijing acting in concert to diminish U.S. power in accordance with their “no limits” treaty of friendship.



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With respect to Iran, the NDS highlights the tremendous success of Operation MIDNIGHT HAMMER, correctly noting that “Iran’s regime is weaker and more vulnerable than it has been in decades.” It acknowledges that “Iran’s leaders have also left open the possibility that they will try again to obtain a nuclear weapon...” but reiterates that “Iran will not be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons.”<sup>29</sup> Consistent with this approach, the Trump Administration launched Operation EPIC FURY on February 28, 2026 to eliminate Iran’s ability to reconstitute its nuclear program—an operation with Israel that resulted in the decapitation of the Iranian leadership and opened the door to a significant and positive transformation of the entire Middle East.

Finally, the NDS deserves credit for something it does *not* say; that is, there is no mention of the necessity or desirability of arms control to ensure U.S. security. With the expiration of the New START Treaty on February 5, the United States is now free to adjust its nuclear forces accordingly to enhance its deterrent capability and improve its overall military posture vis-à-vis America’s adversaries. Arms control is unlikely to result in a strategic environment favorable to U.S. interests when both Russia and China see it as a tool to help overturn the existing U.S.-led world order and to create a new world order in their favor.<sup>30</sup>

In this context, however, even the desirability of a world order based on agreed upon rules of behavior now appears problematic. For although the 2018 NDS stated that the “decline in the long-standing rules-based international order” has created “a security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory,”<sup>31</sup> the Secretary’s NDS transmittal memo refers to the “rules-based international order” as an example of the “cloud-castle abstractions” that have led previous administrations to squander U.S. military advantages and place the lives and fortunes of Americans in jeopardy.<sup>32</sup> At a broader level, the controversy over the Trump Administration’s efforts to acquire Greenland may be interpreted by some as a concrete example of antipathy toward the “rules-based international order,” presaging the end of decades of bipartisan American foreign policy efforts to ensure relative stability in the international security environment. Indeed, some may see the strategy’s focus on Western Hemispheric threats to the U.S. homeland and its call for regional allies to shoulder a greater burden in their own defense as a repudiation of the existing rules-based international order and an acceptance of the notion of “spheres of influence.”

## Conclusion

In short, the NDS, like the NSS, is an aspirational document lacking important details regarding how the United States will meet the defense challenges of today and tomorrow. Its inventory of such challenges is notably incomplete. And it fails to adequately address the “ways, means, and ends” issue. The phrase “we will” appears 67 times in the 24-page document. Yet the question of *how* “we will” marshal the resources and capabilities necessary to do everything the strategy puts forward remains unanswered.

The document’s guiding principle is “Out with utopian idealism; in with hardnosed realism.”<sup>33</sup> However, a truly realistic appraisal of the national security challenges the nation



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faces would result in a qualitatively different strategy document than the one that has been produced and would consider how threats and U.S. responses to those threats in one region may affect the perceptions and actions of both friends and foes in other regions. While a defense strategy based on the notion of “peace through strength” is appropriate to today’s dynamic threats, it remains to be seen whether the resources necessary to implement the strategy will be forthcoming and how effectively they will be applied.

<sup>1</sup> Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, January 23, 2026, p. 6, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Memo on “SUBJECT: 2026 National Defense Strategy,” *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *2026 National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 2018, p. 9, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/18/2002302061/-1/-1/1/2018-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-SUMMARY.PDF>.

<sup>9</sup> *2026 National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Memo on “SUBJECT: 2026 National Defense Strategy,” op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> *2026 National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., pp. 3, 17. (emphasis in original)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Greg Hadley, “US Won’t Update Nuclear Posture Review: Pentagon Policy Chief,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, March 5, 2026, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/no-2026-nuclear-posture-review-pentagon-policy-czar/>.

<sup>17</sup> *2026 National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> The White House, “Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit,” June 12, 2018, [https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/#:~:text=On%20June%2012%2C%202018%2C%20President%20Donald%20Trump,\\*\\*Implement%20the%20stipulations%20in%20the%20joint%20statement\\*\\*](https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/#:~:text=On%20June%2012%2C%202018%2C%20President%20Donald%20Trump,**Implement%20the%20stipulations%20in%20the%20joint%20statement**).

<sup>23</sup> *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> *2026 National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 17.



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<sup>25</sup> For a detailed discussion of this point, see Matthew R. Costlow, *A Curious Criterion: Cost Effective at the Margin for Missile Defense*, *Information Series*, No. 537 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 21, 2022), [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/matthew-r-costlow-a-curious-criterion-cost-effective-at-the-margin-for-missile-defense-no-537-october-21-2022/](https://nipp.org/information_series/matthew-r-costlow-a-curious-criterion-cost-effective-at-the-margin-for-missile-defense-no-537-october-21-2022/).

<sup>26</sup> *2026 National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., pp. 4, 18.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *2026 National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

<sup>30</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this point, see David J. Trachtenberg, *Why Arms Control Must Fail*, *Information Series*, No. 627 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 12, 2025), [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/david-j-trachtenberg-why-arms-control-must-fail-no-627-july-12-2025/](https://nipp.org/information_series/david-j-trachtenberg-why-arms-control-must-fail-no-627-july-12-2025/).

<sup>31</sup> *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Memo on "SUBJECT: 2026 National Defense Strategy," op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> *2026 National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 6.

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