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**Expert Commentary on the
2025 National Defense Strategy**

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Preface

This *Occasional Paper* provides a compilation of views on the Trump Administration's 2026 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS). The document, publicly released in January 2026, is longer than the *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* released during President Trump's first term, and consistent with the previously released 2025 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, represents a significant departure from the priorities established in earlier national defense strategies.

The 2026 NDS provides insight into the Department of Defense's¹ approach to addressing the goals and objectives of the National Security Strategy. In the introductory memorandum to the NDS, the Secretary of Defense states that this new approach "does not mean isolationism. To the contrary, it means a focused and genuinely strategic approach to the threats our nation faces and how to best manage them. This approach is based on a flexible, practical realism that looks at the world in a clear-eyed way, which is essential for serving Americans' interests."

The commentaries contained in this *Occasional Paper* reflect the personal views of well-respected subject matter experts in the field of defense and national security policy and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the U.S. government or any entity or organization with which the authors may be affiliated. Many of the contributors have a distinguished record of service at senior levels of the U.S. government and their views are informed by years—in

¹ Although the Trump Administration has rebranded the Department of Defense as the Department of War and the Secretary of Defense is now referred to as the Secretary of War, Executive Order 14347 notes that this is a "secondary title" and that "Statutory references to the Department of Defense, Secretary of Defense, and subordinate officers and components shall remain controlling until changed subsequently by the law."

some cases, decades—of public service dealing with strategic-level national security issues. In addition, foreign expert perspective is also included.

This volume begins with commentary from James Anderson, who argues that despite its positive features, the NDS falls short in addressing China's threat both regionally and globally. He notes that the document "devotes more attention to China than it first appears, although this requires reading between the lines in places." In particular, he notes that the NDS' "hesitancy to call out China by name regarding threats to the homeland is matched by its peculiar silence on Taiwan" and concludes that more military-to-military contacts with the People's Liberation Army—as called for in the NDS—cannot address "the profound underlying political and economic frictions that define the U.S.-China relationship." Michaela Dodge argues that the NDS "falls short in realistically appraising U.S. adversaries and underappreciates the contributions allies make to U.S. security." She contends that the NDS "fails to appreciate that current adversaries' objectives are fundamentally at odds with U.S. ones and that status quo powers need superiority, not parity," expressing the hope that implementation of the strategy will correct some of its "more problematic aspects." Gary Geipel notes that the NDS's positive aspects have been eclipsed by the lack of a systematic roll-out and coordinated communications strategy. He contends that "it was not taken seriously by its authors as a document worth communicating to key constituencies and applying to major, near-term decisions," and therefore "promptly sacrificed much of the impact it might have had on American citizens, allies, and adversaries alike." Mark Mattox reviews the history and rationale behind the various corollaries to the original Monroe Doctrine and their consistency with the "Trump Corollary" expressed in the NDS. He argues that "far from being a historical aberration," the Trump Corollary "sits

comfortably in the evolutionary chain that characterizes the Monroe Doctrine's development." He concludes that while it moves the United States away from a "strictly paternalistic role as guarantor of the defense of the Western Hemisphere and toward one which expects proactive defense efforts by all Western states," it "clearly asserts the U.S. prerogative to act in its own interests, whether supported by its hemispheric neighbors or not." Michael Rühle argues that "the NDS' awkward style fundamentally undermines its seriousness as a policy guidance document of a major world power." He notes that "the obsession with blaming allies as well as former U.S. administrations is a recurring theme" and that "European allies will continue to watch U.S. decisions with unease." He also criticizes the document for its lack of any reference to "extended deterrence," and concludes that "the NDS appears to go out of its way to suppress any notion of China as a nuclear rival." Mark Schneider notes that although the NDS's discussion of nuclear weapons is limited, it nevertheless reflects a "traditional concept of nuclear deterrence" that dates back decades. He notes that the defense strategy acknowledges "the dramatic increase in overt nuclear threats by multiple hostile foreign leaders during the last two decades" and argues for the deployment of additional low-yield U.S. nuclear weapons to implement the NDS's deterrence through denial strategy. Santiago Spadiliero reviews two of the key lines of effort in the NDS—the focus on the Western Hemisphere and defense of the homeland. He contends that the Trump Administration "has changed the script of policymaking with a set of new, innovative, and somewhat controversial decisions," arguing that the emphasis on Golden Dome may be perceived as a return to what has been described as a "Fortress America." David Trachtenberg considers the NDS less of a strategy and more of an aspirational document, noting that it "does not explain how budgetary and programmatic means will align with its

aspirational ends.” He notes that the NDS is generally consistent with the previously released *National Security Strategy*, but that it reflects a “significant departure” in substance and tone from the prior defense strategies of previous administrations, including the first Trump Administration. While he sees positive elements in the NDS, including support for missile defense and recognition of the threat of opportunistic or coordinated aggression by U.S. adversaries, he concludes the NDS downplays critical threats to U.S. security and lacks important details on how the United States will counter them. Finally, Bing West comments on the four main themes of the NDS, criticizing the document as “untrustworthy” given the president’s “incoherent” philosophy and frequent changes in decisions. He concludes that “the national defense strategy reflects President Trump’s impulsive, emotional choices. It is an interregnum strategy, certain to be drastically altered or thrown aside by the next commander-in-chief.”

In short, many of the expert commentaries contained in this volume note positive aspects of the NDS—including its focus on defending the homeland and encouraging greater allied burden sharing—while criticizing its tone and lack of substance in describing key threats and cogently explaining the administration’s approach to dealing with them. Clearly, the authors whose views are expressed here see the NDS as a mixed bag.

We thank the Smith Richardson and Sarah Scaife Foundations for making this *Occasional Paper* possible and hope you find the perspectives reflected here both novel and informative.

The National Defense Strategy: A Mixed Bag on China

James H. Anderson

Introduction

The *2026 National Defense Strategy* (NDS), released earlier this January, includes several positive features. It emphasizes strengthening national missile defense (aka Golden Dome), bolstering border security, and reviving the Defense Industrial Base. The NDS also draws attention to the “simultaneity problem” of multiple adversaries initiating hostilities across different theaters. This problem is not new—Pentagon planners have wrestled with it for decades—but it has new salience given the growing military cooperation between China and Russia. The simultaneity problem is a strong argument for allies and partners to increase their self-defense capabilities.

The NDS adapts the Monroe Doctrine to the twenty-first century security threats, which aligns well with President Trump’s emphasis on hemispheric defense. More broadly, with its observation that “America’s alliances and partnerships form a defensive perimeter around Eurasia,” the strategy echoes geopolitical theorist Nicolas Spykman’s Rimlands Theory.¹ The Monroe Doctrine and the Rimlands Theory are rooted in geography, which befits the NDS’s embrace of practical realism; both recall Colin Gray’s timeless, and under-appreciated, insight that “all strategy is geostrategy.”² The NDS is right to emphasize key terrain.

¹ Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, p. 13, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>.

² Colin Gray, *Forty Maxims on War, Peace, and Security* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), pp. 78-81.

Yet, at times, the strategy hesitates to call out just who menaces these pieces of strategic real estate, although the answer is obvious. These considerations bring us to China and the sizeable challenge of deterring its hegemonic ambitions.

China No Longer First Priority?

At first blush, it may seem that the NDS has de-emphasized the China threat. Notably, there are no references to China as the “pacing threat” in the strategy, even though this label has been a staple of the Department’s lexicon for years. “Deterring China” is ranked second to “Defending the Homeland,” which is the NDS’s number one priority. The strategy devotes more attention to China than it first appears, although this requires reading between the lines in places.

Consider NDS sub-headers listed under Line of Effort 1, “Defend the U.S. Homeland.” Under “Secure Key Terrain in the Western Hemisphere,” the NDS emphasizes the importance of U.S. commercial and military access to Greenland, the Gulf of America, and the Panama Canal. This triadic grouping is no accident. While the NDS does not call out China by name, Beijing has sought to expand its influence in all three areas: seeking to buy key infrastructure in Greenland, developing its intelligence facilities in Cuba, and investing in ports at both ends of the Panama Canal.

The next two sub-headers – “Defend America’s Skies with President Trump’s Golden Dome for America” and “Modernize and Adapt U.S. Nuclear Forces” – are clearly aimed, at least in part, to address China’s dramatic nuclear modernization efforts over the past decade. They also apply to Russia and North Korea, which along with China have the capacity to strike the United States with nuclear weapons.

Finally, under “Deter and Defend Against Cyber Threats,” the NDS states the Department of War (DoW) will “prioritize bolstering cyber defenses for U.S. military and certain civilian targets” and “develop other options to deter or degrade cyber threats to the U.S. homeland.”³ There is no doubt that China is a prime threat here, along with Russia. In January 2024, then FBI Director Christopher Wray publicly testified before Congress that China has infiltrated key U.S. domestic infrastructure and that “low blows against civilians are part of China’s plan” in the event of conflict.⁴

Wray’s comments remind us that global threats do not silo themselves into regionally-defined boxes, however tempting it may be to think of them in this manner. The hard reality is that China threatens the United States at home and abroad in ways that few could have imagined just a couple decades ago. For example, China’s ability to strike America’s critical infrastructure, which includes potentially damaging port facilities on the West Coast, could complicate U.S. efforts to surge forces to the Indo-Pacific in the event of a major conflict with China. In other words, there is no longer a viable distinction between a “home game” and an “away game” when it comes to potential conflict with China; they are one and the same. Clear-thinking about China requires an appreciation of regional threats from a global perspective.

³ 2026 *National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 17.

⁴ Christopher A. Wray, “Director Wray’s Opening Statement to the House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party,” Washington, D.C., January 31, 2024, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/speeches-and-testimony/director-wrays-opening-statement-to-the-house-select-committee-on-the-chinese-communist-party>. See also Christopher A. Williams, “The Coming War in America,” *Information Series*, No. 650 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 12, 2026), https://nipp.org/information_series/christopher-a-williams-the-coming-war-in-america-no-650-february-10-2026/.

Silence on Taiwan

The NDS's hesitancy to call out China by name regarding threats to the homeland is matched by its peculiar silence on Taiwan. This omission is striking given that Taiwan constitutes the most dangerous flashpoint for a major confrontation between the U.S. military and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). China views Taiwan as a renegade province and refuses to rule out using force in pursuit of reunification. Moreover, President Xi has ordered the PLA to "be ready" to take the island by 2027.⁵ The NDS underscores how important it is to "build, posture, and sustain a strong denial defense along the [First Island Chain] FIC."⁶ Taiwan is the linchpin to this defense.

To be fair, the DoW's 2018 *National Defense Strategy* during the first Trump Administration did not mention Taiwan either. But eight years later, China has a much more credible military capability to threaten the island—with both conventional and unconventional means—than it did before. Moreover, Taiwan is mentioned—several times in fact—in the administration's December 2025 *National Security Strategy* (NSS).⁷ The NSS clearly states that "detering a conflict over Taiwan, ideally by preserving, military overmatch, is a priority."⁸ Demonstrating its commitment here, in December 2025, the Administration approved an arms package for Taiwan, totaling more than

⁵ In February 2023, then CIA Director William Burns stated this. See Hope Yen, "CIA chief: China has some doubt on ability to invade Taiwan," *Associated Press*, February 26, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-taiwan-politics-united-states-government-eaf869eb617c6c356b2708607ed15759>.

⁶ 2026 *National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 18.

⁷ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 23.

ten billion dollars.⁹ The NDS is supposed to be in alignment with the NSS, so the DoW's avoidance of any reference to Taiwan in its formal strategy is a peculiar omission.

Gray Zone Gets Short Shrift

Another area that receives short shrift in the NDS is China's gray zone activities. In addition to preparing for war with China if deterrence should fail, the DoW must also play a role in countering China below the level of armed conflict. China thrives in the gray zone, reflecting its preference to win without fighting, if possible. China's efforts here include, but are not limited to, attempts to intimidate Taiwan as well as U.S. treaty allies such as Japan, the Philippines and Australia with increasingly aggressive military exercises; the continued fortification of manmade islands in the South China Sea with advanced weaponry; relentless cyber propaganda and political warfare emphasizing China's irresistible rise and America's decline; lawfare campaigns to promote China's expansionist claims in the South China Sea; and, closer to home, periodic interference in U.S. political campaigns.¹⁰

China's gray zone activities are carefully calibrated and incremental in scope. No one action appears overly consequential. But just as placing individual sheets of paper atop one another eventually results in a weighty sheaf, the

⁹ Foundation for Defense of Democracies, "Trump Administration Approves Massive Arms Sales Package to Taiwan," *Flash Brief*, December 18, 2025, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/12/18/trump-administration-approves-massive-arms-sale-package-to-taiwan/>.

¹⁰ Regarding China's attempts to interfere with U.S. elections, see National Intelligence Council, *Foreign Threats to the 2022 US Elections*, December 23, 2022, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Declassified-ICA-Foreign-Threats-to-the-2022-US-Elections-Dec2023.pdf>.

cumulative impact can be significant. China thus seeks to nibble away at the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Unfortunately, the NDS is largely mute on identifying gray zone challenges from China and what must be done to counter them.

Misplaced Emphasis on Communications

The NDS asserts that it will “*seek and open a wider range of military-to-military communications with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) with a focus on supporting strategic stability with Beijing as well as deconfliction and de-escalation, more generally.*”¹¹ Military-to-military channels between the two powers predate the current administration and they have demonstrated their utility. In the run up to the 2020 election, for example, the DoW used them to dispel the idea that the United States was seeking a confrontation with China.¹²

These long-established channels are quite numerous, so it is unclear what a “wider range” of communications would seek to address. A *partial list* of senior civilian and military meetings in just the past two years includes the following:

- December 15-16, 2025: DoW officials at the Deputy Assistant Secretary of War level met with their Chinese counterparts in Washington, D.C. for the 19th annual U.S.-China Defense Policy Coordination Talks.¹³

¹¹ 2026 *National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 4. Emphasis added.

¹² See Mark Esper, *A Sacred Oath* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 2022), pp 529-530.

¹³ Press Release, Department of War, “Readout of December 2025 U.S.-China Defense Policy Coordination Talks, December 16, 2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4361903/read-out-of-december-2025-us-china-defense-policy-coordination-talks/>

- October 31, 2025: Secretary Hegseth met with China's Minister of National Defense Admiral Dong Jun on the margins of ASEAN's Defense Ministers Meeting.¹⁴
- September 10, 2025: Secretary Hegseth held a secure phone conversation with China's Minister of Defense.¹⁵
- April 2-3, 2025: A senior U.S. military delegation met with PLA counterparts in Shanghai, China as part of the Military Maritime Consultative working group. The U.S. delegation included general and flag officers from Indo-Pacific Command, Pacific Fleet, Pacific Air Forces, and the Coast Guard.¹⁶
- November 6-8, 2024: A U.S. military delegation met with PLA counterparts in Qingdao, China as part of the Maritime Consultative Working Group. The U.S. delegation included general and flag officers from Indo-Pacific Command, Pacific Fleet, Pacific Air Forces, and the Coast Guard.¹⁷

¹⁴ Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Hegseth Maintains U.S. Position on Taiwan, China Urges Caution," *USNI News*, October 31, 2025, <https://news.usni.org/2025/10/31/hegseth-maintains-u-s-position-on-taiwan-china-urges-caution>.

¹⁵ David Brunnstrom et al., "Hegseth tells China in first call that US is not seeking conflict," *Reuters*, September 10, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/hegseth-tells-china-first-call-that-us-is-not-seeking-conflict-2025-09-10/>.

¹⁶ News Article, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, "U.S. Indo-Pacific Command representatives meet with China counterparts at Military Maritime Consultative Agreement working group," April 3, 2025, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/NEWS/News-Article-View/Article/4144173/us-indo-pacific-command-representatives-meet-with-china-counterparts-at-militar/>.

¹⁷ News Article, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, "U.S. Indo-Pacific Command representatives meet with the People's Liberation Army counterparts for the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement

- September 12, 2024: A DoW delegation at the Deputy Assistant Secretary of War level met with Chinese counterparts in Beijing for the Defense Policy Coordination Talks. This was the 18th iteration of these talks.¹⁸
- September 9, 2024: Admiral Samuel Paparo, commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, conducted a teleconference with Gen. Wu Yanan, the commander of the PLA's Southern Theater Command.¹⁹
- April 3-4, 2024: Senior U.S. military officers from Indo-Pacific Command, Pacific Fleet, and Pacific Air Forces met with PLA counterparts as part of the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement working group in Honolulu, Hawaii.²⁰

Beyond DoW venues, there are also National Security Council and State Department channels to discuss security and foreign policy issues with Chinese officials.

working group and plenary session," November 8, 2024, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3960557/us-indo-pacific-command-representatives-meet-with-the-peoples-liberation-army-c/>.

¹⁸Joseph Clark, "DoD Delegation to Hold Talks With Chinese Counterparts in Beijing," *DoD News*, September 12, 2024, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3903932/dod-delegation-to-hold-talks-with-chinese-counterparts-in-beijing/>.

¹⁹U.S. Mission China, "Readout of Commander U.S. Indo-Pacific Command call with PLA Southern Theater Commander," September 11, 2024, <https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/readout-of-commander-u-s-indo-pacific-command-call-with-pla-southern-theater-commander/>.

²⁰News Article, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, "U.S. Indo-Pacific Command representatives meet with Chinese counterparts at Military Maritime Consultative Agreement working group," April 5, 2024, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3731939/us-Indo-pacific-command-representatives-meet-with-chinese-counterparts-at-milit/>.

Longstanding Track 1.5 and Track 2 channels allow for informal discussions on an extensive range of issues as well.²¹

No one should expect existing DoW channels – let alone any additional channels the DoW may establish – to resolve underlying tensions between the United States and China. Military-to-military communications can help convey messages and reduce the potential for military miscalculation. But the scope of such discussions remains limited by Section 1201 of the FY2000 National Defense Authorization Act, which rules out military-to-military discourse in sensitive areas, such as nuclear, space, and logistical operations.

The DoW also must remain on guard against China using the very existence of military-to-military communications for political leverage. The Chinese have curtailed channels in the past, as they did most recently in 2021, which allows them to express displeasure with U.S. policy matters that extend beyond the military's purview. They typically seek concessions as a price for restarting military-to-military discussions.

Conclusion

Calling out China's malfeasance in the Western Hemisphere or with its gray zone activities across the globe does not constitute humiliation. Nor is mentioning Taiwan by name as an important defense partner somehow provocative or inconsistent with President Trump's desire for better relations with China. On the contrary, a working relationship with a near-peer strategic competitor requires political and diplomatic frankness.

²¹ Track 2.0 dialogues involve non-governmental officials, which often include academics and retired diplomats and military officials. Track 1.5 dialogues may involve government officials acting in an unofficial capacity.

The call for a “wider range of military-to-military communications” with the PLA is misplaced. Differences with China are not due to a lack of military and security communication channels. Numerous such channels already exist, as explained above. Military-to-military channels can serve a constructive purpose for discussing military issues of common concern, provided they take place in accordance with congressionally prescribed limits. They are not, however, appropriate forums to address the profound underlying political and economic frictions that define the U.S.-China relationship.

Dr. James H. Anderson served from 2018 to 2020 as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities and as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

The National Defense Strategy and Threats the Administration Wishes It Didn't Have to Face

Michaela Dodge

Introduction

The Department of Defense (DoD) welcomed 2026 by issuing its much-anticipated *National Defense Strategy* (NDS).¹ In it, the DoD articulates its priorities and plans to advance U.S. interests given resource limitations. The NDS focuses on: defending the U.S. homeland, deterring China in the Indo-Pacific, increasing burden-sharing with allies and partners around the world, and rebuilding the defense industrial base.² These are noncontroversial bipartisan objectives that have been supported, albeit with a different degree of emphasis on each, by successive administrations over the past decade. Defending the U.S. homeland has always been the primary objective of the U.S. armed forces. Yet, the NDS misses two key truths that U.S. forefathers had to learn the (very) hard way during the first half of the twentieth century: that the enemy gets a vote, and that Americans fight abroad so they would not have to fight at home. The NDS falls short in realistically appraising U.S. adversaries and underappreciates the contributions allies make to U.S. security.

¹ U.S. Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy: Restoring Peace Through Strength for a New Golden Age of America*, January 2026, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>.

² *Ibid*, pp. 3-5.

The Enemy Gets a Vote

The NDS states that “this Strategy prioritizes those threats of gravest consequence to our nation’s security, freedom, and prosperity,”³ yet it fails to realistically appraise those threats, even on its own terms. For example, in reference to China, the document states that “a decent peace, on terms favorable to Americans but that China can also accept and live under, is possible.”⁴ There is very little evidence that this is indeed so. Quite the contrary.

China has gone to extraordinary lengths to show that it is bent on challenging the international status quo, particularly with regard to Taiwan, the annexation of which the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) leadership sees as an existential imperative for its continued existence.⁵ Beijing has been developing military capabilities that would permit China to do so, including a nuclear force build up that then-Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command ADM Charles Richard referred to as “breathhtaking” and a “strategic breakout.”⁶ China covertly conducted yield producing nuclear weapons explosions in 2020⁷ and is on track to have

³ Ibid, p. 8.

⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

⁵ Gordon C. Chang, “Why China Believes Taiwan is an Existential Threat,” *Pacific Research Institute*, November 29, 2024, <https://www.pacificresearch.org/the-gordon-chang-report-why-china-believes-taiwan-is-an-existential-threat/>.

⁶ John Vandiver, “‘Breathhtaking expansion’: US Strategic Command leader expects further revelations of China’s nuclear weapons advancement,” *Stars and Stripes*, October 18, 2021, available at <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2021-10-18/china-us-russia-nuclear-weapons-hypersonics-stratcom-3283272.html>.

⁷ U.S. Mission to International Organization in Geneva, “United States Statement by Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security The Honorable Thomas DiNanno to the Conference on Disarmament,” February 6, 2026, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2026/02/06/u-s-statement-at-the-conference-on-disarmament/>.

an arsenal as large as the United States, perhaps as soon as the end of the decade. The United States has never had to deter two nuclear peers simultaneously.

China's military capabilities have been designed to deny the United States freedom of action in the Indo-Pacific region and undermine U.S. alliances, particularly with Japan and South Korea. China's military investments and its belligerent rhetoric betray very little willingness to accept "a decent peace" like the NDS would have its readers believe. After all, China has benefitted tremendously from economic liberalization since the end of the Cold War. U.S. elites wanted to believe that political liberalization would follow, but that has not come to pass. Despite more than the "decent peace" that allowed China to become prosperous after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Beijing is bent on changing the status quo. So far, the Trump Administration has been quite conciliatory toward China, including granting permission to sell advanced semi-conductor chips to Beijing, with not much Chinese interest in a "decent peace" to show in return.⁸

Then the NDS discusses Russia, an openly hostile country that regularly issues nuclear threats against the United States and its allies.⁹ The document states that "U.S. forces are prepared to defend against Russian threats to the U.S. Homeland." The section goes on to discuss the disparity between Russia's economy and economies of the European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The NDS echoes the now familiar

⁸ Derek Scissors and Zack Cooper, "Trump vs. China is taking a turn," *The Washington Post*, December 16, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/12/16/trump-china-xi-jinping/>.

⁹ Michaela Dodge, *Russian Escalation Threats in Its War Against Ukraine, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 10 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October, 2025), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Vol.-5-No.-10.pdf>.

cry that European countries must increase their defense spending and take the lead in providing for their own defense and supporting Ukraine. This has been happening. In 2025, European military aid to Ukraine rose by 67 percent above the 2022–2024 average, while non-military aid increased by 59 percent.¹⁰ U.S. support was almost non-existent in 2025.¹¹ The omission of a more specific U.S. commitment to NATO member states' defense is glaring, and could embolden Russia to test NATO's resolve.

By its own account, Russia sees itself as being at war with the West already.¹² Moscow has conducted over 150 operations on NATO member states' territory since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.¹³ These have ranged from seemingly random acts of arson and vandalism to attempted murders to causing hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of damage by cutting undersea communications cables.¹⁴ The West's collective response has been inadequate and has indicated a lack of political will to engage the adversary head on—to the point where

¹⁰ Kiel Institut, "Ukraine support after 4 years of war: Europe steps up," February 11, 2026, <https://www.kielinstitut.de/publications/news/ukraine-support-after-4-years-of-war-europe-steps-up/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>; Daniel Fried and Kurt Volker, "The Speech In Which Putin Told Us Who He Was," *Politico*, February 18, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/02/18/putin-speech-wake-up-call-post-cold-war-order-liberal-2007-00009918>.

¹³ Sophia McGrath, "Spotlight on the Shadow War: Inside Russia's Attacks on NATO Territory," *The Helsinki Commission*, December 2024, p. 3, <https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Spotlight-on-the-Shadow-War-Website.pdf>.

¹⁴ Russia executed similar types of operations prior to 2022, albeit with smaller frequency.

Russia feels comfortable continuing attacks.¹⁵ Russia has very little incentive to stop its campaign against targets in the West and even lesser incentive to stop its conduct in Ukraine.

On Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the NDS says "As President Trump has said, the war in Ukraine must end. As he has also emphasized, however, this is Europe's responsibility first and foremost. Securing and sustaining peace will therefore require leadership and commitment from our NATO allies."¹⁶ But for the future of European (and world) security, it is incredibly important that the war ends with Russia's defeat, not victory.¹⁷

Russia's victory in Ukraine would empower Moscow to attack states that Russia conquered after World War II, including countries that joined NATO as soon as they could once the Soviet Union collapsed; so awful was the Soviet yoke that they never want to experience it again. Vladimir Putin has made no secret of his view that the end of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical disaster of the twentieth century,¹⁸ but very few people in formerly captive nations share this sentiment. Ukrainians are dying by the thousands because they have experienced Russia's brutality and genocidal designs firsthand on territories it has occupied and wish to save the rest of the population from that awful fate.

¹⁵ Michaela Dodge, "Russia Is at War with the West," *Information Series*, No. 636 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 11, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-russia-is-at-war-with-the-west-no-636-september-11-2025/#_ednref7.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of War, 2026 *National Defense Strategy: Restoring Peace Through Strength for a New Golden Age of America*, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁷ Michaela Dodge, "Geopolitical Consequences of Ukraine's Defeat," *Information Series*, No. 612 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 13, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-geopolitical-consequences-of-ukraines-defeat-no-612-january-13-2025/.

¹⁸ "Putin: Soviet collapse a 'genuine tragedy'," *NBC News*, April 25, 2005, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057>.

Moreover, China is now openly aligned with Russia and supports its war economy with very little pushback from the United States or Europe.¹⁹ Russia would not be able to sustain its campaign without Chinese support. Russia's victory becomes China's victory. This could be fatal to the administration's goal of deterring China in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, North Korea is sending its troops to fight along with the Russians, thereby gaining operational experience that South Korea does not have.²⁰ Russia is also helping North Korea modernize its military capabilities and advanced technologies.²¹

The NDS calls for focusing on "strategic stability" with Beijing.²² Setting aside that the term is generally useless because there is no shared understanding between the United States and China of what it actually means, the United States is a status quo power while China seeks to challenge the current world order. Status quo powers need larger forces than their challengers because status quo powers are on defense.

Americans Fight Abroad So They Would Not Have to Fight at Home

Twice in the first half of the twentieth century, the United States was pulled into overseas conflicts it originally perceived as distant and unrelated to its interests and

¹⁹ Derek Scissors, "Why Is America Investing in an Enemy?," *National Review*, February 20, 2025, <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2025/04/why-is-america-investing-in-an-enemy/>.

²⁰ Molly Carlough and James Kennedy, "How North Korea Has Bolstered Russia's War in Ukraine," *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 25, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/how-north-korea-has-bolstered-russias-war-ukraine>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² U.S. Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy: Restoring Peace Through Strength for a New Golden Age of America*, op. cit., pp. 4 and 18.

security of the U.S. homeland. Twice, U.S. forces were unprepared to face more ruthless and initially better equipped adversaries, a negligence stemming from U.S. reluctance to acknowledge the rising threat to its interests and eventually, to its homeland.

During the interwar period, Western democracies and the United States tried to wish away the rising threat and address the growing security challenge through arms control. These efforts were wholly misplaced. The renowned U.S. diplomat George Kennan pointed out that:

The evil of these utopian enthusiasms was not only, or even primarily, the wasted time, the misplaced emphasis, the encouragement of false hopes. The evil lay primarily in the fact that these enthusiasms distracted our gaze from the real things that were happening... The cultivation of these utopian schemes, flattering to our own image of ourselves, took place at the expense of our feeling for reality. And when the rude facts of the power conflict finally did intrude themselves directly upon us, in the form of enemies against whom we were forced to fight in the two World Wars, we found it difficult to perceive the relation between them and the historical logic of our epoch, because we understood the latter so poorly.²³

The German unrestricted warfare against U.S. ships during World War I, and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 during World War II in each case led to a direct U.S. involvement in both World Wars. More than 53,000 Americans died in World War I;²⁴ the nation suffered more

²³ George F. Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 20-23.

²⁴ National Park Service, "The United States and the First World War," September 12, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/wwim/wwioverview.htm>.

than 403,000 casualties during World War II.²⁵ With the Soviet threat on the horizon, the U.S. forefathers decided that a U.S. military presence abroad will contribute to stability, alliance building, and ultimately the prevention of the rise of threats that would threaten the homeland. And for the most part, the system worked, even if it required more extensive U.S. engagement abroad.²⁶ In fact, the system has worked so successfully that many Americans seemingly forgot why we built it.

The NDS is asking allies to help the United States address what the administration defines as its priority national security challenges (e.g. immigration), but what does it offer in return? The United States is planning on limiting support for Europe²⁷ and promises to “calibrate U.S. force posture and activities in the European theater to better account for the Russian threat to American interests as well as our allies’ own capabilities.”²⁸

To allies concerned with their security vis-à-vis Russia, the NDS states that “Moscow is in no position to make a bid for European hegemony.”²⁹ The administration cannot just declare that an adversary is not ready to make a bid for gains; that is up for Russia to decide. As Professor Athanasios G. Platias points out, “the strong rarely hesitate to dominate the weak when opportunity presents itself and the cost appears manageable.”³⁰ Wars often arise from

²⁵ The National World War II Museum, “Research Starters: US Military by the Numbers,” <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-us-military-numbers>.

²⁶ Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us about Great-Power Rivalry Today* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).

²⁷ U.S. Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy: Restoring Peace Through Strength for a New Golden Age of America*, op. cit., p. 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Athanasios G. Platias, “America’s Thucydidean Moment,” *Modern Diplomacy*, February 4, 2026,

miscalculation and historical hubris, the kind Russia displayed prior to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin might believe himself victorious—because Russia barely incurred any costs following its invasion of Georgia in 2008, the first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and is not defeated following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 despite the Western coalition’s support for Ukraine.

While Europe as a whole is undoubtedly stronger than Russia, many NATO individual states are not—and Europe’s political reaction to Russia wreaking havoc on NATO’s territory signals weakness that could easily encourage Russia to attack NATO member states it perceives as weaker than itself. Moreover, Russia has demonstrated the will to fight, unlike NATO members whose support for Ukraine remains limited and who have avoided direct conflict with Russia. The NDS notes, “the Russian military threat is primarily focused on Eastern Europe.”³¹ But Eastern European countries are U.S. allies, too.

NATO and other allies, including Japan and South Korea, have historically relied on U.S. nuclear capabilities.³² A few NATO states have reportedly hosted U.S. nuclear weapons. The NDS says precious little about U.S. extended deterrence: “The United States requires a strong, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal adapted to the nation’s overall and defense strategies. We will modernize and adapt our

https://modern diplomacy.eu/2026/02/04/americas-thucydidean-moment/?utm_medium=email&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-8ObCmajnMWfc5H2T8aEsD9_HvtSD9ff_CB9JTZJeT8b8kReK3fqSWDIgllzTaDreYCny_Y5basGEjx64vwGc0pHRbvIA&_hsmi=402508515&utm_content=402508515&utm_source=hs_email

³¹ U.S. Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy: Restoring Peace Through Strength for a New Golden Age of America*, op. cit., p. 10.

³² Anya L. Fink, “U.S. Extended Deterrence and Regional Nuclear Capabilities,” Congressional Research Service *In Focus* No. 12735, February 6, 2026, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12735>.

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.”³³ Well, for as long as the United States does not have a comprehensive layered missile defense system, strong conventional forces, flexible and responsive nuclear infrastructure, and a superior nuclear arsenal at all force levels, it will be (and has been) just that regardless of what its political representatives may wish to declare.

Conclusion

Adversaries build weapons to achieve political objectives. The NDS fails to appreciate that current adversaries’ objectives are fundamentally at odds with U.S. ones and that status quo powers need superiority, not parity, to defend it. The United States does not get to decide whether adversaries are deterred; at best it can develop capabilities and force posture to try to shape their decision-making process. Capabilities and options that U.S. allies bring to the table, including shortening the distance from which U.S. forces can operate, is a necessary part of an adversary’s calculus. Ultimately, what matters most is how the NDS gets implemented and how adversaries respond to its implementation. It remains to be seen how the process unfolds over the course of the following months and years, but implementation offers the Trump Administration an opportunity to correct some of the more problematic aspects of the NDS’s wording.

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³³ Ibid, p. 17.

Failure to Communicate: A National Defense Strategy Eclipsed

Gary L. Geipel

There is much to commend in the new *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), including its sensible priorities, its focus on military threats rather than social engineering, and its long-overdue attention to the Defense Industrial Base (DIB).¹ The NDS also reflects substantial alignment with the national security platform on which Donald Trump and his administration were elected in 2024. These positive attributes make the NDS's greatest shortcoming all the more glaring: it was not taken seriously by its authors as a document worth communicating to key constituencies and applying to major, near-term decisions. As a result, the 2026 NDS promptly sacrificed much of the impact it might have had on American citizens, allies, and adversaries alike.

The release of the NDS at 19:00 Washington time on Friday, January 23, 2026, assured the document's lack of impact from the outset. Friday evenings are when governments release information that they hope will be forgotten or ignored. Indeed, the release of the NDS was accompanied by no apparent public-relations strategy whatsoever. No speech by the president, Secretary of War, or any other sitting official accompanied the NDS—a missed opportunity to place it in context, offer details and qualifiers, and underline its most important messages to adversaries. No NDS-focused press conference or other roll-out event occurred either at the White House or the Pentagon. No mention of the NDS was made in the

¹ Department of War, *2026 NDS National Defense Strategy: Restoring Peace Through Strength For a New Golden Age Of America*, January 23, 2026, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>.

president's State of the Union address just one month later. Not even a Truth Social post about the NDS has appeared, perhaps the ultimate indicator of insignificance in the current administration.

As the character named "Captain" famously said in the film *Cool Hand Luke*, "What we've got here is failure to communicate." When it comes to a superpower's defense strategy, that shortfall matters greatly. The fact that the NDS has been widely discussed in the media, at think-tank conferences, and in commentaries such as this one is the essence of the problem. Having failed to provide their own context, clarification, and evidence of immediate real-world application, the Department of War and the White House have ceded the power of interpretation to everyone else. Less than two months after its release, the NDS is bogged down by numerous incomplete understandings, charges of hypocrisy, and selective readings, as even a few examples will illustrate.

The NDS leaves obvious pushbacks unchallenged. For example, the Memorandum from the Secretary of War accompanying the NDS—under the rubric of elevating an interests-based strategy—disparages past U.S. efforts to uphold a "rules-based international order."² Yet the document's authors have not explained why a (U.S.-led) global order is not in the nation's interest. Similarly, the NDS notes the "demographic challenges"³ faced by both China and Russia (read: their declining populations), but never reconciles this with a hardline stance on the one thing that sets the United States apart demographically: its openness to immigration.

² Pete Hegseth, Memorandum for Senior Pentagon Leadership, Subject: 2026 National Defense Strategy, January 23, 2026, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>.

³ NDS, op. cit., pp. 9, 10.

The NDS highlights wide gaps between the current administration's words and actions. For example, the document claims that the United States does not demand the "humiliation or submission" of our adversaries,⁴ even as (less than two months later) Washington attacked Iran to humiliate its government and force submission. More broadly, the NDS rejects the use of the U.S. military for regime change, even as its most robust military actions of 2026, in Iran and Venezuela, have occurred primarily in service of that goal.

The NDS leverages a growing rift in the administration's political base of support. Self-identified "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) voters continue to give the Trump Administration the benefit of the doubt about the war with Iran.⁵ However, leaders of vocal factions in the Trump coalition are in open revolt over the war, focused on its apparent violation of the president's pledge to avoid foreign entanglements (largely affirmed in the NDS) and the supposed influence of Israel on the decision to strike Tehran. The March 2026 resignation of a counter-terrorism official in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence over the war brought the fissure into mainstream headlines.⁶

The NDS offers hyperbole in place of sober reckoning. The first line of the NDS sets a tone that persists throughout the document: "President Trump in his first term and since reentering office in January 2025 has rebuilt the American military to be the world's absolute best."⁷ Putting aside the notion that a military can be "rebuilt" so quickly, the

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵ Karl Rove, "Trump Hasn't Lost His Voters Over Iran," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 19, 2026.

⁶ "Trump's top counterterrorism aide resigns, citing Iran war," *Politico*, March 17, 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/03/17/joe-kent-resigns-iran-war-00831187>.

⁷ NDS, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

celebratory language undermines the very purposes of top-level strategy: establishing difficult goals and laying the groundwork for achieving them over the long term. Elsewhere, the NDS claims that the Pentagon's Joint Force "obliterated Iran's nuclear program" in its June 2025 strikes,⁸ leaving even sympathetic observers to scoff when the chief U.S. negotiator in the region declared in mid-February 2026 that Iran was "probably a week away from having industrial-grade bombmaking material."⁹

The NDS makes little effort to reassure key allies and partners. The NDS repeatedly calls on America's NATO allies "to take primary responsibility for Europe's conventional defense."¹⁰ Fair enough. However, the document neither acknowledges the NATO members who answered that call long before it was made (notably the Baltic states and Poland) nor ventures so much as a passing phrase to reassure Europe of its extended nuclear deterrence. Similarly, with regard to the Korean peninsula, the NDS declares that "South Korea is capable of taking primary responsibility for deterring North Korea with critical but more limited U.S. support."¹¹ Intentionally or not, this declaration surely encourages an already significant South Korean movement towards an independent nuclear deterrent.¹² A well-communicated defense strategy would not leave the U.S. stance on such a major issue undefined.

⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

⁹ "Witkoff says Iran 'a week away' from nuclear bombmaking material," *The Hill*, February 23, 2026, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/5751330-witkoff-iran-nuclear-threat/>.

¹⁰ NDS, op. cit., p. 11.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 20.

¹² Lami Kim, "Will South Korea's Nuclear Ambitions Subside in the Next Five Years?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 7, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/will-south-koreas-nuclear-ambitions-subside-next-five-years>.

The NDS conspicuously pulls its punches when it comes to America's most potent adversary. The impact of illegal foreign drug trafficking on American citizens receives appropriate attention in the NDS. However, not a word is devoted to the critical and well-known role China has played in supplying precursor chemicals for the production of fentanyl and related substances by transnational criminal organizations.¹³ This is surely a missed opportunity if the authors intended to establish the proximity and severity of the threat posed by China. More significantly, the word "Taiwan" never appears in the NDS. The document calls for "a strong denial defense along the First Island Chain (FIC),"¹⁴ which, of course, includes Taiwan geographically. It offers no indication of what such a "denial defense" might consist of, however, and pivots immediately to asking "regional allies and partners to do more for our collective defense."¹⁵ It is difficult to believe that virtual silence regarding the most significant threat currently posed by China was not deliberate—an extreme form of "strategic ambiguity," perhaps—but only a concerted effort to communicate the NDS could have established America's actual message to China.

Explanations for the concerns raised here may seem blazingly obvious to defenders of the Trump Administration's approach to national security. But that is precisely the point. Almost no explanations have been offered by the administration regarding the NDS, which has created a vacuum into which criticisms, wishful thinking, and alternative interpretations have flowed from all corners. The unfortunate result may be as bad as having no declared defense strategy at all, if not worse.

¹³ Congressional Research Service, "China Primer: Illicit Fentanyl and China's Role," *IN FOCUS*, February 17, 2026, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10890>.

¹⁴ NDS, op. cit., pp. 4, 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Fans and detractors alike tend to agree that the Trump Administration is bedeviled in almost all areas of policy by too many random utterances and too few rigorous statements of facts, goals, and principles. That may be an unchangeable Standard Operating Procedure. However, in the hope of a different approach when national security is at stake, it could help to outline what disciplined and effective communications of strategy might entail.

First, the release of an NDS intended to shape actions and decision-making over the course of a presidential administration (and ideally beyond) would be timed to secure maximum public attention—early in a week not consumed by crises or other distracting events—in an effort to dominate multiple “news cycles.” Key Members of Congress would receive confidential advance briefings.

Second, a high level of planning would precede the document’s release, including the preparation of no more than three or four “key messages” easily understood by lay audiences as well as national security professionals; an extensive “FAQ” document anticipating the most likely concerns, critiques, and rejoinders surrounding the strategy; official and highly visible translation of the document into (at a minimum) Farsi, Mandarin Chinese, Korean, Russian, and Spanish; and a comprehensive, “multichannel” distribution plan to highlight the NDS across social and traditional media alike. The distribution plan would include placement of one or more pieces in leading opinion journals by senior members of the administration.

Third, release of the NDS would be followed immediately by a presidential address to the nation (and indirectly, to the world), ideally delivered from the Oval Office. The speech would center on the agreed-upon key messages and be delivered succinctly. While such set-piece communications have fallen out of favor dramatically in recent decades (dropping from 29 by Ronald Reagan to

three by Barack Obama¹⁶), there appears to be no clear reason for this decline, even in an age of digital media and short attention spans. Indeed, the momentousness and sheer novelty of such an address today would likely generate more attention than even a series of Truth Social posts by the president.

Fourth, the administration would host a short but highly substantive event (streamed live and recorded for later viewing), featuring a succession of statements by key cabinet and military officials to elaborate on details not necessarily captured in the strategy's text. To "seed" understanding of a new strategy, the audience would include a range of national security thought leaders selected for their influence, diverse views, and willingness to conduct themselves with respect. Questions from this audience would be answered by the officials involved.

Fifth, the key messages of the NDS would be reinforced relentlessly across all opportunities, including but not limited to the State of the Union address; other foreign- and defense-policy speeches by the president or senior officials, in the United States and abroad; routine announcements of decisions linked to the NDS; press conferences during visits by foreign leaders, and private conversations with foreign leaders (especially adversaries) whenever possible.

Finally, the president and key members of the administration would be at pains to offer clear, proactive explanations when any of their actions or directives might appear to contradict elements of the NDS.

¹⁶ Jackie Calmes, "Live From the Oval Office: A Backdrop of History Fades From TV," *The New York Times*, July 9, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/10/us/politics/the-fading-of-a-cultural-touchstone-the-oval-office-address.html>; and Callum Borchers, "The Oval Office address ain't what it used to be. But it's still pretty powerful." *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/06/the-oval-office-address-isnt-what-it-used-to-be-but-its-still-the-best-option/>.

The daily life of any U.S. presidential administration is chaotic and often consumed by unexpected challenges and opportunities. However, there is no reason to believe that a reasonably disciplined communications plan, such as the one outlined here, could not be implemented if the top-level intention to do so exists. It may not even be too late for the 2026 NDS. Communications “resets” by organizations of all types are not uncommon, in which leaders take their audiences back to the essence of a plan or strategy, even months after an initial release.

Ironically, the Trump Administration’s NDS, criticized by some as simplistic, would have lent itself particularly well to a systematic roll-out. The four “lines of effort” in the 2026 NDS exemplify the sorts of straightforward messages that tend to stick: “Defend the U.S. Homeland; Deter China in the Indo-Pacific Through Strength, Not Confrontation; Increase Burden-Sharing with U.S. Allies and Partners, and Supercharge the U.S. Defense Industrial Base.” A few months in, neglected above all by their authors, those messages have taken hold exactly nowhere. Only the Department of War and the White House can change that unfortunate outcome—by making good on their failure to communicate.

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The Trump Corollary: Its Antecedents and its Place in History*

John Mark Mattox

The “Trump Corollary,” as presented in the 2026 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), is the latest in a long line of reinterpretations and expansions upon the 1823 foreign policy and national security doctrine announced in 1823 by President James Monroe. While its relationship to similar modifications presented over the past two centuries is clear, the corollary also makes novel and distinctive contributions to that evolution, to include notice to non-European great powers and cyber and non-state actors as well as insistence on partner self-defense, even as the United States continues to assert its prerogative to defend a geographically expanded view of the Western Hemisphere against threats to U.S. interests. The following analysis situates the Trump Corollary against the backdrop of key developments in the history of the Monroe Doctrine.

The NDS describes the defense of the U.S. homeland in the following expansive terms:

We will secure America’s borders and maritime approaches, and we will defend our nation’s skies through Golden Dome for America and a renewed focus on countering unmanned aerial threats. We will maintain a robust and modern nuclear deterrent capable of addressing the strategic threats to our country, raise and sustain formidable cyber defenses, and hunt and neutralize Islamic terrorists who have the ability and intent to strike our Homeland. At the same time, we will actively and fearlessly defend America’s interests throughout the Western Hemisphere. We will guarantee U.S. military and

commercial access to key terrain, especially the Panama Canal, Gulf of America, and Greenland. We will provide President Trump with credible military options to use against narco-terrorists wherever they may be. We will engage in good faith with our neighbors, from Canada to our partners in Central and South America, but we will ensure that they respect and do their part to defend our shared interests. And where they do not, we will stand ready to take focused, decisive action that concretely advances U.S. interests.¹

The NDS explicitly identifies this statement as “the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine,”² lists it as the first priority of the Department of War, and affirms that the U.S. military is “ready to enforce it with speed, power, and precision.”³

The key to understanding the intent of the Trump Corollary and its place in history is to view it not as a policy innovation but rather as a forceful declaration of continuity with, and commitment to, a foundation stone of American foreign and defense policy laid over two centuries ago. The NDS statement is simply the most recent in a long series of periodic revivals of focus on the Monroe Doctrine.

*The opinions and interpretive views expressed herein are solely the responsibility of the author and do not constitute an official position by the National Defense University or any other government entity.

¹ 2026 *National Defense Strategy: Restoring Peace Through Strength for a New Golden Age of America*, January 23, 2026, p. 3.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

The Monroe Doctrine (1823)

There exists no executive order or presidential proclamation called “the Monroe Doctrine.” Rather, it is a set of foreign and security policy statements embodied in President James Monroe’s otherwise largely unmemorable 2 December 1823 Seventh Annual Message to Congress. The Monroe Doctrine may be characterized in terms of five basic components:

1. **No new European colonization:** “[T]he American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers.”⁴

2. **No extension of European political “systems” to the Western Hemisphere:** The difference in the political systems of Europe and the United States were such that “we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety.”⁵

3. **No tolerance of foreign intervention against the new American states:** With respect to “the Governments [of Western Hemisphere states] who have declared their independence and maintain it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles, acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other

⁴ Message of President James Monroe at the commencement of the first session of the 18th Congress (The Monroe Doctrine), 12/02/1823; Presidential Messages of the 18th Congress, ca. 12/02/1823-ca. 03/03/1825; Record Group 46; Records of the United States Senate, 1789-1990; National Archives.

⁵ Ibid.

light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.”⁶

4. Non-interference by the United States in existing European colonies in the Americas: “With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power we have not interfered and shall not interfere.”⁷

5. Non-involvement by the United States in purely European affairs and wars: “Our policy in regard to Europe... remains the same, which is, not to interfere in the internal concerns of any of its powers; to consider the government *de facto* as the legitimate government for us; to cultivate friendly relations with it, and to preserve those relations by a frank, firm, and manly policy, meeting in all instances the just claims of every power, submitting to injuries from none.”⁸

This doctrinal development was neither whim nor fiat that emerged *ex nihilo*. It was prompted by external circumstances which the current administration views as paralleling those of the present. In Monroe’s day, it was the political machinations of Europe broadly construed, i.e., the European continent plus the Russian Empire. At present, the concern similarly focuses on China, which was not a significant player on the global stage of the early 19th century. Moreover, it was directly influenced by, *inter alia*, input from Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams. Thomas Jefferson was Monroe’s long-time mentor and confidant with whom Monroe corresponded repeatedly on the themes that led to the 1823 policy statement. Scholars point particularly to a 24 October 1823 letter from Jefferson, who urges:

America, North & South, has a set of interests distinct from those of Europe, and peculiarly her

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

own. She should therefore have a system of her own, separate and apart from that of Europe. while the last is laboring to become the domicil [sic] of despotism, our endeavor should surely be to make our hemisphere that of freedom.⁹

John Quincy Adams, who was Monroe's Secretary of State, is credited as the source of key language which Monroe included verbatim in the doctrinal statement. Adams, in reference to his October 1823 cabinet memoranda and draft instructions regarding what became the Monroe Doctrine, calls his contribution "the most important paper that ever went from my hands."¹⁰

The spirit of the Monroe Doctrine provides a connecting thread that runs all the way from 1823 (and, in reality, from the words of the Declaration of Independence which warned "our Brittish [sic] brethren... of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us"; "conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations"; and led to a separation which would "hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends"¹¹) to the 2026 NDS.

⁹ "Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, 24 October 1823," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-20-02-0221>. [Original source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Retirement Series, vol. 20, 1 July 1823 to 31 March 1824, ed. J. Jefferson Looney et al. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023, pp. 266–268.] Original spelling retained.

¹⁰ John Quincy Adams, 27 November 1823, entry (Vol 34 p. 176), *The John Quincy Adams Digital Diary*, published in the Primary Source Cooperative at the Massachusetts Historical Society: <https://www.primarysourcecoop.org/publications/jqa/document/jqadiaries-v34-1823-11-p149--entry21>.

¹¹ "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," America's Founding Documents, National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

The Tyler “Doctrine” (1841)

President John Tyler is the first to extend the geographical and commercial reach of the Monroe Doctrine in a way echoed in the 2026 NDS. In a special message to Congress, Tyler issued what has since become known as the “Tyler Doctrine” but which is probably better viewed as the first “corollary” to Monroe’s statement. At issue is U.S. (as opposed to European) influence over the Hawaiian (or Sandwich) Islands:

Far remote from the dominions of European powers, its growth and prosperity as an independent state may yet be in a high degree useful to all whose trade is extended to those regions; while its near approach to this continent and the intercourse which American vessels have with it, such vessels constituting five-sixths of all which annually visit it, could not but create dissatisfaction on the part of the United States at any attempt by another power, should such attempt be threatened or feared, to take possession of the islands, colonize them, and subvert the native Government. Considering, therefore, that the United States possesses so large a share of the intercourse with those islands, it is deemed not unfit to make the declaration that their Government seeks, nevertheless, no peculiar advantages, no exclusive control over the Hawaiian Government, but is content with its independent existence and anxiously wishes for its security and prosperity. Its forbearance in this respect under the circumstances of the very large intercourse of their citizens with the islands would justify this Government, should events hereafter arise to require it, in making a decided

remonstrance against the adoption of an opposite policy by any other power.¹²

Tyler's Corollary is a clear echo of the Monroe Doctrine, now extended to a U.S. interest one-quarter of the distance across the Pacific Ocean and which, 57 years later, will become a U.S. territory and 61 years after that, the United States' 50th state. As an accident of history, Hawaiian territoriality and then statehood created, (as also Alaska did) in its own way, a convenient segue to the current NDS vision of a United States as a nation with organic interests beyond the Pacific and Atlantic seaboards.

The Polk Corollary (1845)

Reference to "Mr. Monroe's Doctrine"¹³ as such does not appear until 1845, when President James K. Polk referred to it in that way in the context of U.S. territorial ambitions. In his first annual message to Congress, he quotes point #1 above from the Monroe Doctrine and states:

This principle will apply with greatly increased force should any European power attempt to establish any new colony in North America. In the existing circumstances of the world the present is deemed a proper occasion to reiterate and reaffirm the principle avowed by Mr. Monroe and to state

¹² John Tyler, "Message to Congress Regarding US-Hawaiian Relations," December 30, 1842, University of Virginia Miller Center – Presidential Speeches, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/december-30-1842-message-congress-regarding-us-hawaiian>.

¹³ The assertion appears repeatedly in print that the phrase "Monroe Doctrine" first appeared in an 1840s article by John Quincy Adams and published in *The Southern Quarterly Review*. That the moniker was retroactively applied is beyond doubt. However, the reference to its appearance in *The Southern Quarterly Review* remains unverified by reputable scholarly sources.

my cordial concurrence in its wisdom and sound policy. The reassertion of this principle, especially in reference to North America, is at this day but the promulgation of a policy which no European power should cherish the disposition to resist. Existing rights of every European nation should be respected, but it is due alike to our safety and our interests that the efficient protection of our laws should be extended over our whole territorial limits, and that it should be distinctly announced to the world as our settled policy that no future European colony or dominion shall with our consent be planted or established on any part of the North American continent.¹⁴

Polk then continues the geographical and commercial expansion of the doctrine initiated by Tyler. This statement comes on the heels of the coinage, a few weeks earlier, of the phrase “manifest destiny,” by journalist John L. O’Sullivan, editor of *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*:

[O]ther nations have undertaken to intrude themselves..., in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfilment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.¹⁵

¹⁴ James K. Polk, “First Annual Message” Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/200590>.

¹⁵ John L. O’Sullivan, “Annexation,” *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, Vol. XVII, No. LXXXV (July and August 1845), p. 5, https://archive.org/details/sim_united-states-democratic-review_july-august-1845_17_85/page/5/mode/1up?q=manifest.

Even without invoking the phrase “manifest destiny,” it seems clear that, in referring to “the principle avowed by Mr. Monroe,” manifest destiny was precisely what Polk had in mind. Proclamation by the 2026 NDS of “A New Golden Age of America” echoes a similar sentiment.

The Olney Corollary (1895)

By the *fin de siècle*, the role and stature of the United States as the “practical sovereign” of the Western Hemisphere became clear and with it, another expanded understanding of the Monroe Doctrine—in fact, one which continues to predominate in U.S. foreign and security policy as evidenced by the Trump Corollary. A border crisis between Venezuela and British Guiana centered on an approximately 100,000 square-mile territory rich in gold, and claimed by both sides since the 1840s, and which reached its crescendo in 1895, when Venezuela appealed to U.S. President Grover Cleveland, invoking reference to the Monroe Doctrine as the basis for claiming American hemispheric supremacy (or, more to the point, as the basis for disavowing British territorial claims in the New World beyond those already established for prior-existing European possessions). In a letter to U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain Thomas F. Bayard, U.S. Secretary of State Richard Olney presented the U.S. position in terms that would be completely compatible with the Trump Corollary (but almost certainly greeted with less enthusiasm by modern-day Venezuela):

To-day the United States is practically sovereign on this continent, and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition. Why? It is not because of the pure friendship or good will felt for it. It is not simply by reason of its high character as a civilized state, nor because wisdom and justice and equity are the invariable

characteristics of the dealings of the United States. It is because, in addition to all other grounds, its infinite resources combined with its isolated position render it master of the situation and practically invulnerable as against any or all other powers.¹⁶

The promise in the 2026 NDS to enforce the current interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine “with speed, power, and precision”¹⁷ is, in reality, a compacted recitation of the Olney Corollary.

The Roosevelt Corollary (1904)

This corollary formally acknowledged a policy process that had been underway at least since the Spanish-American War of 1898 and which clearly established the U.S. foreign policy principles that underwrote the building of the Panama Canal, the protection of U.S. interests in Panama, and the protection of Panama from financial claims against it by European powers. However, the corollary also viewed U.S. influence extending well beyond Panama to include the entire Western Hemisphere. Moreover, the logic of Roosevelt’s inclusion of events half a world away has global implications, even if a strict reading of the corollary itself is geographically bounded:

Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and

¹⁶ Document 527, “Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, With the Annual Message of the President, Transmitted to Congress December 2, 1895, Part I,” Mr. Olney to Mr. Bayard, July 20, 1895, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1895p1/d527>.

¹⁷ 2026 NDS, op. cit., p. 3.

in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power....

In asserting the Monroe Doctrine, in taking such steps as we have taken in regard to Cuba, Venezuela, and Panama, and in endeavoring to circumscribe the theater of war in the Far East, and to secure the open door in China, we have acted in our own interest as well as in the interest of humanity at large.¹⁸

The 2026 NDS likewise seeks an “open door in China” – not its domination, strangulation or humiliation¹⁹ – but rather “To prevent anyone, *including China*, from being able to dominate us or our allies.”²⁰ At the same time, the Trump Administration has not demonstrated a consistent desire to act as an “international police power... in the interest of humanity at large” even as it has intervened in the Western Hemisphere and beyond when doing so seemed to comport to U.S. interests; and, strictly speaking, that is quite a different enterprise.

The Clark Memorandum (1928)

Moreover, the Trump Corollary hews more closely to the original spirit and intent of the Monroe Doctrine than does the Roosevelt Corollary, and this becomes plain from an examination of the Clark Memorandum, written by President Calvin Coolidge’s undersecretary of state J.

¹⁸ “Theodore Roosevelt’s Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine (1905),” Milestone Documents, National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/roosevelt-corollary>.

¹⁹ 2026 NDS, op. cit., p. 4.

²⁰ Ibid., italics added.

Reuben Clark. The memorandum is one of the most comprehensive U.S. statements on the Monroe Doctrine's first century and effectively severs Roosevelt's doctrinal linkage between Monroe and to issues involving the internal affairs of other American states or to threats to U.S. national security outside the Western Hemisphere. For these cases, Clark argues, appeal to neither the Monroe Doctrine nor the Roosevelt corollary is necessary to justify U.S. actions. So, although the Trump administration has claimed the prerogative to involve itself in the internal affairs of other American states (as in the case of Venezuela), it, in concert with Clark, has not argued any need to invoke reference to the Monroe Doctrine for that purpose, except to the extent that its involvement is in response to meddling by actors external to the Western Hemisphere.

The Kennedy "Corollary" (1962)

Although never formally identified as a corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, John F. Kennedy's 22 October 1962 national radio and television address during the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis can only be understood as a direct invocation and application of the Monroe Doctrine: "It shall be the policy of this Nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union."²¹ Substitution of "China" for "Soviet Union" would comport with the aims of the 2026 NDS, both as pertaining to the obvious case of nuclear warfare as well as a warning against strategic, external encroachment of any kind upon the Western Hemisphere. This expanded application of the

²¹ John F. Kennedy, "Radio and television address to the American people on the Soviet arms build-up in Cuba," October 22, 1962, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/address-during-the-cuban-missile-crisis>.

Monroe Doctrine paves the way for the Trump Corollary's inclusion of warfare domains unimaginable to James Monroe as well as for the inclusion of geography heretofore regarded as more European than American, but whose defense is viewed by the Trump Administration as vital to U.S. interests.

The Trump Corollary in Analytic Perspective

No one should be surprised that critics and criticisms of both the Monroe Doctrine and its subsequent applications abound. In this respect, the Trump Corollary is no exception. However, the critiques levied against the Trump Corollary are consonant both in kind and in degree with those levied against both the basic doctrine and its corollaries: that they reveal the United States as imperialistic or hegemonic; that they serve more as justifications for intervention and paternalism rather than as a statement of a neutral or mutually beneficial security principle; that, in any case, the United States selectively invokes the principle only when it is in its interest to do so. However, in the anarchic sphere of international politics, with its infinite potential for conflicts of interest and collisions of national aims, these criticisms would occur against a Monroe-like doctrine regardless of which nation found itself in the position presently occupied by the United States. Whatever one's normative judgments on these or related matters, the fact remains that the logic of the Trump Corollary is reasonably deducible from the preceding historical developments in the doctrine and possesses an internal logic which marks it as one rational response, perhaps among other possible responses, to the conditions under which it was promulgated.

Conclusion

The Trump Corollary, then, far from being a historical aberration, sits comfortably in the evolutionary chain that characterizes the Monroe Doctrine's development. While maintaining its focus squarely on the Western Hemisphere, it simultaneously champions an expansive understanding of hemispheric geography that extends, not surprisingly, from Alaska and Hawaii in the west to, rather more surprisingly to some, Greenland on the east. However, the corollary is compatible in policy spirit with the basic 1823 pronouncement from which it derives its identity as well as with the general evolutionary developments that have been expressed in two centuries of corollaries. Its unique contribution lies in its implicit inclusion of non-European adversaries identified in the NDS as well as of cyber criminals and terrorists not bounded by geography. It also moves away from a strictly paternalistic role as guarantor of the defense of the Western Hemisphere and toward one which expects proactive defense efforts by all Western states. At the same time, it clearly asserts the U.S. prerogative to act in its own interests, whether supported by its hemispheric neighbors or not.

Like all policy statements, the Trump Corollary will be shaped by fiscal and other practical constraints, including force arrays in the Caribbean and Arctic, thresholds for action against extra-hemispheric actors, the give-and-take demands of coordination with allies and partners, and the unavoidable sway of domestic politics. As it encounters these realities in practice, the role—ephemeral or enduring—that it plays in U.S. foreign and security policy will come into clearer focus.

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What the National Defense Strategy Hath Wrought

Michael Rühle

George Orwell once observed that if thought can corrupt language, language can also corrupt thought. The *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) is a sad case in point.

The U.S. *National Security Strategy* (NSS), released in December 2025, had baffled many readers not only with its crude mix of verbosity and hyperbole,¹ but also with its partial turn away from the 2017 document released by the first Trump Administration.² That document had put a much stronger focus on the risks of great power competition—a focus that had also characterized Biden’s 2022 NSS. The 2025 NSS, by contrast, seemed to turn down the volume of the previous documents regarding hostile powers, yet revved up the volume on hemispheric defense.

Overall, the *National Security Strategy* had traded strategic clarity in favor of a stream of consciousness about

¹ Praise for President Trump’s ability to “surgically extinguish embers of division between nuclear-capable nations and violent wars caused by centuries-long hatred” may well go down as the peak of absurdity in an official U.S. document, see Eliot A. Cohen, “Trump’s Security Strategy Is Incoherent Babble,” *The Atlantic*, December 5, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/2025/12/national-security-strategy-incoherent-babble/685166/>.

² “Put simply, the newest strategy represents Trump unleashed, while the first portrayed Trump constrained.” Frederik Kempe, “Dispatch from Doha: A tale of two Trumps (constrained vs. unleashed),” Atlantic Council, December 9, 2025 (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/inflection-points/dispatch-from-doha-a-tale-of-two-trumps-constrained-vs-unleashed/>). See also David Trachtenberg, “Parsing the New National Security Strategy: A Remarkable About Face,” *Information Series*, No. 648 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 19, 2026), https://nipp.org/information_series/david-j-trachtenberg-parsing-the-new-national-security-strategy-a-remarkable-about-face-no-648-january-19-2026/.

American greatness, Europe's "civilizational erasure," and the wish to turn those very countries into business partners whom the 2017 NSS had singled out as major rivals. One German commentator referred to the NSS as a "divorce note," characterizing its chapter on Europe as a mixture of "condescension, contempt, and hostility."³ A German politician with strong "Atlanticist" credentials referred to the NSS as a "zweite Zeitenwende" (second turning point), implying that Germany, after having started to transform its defense policy in light of Russia's assault on Ukraine, now had to confront another sea change in its strategic environment: an openly hostile United States. Outside Germany, the reviews of the NSS were equally negative.

Given the largely negative verdict on the NSS, hopes were high that the *National Defense Strategy* would answer some of the questions which the previous document had failed to address. After all, if the NSS had laid out the "big picture," however awkwardly, one could have expected the NDS to provide the pragmatic, down-to-earth explanation of what all this meant for U.S. defense policy and posture. On some issues, the NDS did indeed deliver. Most importantly, it explains the rationale for a renewed U.S. focus on hemispheric defense as well as on China as the two main priorities, and it also explains how the United States envisages its future engagement in other regions, including Europe. As one sympathetic observer argues, "the 2026 NDS represents an attempt to align strategic commitments with operational realities through three mechanisms: restoring long-neglected homeland defense, enabling genuine allied military capacity through defense industrial integration, and prioritizing American military power where it is genuinely irreplaceable," possibly resulting in "a

³ Expertin über Kurs der USA: "Mischung aus Verachtung und Feindseligkeit," Web.de, December 12, 2025, <https://web.de/magazine/politik/politische-talkshows/expertin-us-kurs-mischung-verachtung-feindseligkeit-41682980>.

more sustainable foundation for collective defense.”⁴ However, even in laying out these key tenets of U.S. defense policy, the NDS fails to provide the coherence that many observers inside and outside the United States had been hoping for. From its surprisingly mellow tone on China (unlike the NSS, the NDS does not even mention Taiwan) to its obsession with illegal immigration, which it characterizes as a military mission rather than a task for law enforcement, the NDS strikes one as a document whose drafters seemed unsure of what they were trying to accomplish.

Worse, as with the case of the NSS, the NDS’ awkward style fundamentally undermines its seriousness as a policy guidance document of a major world power. The document mentions President Trump almost 50 times, ascribing almost mythical qualities to him (“President Trump in his first term and since reentering office in January 2025 has rebuilt the American military to be the world’s absolute best,” while “leading our nation into a new golden age.”) Such hyperbole may appeal to the MAGA-faction, but its sycophantic language inevitably affects the more serious parts of the NDS. If this is indeed what the authors believe, what is the reader to make of the rest of the document?

From a European allies’ perspective, three elements of the NDS deserve closer scrutiny: the overall direction of U.S. defense policy, the role of allies, and the treatment of deterrence. The NDS pretends to give clear messages on each of these issues, yet each message raises more questions than it answers.

⁴ Robbin Laird, “Restoring Strategic Coherence: The 2026 National Defense Strategy as Industrial and Operational Realism,” *Defense Info*, January 20, 2026, <https://defense.info/re-thinking-strategy/2026/01/restoring-strategic-coherence-the-2026-national-defense-strategy-as-industrial-and-operational-realism/>.

U.S. Global Security and Defense Policy

The major commonality between the NSS and the NDS is clear: the United States wants to re-prioritize its international commitments, reflecting both a changing global landscape and limited U.S. means. Consequently, the United States will focus on hemispheric defense and deterring China, while enabling allies around the globe to take on a larger share of their own defense. Superficially, this may seem logical, but many questions remain. First of all, is the U.S. reassertion of its dominance within the Western Hemisphere really the most urgent item on its security agenda? And is fighting immigration and narcotics trafficking really a predominantly military task? Regarding China, which now seems to rank only second on the Pentagon's priority list, why has the language become so anodyne ("we will erect a strong denial defense along the First Island Chain"), even though the threat posed by that country has not diminished since the first Trump Administration? Is it an attempt to create some wiggle room for political and economic accommodation with Beijing, as President Trump's rather personal policy style might sometimes suggest? The reader is left to guess the answers.

The wish for a re-prioritization of U.S. commitments also raises a more profound question, namely about the very nature of international politics. The NDS seems to assume that in many parts of the globe the United States can maintain stability largely by playing the "enabler" for allies in certain regions to meet their respective regional challenges. This is a sensible assumption, provided that the U.S. definition of support is not too narrow—and that the opponents play along. In the case of Ukraine, where a false sense of prioritization had led the United States—albeit briefly—to cut important aid, one could see a clash between a dogmatic prioritization worldview and urgent real-life requirements. In its war against Ukraine, Russia has gone

“all in,” which may not allow the United States to follow a re-prioritization textbook that smacks of President Obama’s now infamous “leading from behind” approach. Nor will Russia be the only country that could be tempted by a perceived semi-disengagement of the United States from certain regions. In short, while re-prioritization is a legitimate exercise, world events may quickly render it obsolete.

The Role of Allies

Since the first Trump Administration, European allies have become used to being scolded for their alleged sins. The NDS echoes this now familiar theme, although it spares the European allies some of the insults contained in the NSS, simply stating that “(f)or too long, allies and partners have been content to let us subsidize their defense.” What is striking about the NDS, however, is its attack on previous U.S. administrations for having allowed such allied negligence: “Our political establishment reaped the credit while regular Americans paid the bill.” According to the NDS, previous administrations “allowed, even enabled, our cunning adversaries to grow more powerful, even as they encouraged our allies to behave as dependents rather than partners, weakening our alliances and leaving us more vulnerable.”

It would be tempting to argue that such a conspiracy of wily European allies and an equally wily U.S. “political establishment” who team up to screw the hard-working American taxpayer is a nod to the MAGA narrative rather than an accurate description of reality. However, the obsession with blaming allies as well as former U.S. administrations is a recurring theme, which makes it quite worrisome. What may have been intended both as a stab at the failings of the “Deep State” and as self-congratulatory praise of the second Trump Administration for bringing a

halt to these nefarious activities comes across as an assault on the very logic of having allies and alliances. If working with allies is not a U.S. core interest but merely an expression of the cynicism of the U.S. “political establishment,” where does the trust come from that keeps alliances together? The NDS suggests that those “model allies” who are spending and doing more may receive preferential treatment, but the dismissive language, coupled with endless repetitions of the need to shift a greater burden on the allies, do not inspire confidence that this will result in a more mature relationship.

Of course, the NDS dutifully praises the strategic value of America’s partnerships, and even acknowledges that the European allies are now spending more on defense—an achievement that is, quite rightly, attributed to President Trump’s persistent efforts. In line with Washington’s new global approach, “our allies and partners... will take primary responsibility for their own defense with critical but more limited support from American forces.” There is nothing inherently wrong with this, all the more so as Russia is seen as “a persistent but manageable threat to NATO’s eastern members for the foreseeable future,” and is “in no position to make a bid for European hegemony.” Some Eastern European NATO members may beg to differ, but, as pointed out above, the final verdict will depend on a more concrete definition of what is meant by “critical but more limited support” or by the statement that the United States will “calibrate” its force posture in Europe. Reassuringly, even as this calibration takes place, the Department of War “will... continue to play a vital role in NATO itself” in dealing with the Russian threat, although priority will be given to Moscow’s threat to the U.S. homeland.

For too long, Europe had assumed that it would remain at the top of the U.S. priority list, even though other regions were becoming increasingly important. Hence, it was to be

expected that the United States would eventually shatter these European illusions by, as the NDS puts it, a “sharp shift—in approach, focus, and tone.” However, stating that “allies will take the lead against threats that are less severe for us but more so for them” signals a kind of mental departure from Europe that could turn on its authors with a vengeance. The Trump Administration’s handling of the negotiations with Russia and Ukraine regarding an end to the war offer a glimpse into the consequences of such a bifurcated view of European vs. U.S. interests. By trying to be an honest broker, while largely accepting the Russian narrative and putting pressure on Ukraine rather than on Russia, the administration seems oblivious to the high stakes involved. Not only does its approach squander U.S. leverage, it also effectively exposes the NDS’ clarion call of “peace through strength” as an empty slogan. To “maintain favorable balances of power in each of the world’s key regions” may not require current U.S. force levels, but at least it will require the will to engage with allies and partners. As long as the second Trump Administration’s key documents find more fault with allies than with opponents, the jury will remain out on whether this policy “will... leave our alliances and partnerships stronger than they have been at any point since the end of the Cold War.” The European allies will continue to watch U.S. decisions with unease—and, fortunately, so will the U.S. Congress.

Nuclear Deterrence

From a European perspective, one of the NDS’ most striking features is the absence of any reference to “extended deterrence.” The document notes the need to modernize U.S. nuclear forces in light of the growing nuclear threats from Russia and North Korea. China’s nuclear program deserved no mention at all, while Iran’s nuclear program has been “obliterated,” and hopes are high for the “Golden

Dome” missile defense project. The document deems it “only prudent for the United States and its allies to be prepared for the possibility that one or more potential opponents might act together in a coordinated or opportunistic fashion across multiple theaters.” However, this is a far cry from the notion of “coercive strikes” launched by China and Russia, a scenario that featured prominently in recent U.S. documents, including the 2023 Report of the Strategic Posture Commission.⁵ While the plausibility of such a scenario may be arguable, the NDS appears to go out of its way to suppress any notion of China as a nuclear rival.

Given the way in which the NDS defines away the Chinese nuclear challenge, it is perhaps not such a bad thing that it also remains silent on whether and how U.S. nuclear forces relate to the deterrence of threats to Europe. If Europe had been mentioned in similar ways as South Korea, which is given the “primary responsibility for deterring North Korea,” it probably would have made matters worse. In this case, no news is good news—which is not exactly a compliment for a Pentagon guidance document. Perhaps a dedicated Nuclear Posture Review will clarify what was left out in the NDS. However, if such a new document were to be written, the administration would be well-advised not to entrust it to the same drafting team that cobbled together the NDS.

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⁵ Madelyn R. Creedon, Jon L. Kyl, et al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, October 2023, <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/A/Am/Americas%20Strategic%20Posture/Strategic-Posture-Commission-Report.pdf>.

The Department of War's *National Defense Strategy* and Nuclear Deterrence

Mark B. Schneider

In January 2026, the Department of War released its *National Defense Strategy*. This report built on the November 2025 White House *National Security Strategy*. Concerning the vital issue of nuclear deterrence, this presidential publication stated, “We want the world’s most robust, credible, and modern nuclear deterrent, plus next-generation missile defenses—including a Golden Dome for the American homeland—to protect the American people, American assets overseas, and American allies.”¹ While its discussion of nuclear weapons was limited, the *National Defense Strategy* affirmed:

The United States requires a strong, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal adapted to the nation’s overall and defense strategies. 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.²

This statement represents a traditional concept of nuclear deterrence going back to the 1950s and 1960s. The new *National Defense Strategy* modernizes this approach by taking into account the dramatic increase in overt nuclear threats by multiple hostile foreign leaders during the last

¹ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, p. 3, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

² Department of War, *2026 NDS – National Defense Strategy*, 2026, p. 17, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>.

two decades and nuclear force reductions undertaken by the United States. Indeed, in its last months in office, even the Biden Administration recognized that, “Russia, the PRC [People’s Republic of China] and North Korea are all expanding and diversifying their nuclear arsenals at a breakneck pace—showing little or no interest in arms control.”³ It even announced, “We have begun exploring options to increase future launcher capacity or additional deployed warheads—on the land, sea, and air legs—that could offer national leadership increased flexibility if executed.”⁴ In the end, it did nothing.

The discussion of “nuclear deterrence,” “nuclear escalation control,” dealing with “nuclear coercion” and the role of nuclear weapons in damage limitation needs to be elaborated in detail in a Nuclear Posture Review, a Nuclear Employment Guidance or both. The Biden Administration’s versions of these documents, still on the books, were clearly inferior to the first Trump Administration’s versions. Unless changed, they will continue to impact nuclear weapons decisions negatively.

The Trump Administration substantially increased funding to assure that the United States will preserve its nuclear Triad to counter the growing multipolar nuclear threats. In particular, the Air Force announced that production capability for the nuclear-capable B-21 bomber was being increased by 25 percent and in 2027 it will be “on

³ Pranay Vaddi, “Adapting the U.S. Approach to Arms Control and Nonproliferation to a New Era,” Arms Control Association, June 7, 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/2024AnnualMeeting/Pranay-Vaddiremarks>.

⁴ “Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies’: Remarks by Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy Dr. Vipin Narang at CSIS,” August 1, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3858311/nuclear-threats-and-the-role-of-allies-remarks-by-acting-assistantsecretary-of/>.

the ramp.”⁵ However, the Department of War has apparently failed to change the previously planned number of deployed nuclear weapons. A better funded version of the Biden program will help but it will not create the “...world’s most robust, credible, and modern nuclear deterrent.” Numbers count.

Nuclear coercion is the core of President Putin’s nuclear strategy, which lowered the nuclear weapons first use threshold and, since 2007, involved making repeated nuclear threats, many by Putin himself.⁶ In recent years former President and now Deputy Chief of the Russian National Security Council Dmitri Medvedev has become the preeminent nuclear saber rattler. Medvedev even threatened the use of “...any Russian weapons, including strategic nuclear weapons” to defend territories taken by force from Ukraine and incorporated illegally into Russia.⁷

Signed by President Putin in 2024, Russia published a new version of its nuclear doctrine entitled “Basic Principles of State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence.” It was generally recognized that Russia had once again lowered its threshold for nuclear weapons use.⁸ The revised doctrine states:

⁵ Greg Hadley, “Air Force Announces B-21 Production Deal, 2027 Entry into Service,” *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, February 23, 2026, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/air-force-b-21-production-deal-2027-service/>.

⁶ Dr. Keith B. Payne, Testimony United States Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development, July 25, 2012, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/July-25-testimony-for-web.pdf>.

⁷ “Russia’s Medvedev: new regions can be defended with strategic nuclear weapons,” *Reuters*, September 22, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-medvedev-strategic-nuclear-weapons-can-be-used-defend-new-regions-2022-09-22/>.

⁸ “Putin lowers the threshold for using his nuclear arsenal after Biden’s arms decision for Ukraine,” *The Associated Press*, November 19, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-nuclear-doctrine-putin-91f20e0c9b0f9e5eaa3ed97c35789898>; Trevor Hunnicutt and Doina Chiacu, “US won’t change nuclear posture after Russia lowers

19. The conditions that enable the possibility of nuclear weapons employment by the Russian Federation are as follows:

- a) receipt of reliable data on the launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territories of the Russian Federation and (or) its allies;
- b) employment of nuclear or other types of weapons of mass destruction by an adversary against the territories of the Russian Federation and (or) its allies, against facilities and (or) military formations of the Russian Federation located outside its territory;
- c) actions by an adversary affecting elements of critically important state or military infrastructure of the Russian Federation, the disablement of which would disrupt response actions by nuclear forces;
- d) aggression against the Russian Federation and (or) the Republic of Belarus as participants in the Union State with the employment of conventional weapons, which creates a critical threat to their sovereignty and (or) territorial integrity;
- e) receipt of reliable data on the massive launch (take-off) of air and space attack means (strategic and tactical aircraft, cruise missiles, unmanned, hypersonic and other aerial vehicles) and their crossing of the state border of the Russian Federation.⁹

threshold, White House says," *Reuters*, November 19, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-wont-change-nuclear-posture-after-russia-doctrine-change-white-house-says-2024-11-19/>.

⁹ "Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, December 3,

The revised doctrine also linked nuclear first use to a “critical threat to their sovereignty and (or) territorial integrity” of Russia and Belarus.¹⁰ This increased emphasis is potentially very permissive and impacts Russian war planning.¹¹ Russia routinely practices nuclear escalation in its theater war exercises. Indeed, the *Financial Times* reported that, “The [Russian] classified papers, seen by the *Financial Times*, describe a threshold for using tactical nuclear weapons that is lower than Russia has ever publicly admitted, according to experts who reviewed and verified the documents.”¹²

Russia clearly has the world’s lowest threshold for nuclear weapons first use. The language in Putin’s 2024 nuclear deterrence guidance provides further evidence that Russia is trying to establish a norm in which it can initiate a war, launch devastating conventional attacks on adversary infrastructure and expect no comparable retaliation because of the threat of Russian nuclear escalation, probably with low-yield nuclear weapons. The United States must be prepared to deter this threat and deal with it if deterrence fails.

2024, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1434131/.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mark B. Schneider, “The Implications of Russia’s New Nuclear Doctrine,” *Information Series*, No. 615 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 5, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/mark-b-schneider-the-implications-of-russias-new-nuclear-doctrine-no-615-february-5-2025/.

¹² “Leaked Russian military files reveal criteria for nuclear strike,” *Financial Times*, February 28, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/f18e6e1f-5c3d-4554-ae5-50a730b306b7>.

In 2026, the Commander of the United States Strategic Command Admiral Richard Correll, for the first time since 2012, provided an unclassified number for Russian nuclear weapons—4,600 including 2,600 strategic nuclear weapons and 2,000 non-strategic.¹³ While this number is significantly more than the United States has in its inventory, it may still be a substantial underestimate.¹⁴

China also makes nuclear threats, though it is usually more circumspect in making nuclear threats than Russia. China's claim of a "no first use" strategy is not real. Even the Biden Administration's 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* report recognized that growing Chinese nuclear capabilities allow "...it potentially to adopt a broader range of strategies to achieve its objectives, to include nuclear coercion and limited nuclear first use."¹⁵ The Pentagon estimates that China's nuclear weapons will increase from over 600 operational weapons in 2024 to over 1,000 in 2030 and 1,500 in 2035, but these numbers are likely considerable underestimates.¹⁶ In 2025, then-STRATCOM Commander General Anthony Cotton stated regarding the growth of

¹³ "Statement of Richard A. Correll, Commander, United States Strategic Command Before the House Armed Services Committee on Strategic Forces," March 17, 2026, p. 4,

https://www.stratcom.mil/portals/8/Documents/Posture%20Statements/2026%20USSTRATCOM%20Congressional%20Posture%20Statement.pdf?ver=Hb98LGT3_5gb01-f_KLHhQ%3D%3D.

¹⁴ Mark B. Schneider, *How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile*, Occasional Paper, Vol. 3, No. 8 (Fairfax VA: National Institute Press, 2023), pp. 123-210, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Vol.-3-No.-8.pdf>.

¹⁵ The Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, 2022, p. 11, <https://fas.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/2022-Nuclear-Posture-Review.pdf>.

¹⁶ Mark B. Schneider, "The Chinese Nuclear Arsenal: More DoD Nuclear Threat Minimization," *Real Clear Defense*, March 1, 2025, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2025/03/01/the_chinese_nuclear_arsenal_more_dod_nuclear_threat_minimization_1094753.html.

Chinese nuclear weapons, "...that China has outpaced every previous estimate that we've made."¹⁷

Nuclear coercive threats are used by the Kim family dictatorship in North Korea. It threatens to turn its neighbors into "seas of fire."¹⁸ The North Korean nuclear stockpile is still small, but a RAND study concluded that it will grow to "...at least 300 to 500 nuclear weapons..."¹⁹

Regarding the deterrence of China and other nations, the 2026 *National Defense Strategy* states, "...we will reinforce deterrence by denial so that all nations recognize that their interests are best served through peace and restraint. This is how we will establish a position of military strength from which President Trump can negotiate favorable terms for our nation."²⁰ Deterrence by denial is a concept dating back to the 1950s. However, it is not mentioned in the Biden Administration's 2024 "Report on

¹⁷ "Statement of General Anthony J. Cotton, Commander, United States Strategic Command Before the Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, Senate Armed Services Committee," March 26, 2025. p. 3, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/testimony_of_general_anthony_j_cotton1.pdf.

¹⁸ "N. Korea Threatens U.S. with 'a Sea of Fire' if Attacked," *Asia Political News*, April 2, 2002, <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mim0WDQ/is2002April8/ai84640326>; Viktor Cha, "Nuclear Sea of Fire," *CSIS* (no date), http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/0403qjapan_korea.pdf; "North Korea Threatens: U.S. Bases 'Sea of Fire'," *World Net Daily*, February 5, 2005, <http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLEID=42733>; and, Nicholas D. Kristof, "'A Sea of Fire,' or Worse?," *The New York Times*, February 5, 2005, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F03E0DF1138F937A35751C0A9659C8B63>.

¹⁹ Bruce W. Bennett, Kang Choi, Cortez A. Cooper III, Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., Myong-Hyun Go, Gregory S. Jones, Du-Hyeogn Cha, Uk Yang, *Options for Strengthening ROK Nuclear Assurance* (Santa Monica CA.: Rand Corporation, October 28, 2023), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2612-1.html.

²⁰ 2026 NDS – *National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p.4.

the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States” or its 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*.²¹

Under the concept of deterrence through denial, U.S. forces must have the capability to actually defeat an adversary attack by denying the adversary the benefits of aggression. This is no easy task. Russia has more nuclear weapons than the United States and has modernized 92 percent of its strategic nuclear force compared to the United States, which has deployed no new U.S. nuclear delivery vehicles since 1997.²² This disparity is made more difficult by the vast Russian advantage in low-yield non-strategic or tactical nuclear weapons (both in numbers and types) and China’s rapid numerical growth and introduction of low-yield nuclear weapons.

Escalation control can be impacted by a disparity in numbers. Even using the low Pentagon estimates, Russia and China combined now have over 5,200 nuclear weapons and this number will continue to increase. Just the projected growth of Chinese weapons by 2035 will increase this number to 6,700. In 2023, the Biden Administration announced that the active and inactive U.S. nuclear stockpile was 3,748 weapons.²³ This number is likely to

²¹ Department of Defense, “Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States,” November 2024, <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Nov/15/2003584623/-1/-1/1/REPORT-ON-THE-NUCLEAR-EMPLOYMENT-STRATEGY-OF-THE-UNITED-STATES.PDF>; and, 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, op. cit.

²² Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 6, 2023), pp. 12, 14, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reportspublications/reports-publications-2023/item/2363-2023-annual-threatassessment-of-the-u-s-intelligence-community>; and, “Expanded meeting of the Defence Ministry Board,” *Kremlin.ru*, December 17, 2025, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78801>.

²³ National Nuclear Security Administration, “Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Stockpile,” July 2024,

decline. Moreover, inactive weapons (about 2,000 of the 3,748) are not usable unless activated and deployed.

If the United States seeks to reduce the risk of escalation by restricting its nuclear retaliation to low-yield weapons, it is certain to run out of them far earlier than Russia. Eventually, the same will likely be true with regard to China. Worse yet, a small preemptive nuclear attack against a small number of bomber and fighter bases could eliminate most U.S. low-yield nuclear weapons. At this time, the only survivable U.S. low-yield capability is the low-yield Trident warhead (W76-2) – estimated to number 25 or less.²⁴ The United States reportedly has only 200 non-strategic nuclear bombs and no missiles on which to carry them.²⁵ According to Admiral Correll, the very important low-yield Nuclear-Armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile will have “...limited operational deployment in FY 2032 and initial operational capability in FY 2034.”²⁶ This deployment is well behind the threat. He also said:

China, Russia, and North Korea are actively developing theater-range nuclear weapons to counterbalance the conventional military advantage of the United States and its allies and partners. Addressing these efforts requires theater nuclear capabilities that provide credible

<https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/transparency-us-nuclear-weaponsstockpile>.

²⁴ “Statement of Richard A. Correll, Commander, United States Strategic Command Before the House Armed Services Committee on Strategic Forces,” March 17, 2026, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

²⁵ Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns and Mackenzie Knight-Boyle, “United States nuclear weapons, 2026,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2026, Vol. 82, No. 2, p. 120, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2026.2633029>.

²⁶ “Statement of Richard A. Correll, Commander, United States Strategic Command Before the House Armed Services Committee on Strategic Forces,” March 17, 2026, op. cit., p. 17.

deterrence options and incentivize off-ramps. To this end, USSTRATCOM is collaborating with USINDOPACOM, USEUCOM, Nuclear Weapons Council partners in the DoW [Department of War], and the Department of Energy to identify the most effective strategies for deploying future TNF [Theater Nuclear Forces].²⁷

The United States cannot wait until 2034 to enhance its low-yield deterrent capabilities significantly. It is time to move beyond paper studies and take action with a sense of urgency. A first step should include a very low-cost upload of our strategic nuclear missiles. In 2020, the Congressional Research Service estimated the cost of upload at only \$100 million dollars.²⁸ Within less than a year, the highly survivable Trident missile force can be uploaded by over 60 percent at least, enhancing our ability to deter war and target Russia and China.²⁹ It would allow many more low-yield weapons.

If U.S. strategy is deterrence through denial, as the *National Defense Strategy* declares, the United States needs nuclear weapons that can accomplish this objective. Today, the United States does not have them, and the legacy Biden Administration program will not provide them. Deterrence by denial requires anti-ship, anti-submarine and battlefield nuclear capabilities. Without these, the United States is unwittingly inviting Russia, China and North Korea to initiate the use of nuclear weapons against the United States

²⁷ Kristensen, Korda, Johns and Knight-Boyle, "United States nuclear weapons, 2026," op. cit., p. 120.

²⁸ Keith B. Payne and Mark B. Schneider, "Deterrence Requirements and Low-Cost Nuclear Upload Options," *Information Series*, No. 626 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 5, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-and-mark-b-schneider-deterrence-requirements-and-low-cost-nuclear-upload-options-no-626-june-5-2025/.

²⁹ Ibid.

and its allies in the event of war. Under the Biden legacy program, even if much better funded, the only option would eventually be escalation or capitulation.

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A Fortress of America? The Western Hemisphere and Missile Defense in Trump's America

Santiago Spadilero

Introduction

In a compelling article for *The Hill*, Dr. Imran Khalid stated that in refocusing America's strategy to defend the Western Hemisphere and the subsequent development of a high-end missile defense shield, as expressed in the most recent *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), "the administration is signaling a retreat into a Fortress America. (...) this 'Fortress' is far from passive; it is a doctrine of aggressive preemption, where the U.S. remains willing to shatter regional stability abroad to ensure its own 'dome' is never tested."¹

Undoubtedly, President Trump's NDS presents several radical modifications that contrast heavily with its predecessors' national strategy documents. This shift is evident in the first subsection under the title "The Security Environment: Homeland and Hemisphere."² In this area, the document states that "For decades, America's foreign policy establishment neglected our nation's Homeland defenses. (...) American interests are also under threat throughout the Western Hemisphere."³ In shocking

¹ Imran Khalid, "Why the NDS 2026 Golden Dome is a strategic paperweight," *The Hill*, March 10, 2025, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/5776276-fortress-america-strategic-risk/>.

² U.S. Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, January 23, 2026, p. 8, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 8-9.

contrast, the 2022 NDS stated that “The most comprehensive and serious challenge to U.S. national security is the PRC’s coercive and increasingly aggressive endeavor to refashion the Indo-Pacific region and the international system to suit its interests and authoritarian preferences.”⁴ This represents a striking geographical and strategic difference.

Therefore, the strategic importance of the 2026 NDS is centered on two main axes: a new hemispherical approach regarding the homeland and the Americas; and the protection of the former by an advanced, high-end missile defense system, named Golden Dome. In the words of Dr. Khalid, a Fortress America. This short piece seeks to briefly introduce the significance of this shift in policy and address these two radical modifications: what they could imply for U.S. security and the region.

The National Defense Strategy’s Main Axes

The NDS, released in January 2026, deepened the conceptual strategies developed in the Trump Administration’s *National Security Strategy* (NSS), released in November 2025. The NSS focused on five broad priorities: The era of mass migration is over; protection of core rights and liberties; burden-sharing and burden-shifting; realignment through peace; and economic security.⁵ These priorities reflect the basic foundations of this administration’s foreign policy and, although important, it failed to identify specific policies instrumental to their achievement. These were more comprehensively

⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy*, October 27, 2022, p. 4, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

⁵ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, pp. 11-13, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

expressed in the NDS released by the U.S. Department of War (DoW) two months later.

The NDS identified four lines of effort to achieve the goals of this administration, but one of these is of particular interest here: the defense of the U.S. homeland. Divided into several sections, it aims at securing U.S. borders, countering narco-terrorists in the hemisphere, securing key terrain in the Western Hemisphere, defending America's skies with the development of Golden Dome and other counter-drone measures, modernizing and adapting U.S. nuclear forces, deterring and defending against cyber threats, and countering Islamic terrorists.⁶

Although the NDS encompasses a broad range of interest areas, which can be perceived as significantly different from the defense strategies of prior administrations, the first tenet—the defense of the U.S. homeland—is and has been vital in this administration's decisions. For instance, the arrival of the USS Gerald R. Ford and its strike group in the Caribbean Sea in November 2025 was no coincidence. It was a clear message of this shift, from global engagement toward a focus on the Western Hemisphere. Moreover, the increased attention on the southern border, the strikes against drug trafficking speedboats, and the signals to friendly and adversarial leaders in the region also demonstrate that the administration's new policy towards Latin America, also known now as the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, is indeed present.

At the same time, the president's homeland missile defense project, Golden Dome, is being prioritized by the Department of War. As noted in the NDS: "The Department will prioritize efforts to develop President Trump's Golden Dome for America, with a specific focus on options to cost-effectively defeat large missile barrages and other advanced

⁶ 2026 *National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

aerial attacks.”⁷ Still, not much is known about what “Golden Dome” represents.

The Trump Corollary and the Western Hemisphere

The NDS sets the homeland and the hemisphere as the main regions of concern in terms of their defense. In this area, the document states that “our predecessors recognized that the United States must take a more powerful, leading role in hemispheric affairs in order to safeguard our nation’s own economic and national security. It was this insight that gave rise to the Monroe Doctrine and subsequent Roosevelt Corollary.”⁸ But what was the Monroe Doctrine? On December 2, 1823, President James Monroe delivered his message to Congress, in which he conveyed an essential point: He endorsed a policy of “hands off” for European powers over the American continent, and that “any attempt by the Europeans to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere” would appear “as dangerous to our peace and safety” and as evidence of “an unfriendly disposition towards the United States.”⁹ In a few words, the doctrine was an early attempt to delimit the boundaries of America’s sphere of influence and to protect itself from expansionist European powers that might seek to reclaim former colonies.

The adaptation of America’s current policy regarding Latin America seeks to add an extra tenet to it, or in other words, to update it for the demands of the twenty-first century. The Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, thus, seeks to concentrate on two main points: massive migration and drug trafficking; and the influence of adversaries in the

⁷ Ibid, p. 17.

⁸ Ibid, p. 9.

⁹ Mark T. Gilderhus, “The Monroe Doctrine: Meanings and Implications,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (March 2006), p. 8.

region. In the case of the former, the Trump Administration decided to close the U.S. southern border, increase the vetting for immigrants coming to the country, prosecute those with criminal backgrounds who are in the country illegally, and target those drug trafficking organizations that are designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).¹⁰ In the case of the latter, it has also sought to counter Chinese and Russian influence in the region by undermining the regimes that sympathize with Beijing and Moscow.

One case reflects both new policies: the capture of President Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela and his wife, Celia Flores, who were transferred to New York City to face narco-terrorism, drug trafficking, and weapons charges.¹¹ This decision sought to fulfill two goals. First, to capture the leader of a narco-terrorist organization, the Cartel de los Soles, and bring him to justice in the United States.¹² Second, to send a message to China and Russia that their position on the continent would face the opposition of Washington. As such, this operation was not meant to bring down the regime, but rather to depose a single leader. Delcy Rodriguez, then-vice president of Venezuela, serves now as interim president and is cooperating with U.S. authorities.¹³

¹⁰ The White House, "Designating Cartels And Other Organizations As Foreign Terrorist Organizations And Specially Designated Global Terrorists," January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/designating-cartels-and-other-organizations-as-foreign-terrorist-organizations-and-specially-designated-global-terrorists/>.

¹¹ Clare Ribando Seelke, "U.S. Capture of Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro: Considerations for Congress," Congressional Research Service, January 12, 2026, p. 1, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IN12618>.

¹² U.S. Department of State, "Nicolás Maduro Moros (Captured)," January 6, 2026, <https://www.state.gov/nicolas-maduro-moros>.

¹³ A March 5, 2026 statement released by the U.S. Department of State confirms that the U.S. and Venezuela will re-establish diplomatic and consular relations. U.S. Department of State, "A Statement on U.S.-

The decision to embark on this operation eliminated the hierarchical leadership of the Cartel de los Soles, at least for the short-term, while it sent a powerful message to China and Russia. Cuba might be the next target unless a new compromise is reached with Havana, but it is certain that the United States is no longer oblivious to what happens in its hemisphere.

The Golden Dome of America

On January 27, 2025, the recently inaugurated President Donald J. Trump signed an Executive Order directing the deployment and maintenance of a next-generation missile defense shield intended to deter America's adversaries while protecting American citizens and U.S. critical infrastructure from any "foreign aerial attack."¹⁴ This decision was later reinforced with the statement within the NDS that "The Department will prioritize efforts to develop President Trump's Golden Dome for America, with a specific focus on options to cost-effectively defeat large missile barrages and other advanced aerial attacks. In addition, DoW will develop and deploy capabilities and systems to counter unmanned aerial systems. We will also ensure that U.S. forces have access to the electromagnetic spectrum required to defend the Homeland."¹⁵ Still, not much is known about the specifics of this project.

A Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) report notes that "the specifics are still being worked out,

Venezuela Relations," March 5, 2026,
<https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/03/a-statement-on-u-s-venezuela-relations>

¹⁴ The White House, "The Iron Dome for America," January 27, 2025,
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidentialactions/2025/01/the-iron-dome-for-america/>.

¹⁵ 2026 *National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 17.

and the administration has provided few details.”¹⁶ Moreover, in a November 2025 article written by Dr. Tom Karako, director of the Missile Defense Project at CSIS, he states that “a next-generation missile defense capability for the U.S. homeland, is both strategically necessary and long overdue. It is also already in jeopardy of failure,” he argues, due to a “lack of dialogue and persuasion. If the Pentagon does not start explaining Golden Dome, it will never be built.”¹⁷ In other words, if the Pentagon does not reveal the real planning behind the Golden Dome, the project may fail as quickly as it emerged, similar to the Strategic Defense Initiative of President Reagan.

The evidence does show some kind of effort to support the project, though. As the primary document that authorizes funding for the diverse projects within the Department of War (and others), the Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) authorized increased funding for several elements of America’s missile defense architecture, for example, doubling the funds authorized for the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, from \$523 million requested by the executive to \$1.2 billion authorized by Congress.¹⁸ Furthermore, the defense appropriations bill that passed

¹⁶ Mark F. Cancian and Chris H. Park, “The 2026 National Defense Strategy by the Numbers: Radical Changes, Moderate Changes, and Some Continuities,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2026, p. 16, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2026-01/260127_Cancian_Defense_Strategy.pdf?VersionId=WzP08q28PbYuNbaOY7imptsQLOGSodxU.

¹⁷ Tom Karako, “Golden Dome: Loosen the gag order, and start talking,” *Breaking Defense*, November 17, 2025, <https://breakingdefense.com/2025/11/golden-dome-loosen-the-gag-order-and-start-talking/>.

¹⁸ Congress.gov, “Text - S.1071 - 119th Congress (2025-2026): National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026,” December 18, 2025, p. 774, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/1071/text>.

both chambers of Congress in early February 2026 also increased the quantities of munitions procured which “reflect critical investments in near-term air/missile defense and Golden Dome requirements.”¹⁹ These included \$2.1 billion extra in munitions procurement and \$1.6 billion more for procurement and research and development of missile defense-related systems.

Breaking from other administrations, the White House under Trump has revitalized an old debate regarding the usefulness and purpose of a homeland missile defense architecture and has included it as one of the pillars of its new defense policy proposal. As the numerical and argumentative evidence in this short paper has shown, not much can still be said about what else this new project entails.

Conclusion

The Trump Administration has changed the script of policymaking with a set of new, innovative, and somewhat controversial decisions. In the realm of defense and foreign policy, his decision to move the focus away from Asia and the Middle East (at least, in arguments) to Latin America certainly sparked some discussion about his purpose in the area and how effective his strategy in the Western Hemisphere might be. This paper explored the origins of this new policy and possible implications that it will have for the region.

Moreover, the Trump Administration also reignited debate over the merits and effectiveness of a homeland missile defense system. Not many specifics have yet been revealed, but this new emerging project may drastically

¹⁹ United States Senate Committee on Appropriations, “Congress Approves FY 2026 Defense Appropriations Bill,” February 3, 2026, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/congress-approves-fy-2026-defense-appropriations-bill>.

modify the way the United States conducts war and implements deterrence. It may even be argued that the nation may retreat into a fortress in its own hemisphere – in effect, a Fortress of America.

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Parsing the New National Defense Strategy: Upending Bipartisan Tradition*

David J. Trachtenberg

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.¹ 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.”² 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

*Original publication: “Parsing the New National Defense Strategy: Upending Bipartisan Tradition,” *Information Series XXX* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, XXXXXX), [web link].

¹ 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>.

² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

2026 National Defense Strategy shows how.”³ 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,”⁴ 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.⁵ This

³ Memo on “SUBJECT: 2026 National Defense Strategy,” *ibid.*

⁴ *2026 National Defense Strategy*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

includes Europe “taking the lead in supporting Ukraine’s defense.”⁶ 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.⁷

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.”⁸

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

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

⁸ 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>.

East, and on the Korean Peninsula....”⁹ Although the NDS asserts, “This does not mean isolationism,”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

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

⁹ 2026 *National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 19.

¹⁰ Memo on “SUBJECT: 2026 National Defense Strategy,” op. cit.

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

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.”¹² 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....”¹³ 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.”¹⁴ While true in substance, European NATO nations will hardly be

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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 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.”¹⁵

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,¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ It states that the United States “will prioritize bolstering cyber

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

¹⁶ 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/>.

¹⁷ *2026 National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 9.

defenses” and “develop other options” to defend against cyber threats.¹⁸ It also declares, “We will also ensure that U.S. forces have access to the electromagnetic spectrum required to defend the Homeland.”¹⁹ 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.”²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.”²² By contrast, the 2018 NDS explicitly identified

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 20.

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

²² The White House, “Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the

U.S. missile defenses as tailored to address North Korean ballistic missile threats.²³

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-effectively defeat large missile barrages and other advanced aerial attacks."²⁴ 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.²⁵ As Israel's Iron Dome experience demonstrated, such cost effectiveness criteria

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%202012%2C%202018%2C%20President%20Donald%20Trump,**Implement%20the%20stipulations%20in%20the%20joint%20statement**.

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

²⁴ *2026 National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 17.

²⁵ 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/.

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 China²⁶—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

²⁶ 2026 *National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., pp. 4, 18.

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.”²⁷ 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.”²⁸ 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.

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.”²⁹ 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.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ 2026 *National Defense Strategy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

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.³⁰

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,"³¹ 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.³² 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

³⁰ 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/.

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

³² Memo on "SUBJECT: 2026 National Defense Strategy," op. cit.

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."³³ However, a truly realistic appraisal of the national security challenges the nation 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.

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³³ 2026 *National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 6.

An Interregnum National Defense Strategy

Bing West

The Department of Defense/War annually produces a *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) that reflects the vision of the commander-in-chief. Under President Trump, this is not possible. His philosophy is incoherent and he changes his decisions so frequently that any written document is untrustworthy.

Despite the loathing of the mainstream press, academia, and the foreign policy establishment, Trump burst upon the world stage twice—first as the 45th and then as the 47th president. “The great man of the age,” Hegel wrote, “is the one who can put into words the will of the age, tell his age what its will is, and accomplish it. What he does is the heart and essence of his age; he actualizes his age.”¹ Trump tapped into the deep resentment of the non-college white American electorate, a bloc alienated by futile wars, porous borders, progressive favoritism and overt racial preferences. His promise to “make America great again” distilled their anger into a movement. Trump epitomized the “essence of his age,” namely, the deep division in the American body politic. He was a kaleidoscope, enabling both critics and supporters to glimpse what they cherished or loathed.

Centuries earlier, Thomas Jefferson warned against the “idolatry of royalty.” Trump embodied that danger. He presided over the White House as an imperial court in which loyalty mattered more than truth, and in which the most prized currency was obeisance. *A Wall Street Journal*

¹ “Exclusive 3:16 Interview with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel,” (undated), <https://www.3-16am.co.uk/blog/exclusive-3-16-interview-with-georg-wilhelm-friedrich-hegel>.

reporter observed that no contradiction of his whims was tolerated; fidelity to the man outweighed fidelity to any principle.²

The central theme of the NDS is that Trump wants the United States to turn inward, concerned first with its own physical well-being. The Pentagon is “to prioritize efforts to develop President Trump’s Golden Dome for America, with a specific focus on options to cost-effectively defeat large missile barrages and other advanced aerial attacks... In addition, DoW (Department of War) will develop and deploy capabilities and systems to counter unmanned aerial systems.”

To accomplish a fulsome defense of the continental United States as well as Alaska and Hawaii in a cost-effective manner is technically impossible. President Reagan had envisioned a “Star Wars” shield against ballistic missiles. Although never completed, this unnerved the Soviet leadership and contributed to Gorbachev’s conclusion that the Soviet Union could not compete with America in funding advanced military systems. A half century later, however, the array of intercontinental attack options has expanded, as have the capabilities of Russia, China and North Korea. The Golden Dome is a quixotic idea by an impulsive commander-in-chief whose style is to advance extreme gambits, combined with a willingness to fire any appointee who voices reluctance to go along. The Golden Dome is open-ended in its scope and funding. It cannot survive objective analysis both of its staggering full costs and the improbability of achieving its ambitious goal.

The second theme is defense funding. The strategy declares that “President Trump has set a new global standard for defense spending at NATO’s Hague Summit – 3.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) on core military

² Daniel Henninger, “King Joe and His Court,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 10, 2024, https://www.wsj.com/articles/king-joe-and-his-court-election-biden-trump-2024-f7d151ae?mod=hp_opin_pos_5#cxrecs_s.

spending and an additional 1.5% on security-related spending, for a total of 5% of GDP." On its face, that is commendable. Beneath the surface, however, the subtext is disconcerting. President Trump's disdain for allies reflects a world view that rejects the allied approach motivating American foreign policy since 1947. European allies are laggards that have been given a free ride for decades. America provided for their defense. But the world stability since the end of WWII has been beneficial for our standard of living. We did the heavy lifting; we also reaped economic rewards from a rules-based international order maintained by our military deployments and willingness to engage abroad.

He scoffed at, and perhaps permanently undermined, the doctrine of alliance solidarity that had anchored American global strategy since 1947. President Eisenhower once told Margaret Thatcher that "one truth must rule all we think and all we do. The unity of all who dwell in freedom is their only sure defense."³ That unity is nowhere in evidence today. President Trump in March of 2026 bombed Iran with the intent of destroying its missile and nuclear development. Logically, NATO as well as the Gulf states and Japan and Australia should have aided in keeping the Hormuz strait open. That none did illustrated the wariness with which our allies respond in matters where Trump seeks to dominate.

³ Andrew Rawnsley, "Margaret Thatcher: The Authorised Biography, Volume One: Not for Turning by Charles Moore – review," *The Guardian*, April 27, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/27/margaret-thatcher-charles-moore-review?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

While he exhorted others to spend 3 percent of GDP on military forces, our defense budget is below 3 percent, and will plummet toward 2 percent in the next decade under the crushing pressure of servicing our debt. Trump talks about increases, but then bemoans a Congress that will not do his bidding.

Nor did he use the bully pulpit to campaign against our unsustainable debt. He insisted that entitlements such as Medicare and Medicaid remain untouched.⁴ He railed against federal spending but refused to confront the driving programs, knowing that progressives would attack him and that many of his supporters depended on those benefits. He worked within the confines of what he believed was politically acceptable. Consequently, America is on the glide path to spend the smallest share of GDP on defense since 1937, a year when the country was trapped in the Depression and wholly unprepared for the coming world war.

The third theme of the national defense strategy is feeble, nuanced rhetoric about our most dangerous adversary. The strategy says, "we will erect a strong denial defense along the First Island Chain, strong but not unnecessarily confrontational." Our military and civilian leaders are not that wishy-washy, but of course they obey the commander in chief. President Reagan viewed international relations through the prism of fundamental values: freedom vs. tyranny. Trump made no such distinction. To him, Putin and Xi were kindred strong leaders, not despots. Freedom was an abstraction; trade deals were concrete. Trump believed that the United States

⁴ Siobhan Hughes and Lindsay Wise, "Senate Republicans Move Ahead with Budget Bill despite Trump's Broadside," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 19, 2025, https://www.wsj.com/politics/policy/trump-torpedoes-senate-border-effort-urges-gop-to-back-big-beautiful-house-bill-603d16ca?mod=hp_lead_pos3.

and China could coexist in a stable equilibrium anchored in shared economic interests. He encouraged hundreds of thousands of Chinese students to study in America, indifferent to how their acquired knowledge might be used to strengthen an adversary. He saw China as a clever negotiator rather than an autocratic communist power seeking to extend its control.

The reality is that our forces are shrinking, while China's are expanding, especially drones and missiles. By elementary quantitative measures, the U.S. Navy will confront a stronger China in 2033. China will expand its missile arsenal by 100 percent over the next decade, while increasing its fleet by 17 percent and its airpower by 25 percent.⁵ The Iran War should wake up the services. They

⁵ From Chat GPT: China's **quantitative military advantage** – in terms of conventional missiles, ships, and aircraft – is expected to **grow substantially** by 2033 if current procurement rates continue. Here's a breakdown by category:

Missiles

- The **Rocket Force** currently fields nearly **2,500 short- to intercontinental-range launchers** (SRBMs, MRBMs, IRBMs, ICBMs),
andrewerickson.com+6uscc.gov+6ft.com+6en.wikipedia.org.
- Analysts estimate **equipment procurement** (missiles included) is rising at around **30% annually** through 2025.
- Assuming even a conservative **15% compound annual growth rate (CAGR)** from 2025 to 2033:
 - Quantity $\approx (1.15)^8 \approx 3.2 \times (1.15)^8 \approx 3.2 \times (1.15)^8 \approx 3.2 \times$
 - That's a **220% increase** in missile count over 8 years.

Ships

- China's Navy – the PLAN – has grown from about 370 warships today to a projected **500+ by the late 2020s**, and could reach **475 battle-force ships by 2035**,
debuglies.com+4imarcgroup.com+4gao.gov+4media.defense.gov+15en.wikipedia.org+15businessinsider.com+15.
- That represents a roughly **30-35% increase** in hulls from ~370 to ~500 in under a decade.

pay \$50,000 per drone, ten times too expensive to buy in the million-drone category needed to deter China.

The fourth theme of the strategy is “to rebuild our nation’s defense industry.” To Trump, that means a return to the 1950s—labor-intensive manufacturing plants that have been obsolete in the United States and Europe for 40 years. White House and congressional support are strong for large, expensive warships and the thousands of ship-building jobs they create at cost prohibitive prices. President Trump has advocated creating “pocket battleships” as the expensive centerpiece of what he calls a “Golden Fleet.”⁶

Ships funded in 2025 will not enter service until 2035, and will deploy for the rest of this century. It is difficult to imagine massive carriers and battleships remaining survivable in the battlespace of 2040, let alone 2100. Retired Admiral James Stavridis, former Supreme Allied Commander in NATO, warned that maritime warfare has reached an absolute pivot point. He wrote:

Big surface ships are highly at risk to air, surface, and subsurface drones. The sooner great-power navies like that of the United States understand that, the more likely they are to survive in major

Aircraft

- While precise counts of Chinese aircraft aren’t detailed here, modernization and expansion across the **air force** and **naval aviation** are ongoing. Given the missile and ship growth rates, aviation numbers likely follow with **double-digit annual expansion**, though likely slower—perhaps a **50-100% increase** in frontline aircraft by 2033.

⁶ Lara Seligman and Alexander Ward, “Trump Pushes for New Classes of Navy Warships,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 24, 2025, https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/trump-pushes-for-new-classes-of-navy-warships-0fe217b9?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=AWetsqfKx3zATZ3vOiYnHTPqxexH1wI sZFyHGPNkTTTTsDEiRdBg23tcCykUaA-4PUlg%3D&gaa_ts=6908fbb5&gaa_sig=BuMTdRyvfnN4ZaxdrgDWE6hNJzX6-tSR8Q4eIq-_M1CctPV_IoJwar5f2hql2dPM9a2WhVag2K8jQv-WUZZXRg%3D%3D.

combat in this turbulent twenty-first century. Like the battleship row destroyed at Pearl Harbor, carriers are at the twilight of their days. It is time to move the rheostat away from manned warships and toward more numerous and far less expensive unmanned vessels.⁷

China's surveillance and missile networks have turned the Western Pacific into a transparent battlespace. Any carrier, amphibious ship, or large surface combatant nearing Taiwan will be detected, tracked, and targeted by thousands of precision weapons. The mathematics of modern naval warfare is unforgiving. Defensive missiles cost millions of dollars each; the drones and missiles attacking them cost tens of thousands. This is a losing exchange, made worse by the finite number of defensive missiles each ship can carry.

In 2025, the Navy allocated twenty billion dollars to surface warships and only one billion – about 4 percent – to unmanned vessels and drones. The Pentagon must redirect funds into inexpensive, AI-enabled drones and other unmanned systems. Unmanned surface ships between 200 and 300 feet long can carry hundreds of drones or missiles and can be built for a fraction of the price of a Ford-class carrier. Taking into account both capital expenses and attrition rates per strike, unmanned vessels with AI-guided drones and missiles generate destructive power at roughly one-third the cost of carrier-based aviation or battleships launching missiles.

In summary, the national defense strategy reflects President Trump's impulsive, emotional choices. It is an

⁷ Max Boot, "Ukraine's Naval Drone Success Holds a Huge Lesson for the U.S. Navy," *The Washington Post*, June 17, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/06/17/ukraine-naval-drone-success-pentagon/>.

interregnum strategy, certain to be drastically altered or thrown aside by the next commander-in-chief.

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