



PROCEEDINGS

ASSESSING THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY AND NATIONAL DEFENSE STRATEGY

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Assessing the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on February 24, 2026. The symposium examined the similarities and differences between the Trump Administration’s main security strategy documents and those of prior administrations. It also considered the implications for deterrence, extended deterrence, and allied assurance.

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There has already been a great deal of commentary on both the NSS and NDS. Some observers have praised the shift in priorities away from long-standing theaters of interest like Europe and toward greater attention on Western Hemisphere security challenges. Other analysts have criticized the documents for downplaying or downgrading U.S. concerns over what has been previously characterized as the return of great power competition. If nothing else, both strategy documents appear to overturn the longstanding bipartisan tradition that saw significant U.S.-led engagement abroad as necessary to ensure security at home.

Both the NSS and NDS essentially repudiate prior U.S. support for a rules-based international order. Both declare that U.S. allies must bear the brunt of providing for their own security, with only limited U.S. support, casting further doubt on the credibility of U.S. extended security guarantees. And both reject the notion that the United States should seek to spread democracy abroad and engage in what has been derogatorily referred to as “nation building.”

These shifts stand in stark contrast to the policies of previous Republican and Democratic administrations. For example, in his second inaugural address, President George W. Bush declared, “it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world. The concerted effort of free nations to promote democracy is a prelude to our enemies’ defeat.”¹

Likewise, President Biden declared, “I firmly believe that democracy holds the key to freedom, prosperity, peace, and dignity.”² Nevertheless, in the 2026 NDS, Secretary Hegseth declared that upholding what he referred to as “cloud-castle abstractions like the rules-based international order” led previous administrations to squander U.S. military

¹ The White House, “President Bush’s Second Inaugural Address,” January 20, 2005, <https://www.npr.org/2005/01/20/4460172/president-bushs-second-inaugural-address#:~:text=President%20Bush's%20Second%20Inaugural%20Address>.

² The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 2021, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-PR-PURL-gpo152456/pdf/GOVPUB-PR-PURL-gpo152456.pdf>.



advantages and that the United States would no longer be “distracted” by what he called “grandiose nation-building projects.”³

Even the Trump Administration’s 2017 NSS acknowledged that “America’s commitment to liberty, democracy, and the rule of law serves as an inspiration for those living under tyranny.”⁴ And the 2018 NDS lamented what it called the “decline in the long-standing rules-based international order,” noting that this had created “a security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory.”⁵

In short, the second Trump Administration’s NSS and NDS represent a clean break from the bipartisan sinews of American foreign and national security policy established and reinforced over generations.

In addition, I would suggest that neither the NSS nor the NDS are true strategy documents. A true strategy would explain the relationship between ways, means, and ends—in other words, how goals and objectives will be accomplished. Yet, neither document does so. Both appear to be aspirational in nature. In fact, the NDS says “we will” 67 times in a 24-page document, without explaining *how* we will, or describing what is required to accomplish the laundry list of objectives it highlights.

Of course, a strategy cannot be expected to provide every level of detail regarding the resources and programs necessary to implement it. That will flow from the relevant budget submission and implementation guidance. However, there should at least be some foreshadowing of the necessary tradeoffs to be expected in order to accomplish the strategy’s goals.

Finally, let me mention that today is the fourth anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. And while both the NSS and NDS refer to “Russia’s war in Ukraine” and “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,” the strategy documents make clear that America’s European allies must “tak[e] the lead in supporting Ukraine’s defense.”⁶

In short, both the NSS and NDS contain language that its supporters can point to suggest they reflect a “practical” and “hardnosed realism,” while its detractors can point out that our allies receive more criticism than our adversaries, and that the lack of language regarding, for example, the importance of extended deterrence, suggests a retreat from traditional U.S. strategic policies. Clearly, as the NDS explicitly declares, the Trump Administration’s current strategy reflects “a sharp shift—in approach, focus, and tone” from the prior strategy documents of previous administrations.⁷

³ Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>.

⁴ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, p. 4, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

⁵ Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, p. 1, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/18/2002302061/-1/-1/1/2018-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-SUMMARY.PDF>.

⁶ Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 11.

⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

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George Orwell once said that “If thought can corrupt language, language can also corrupt thought.” The National Security Strategy (NSS) and the National Defense Strategy (NDS) are two sad cases in point.

Both documents are oddities, in terms of style as well as substance. Because of that, they have been widely criticized, not least because they fail the very basic tests of clearly relating means to ends.⁸ Both documents are supposed to explain to the world how the United States views its security environment, and how it wants address the main security challenges. They manage to explain the U.S. determination to better prioritize its international commitments. They also make a strong case for maintaining U.S. dominance throughout the Western hemisphere—even though this marks a radical shift with the hierarchy of regions spelled out in previous documents. For a foreign audience, such statements are important pointers in helping to understand the main drivers of U.S. policies and actions.

Beyond these very basic points, however, both papers confuse more than they enlighten. From the viewpoint of an Atlanticist European, both documents feature certain peculiar characteristics that could result in even more transatlantic disagreements.

The first is *style*. The style of national security documents is usually not an issue. Such documents tend to be anodyne and matter-of-fact, and only the President's foreword may stick out as a bit of lofty partisan propaganda. Neither the drafters nor the readers would expect Pulitzer-winning prose.

However, the NSS and the NDS deviate from established patterns. Their drafters are driven by an urge to tell the world about much more than merely the U.S. view of global security challenges. These documents are also manifestos of the MAGA “Weltanschauung.” Hence, they oscillate between matter-of-fact observations and highly ideological rants. Moreover, both are extremely sycophantic, with the NDS mentioning President Trump almost 50 times. If one compares these documents to the 2017 NSS, a cynical observer might even argue that they are an authentic reflection of a President whose second Administration is becoming increasingly unhinged. Put differently, in the case of the NSS and NDS, style is substance.

Second, *threats*. Both documents surprise their readers with their timid language on China and Russia. In the 2017 NSS, both countries were characterized as competitors. Since

⁸ See, for example, “Unpacking a Trump Twist of the National Security Strategy,” Council on Foreign Relations, December 6, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/unpacking-trump-twist-national-security-strategy>. For a critical European view of the NDS, see Rafael Loss, “Disintegrated Deterrence: What Trump's National Defense Strategy means for Europe,” European Council on Foreign Relations, January 26, 2026, <https://ecfr.eu/article/disintegrated-deterrence-what-trumps-national-defense-strategy-means-for-europe/>.

then, China's growing military arsenal and assertive policies, and Russia's war against Ukraine should have led the drafters of the new documents to adopt even more dramatic language. Yet the opposite is the case. Both documents play down the threat. The NDS does not even mention Taiwan, and it treats China largely as an economic opportunity. Russia is characterized as a manageable problem that largely can be left for the European allies to deal with. South Korea carries the main responsibility for deterring North Korea, and Iran's nuclear program has been, in the words of the NDS, "obliterated."

According to both documents, the real security challenges are to be found in the Western Hemisphere, which leads the administration to reaffirm the Monroe Doctrine. However, such a shift in emphasis begs the question why the United States requires the world's strongest military—all the more so since stopping narcotics trafficking and illegal immigration are not predominantly military tasks. In sum, the documents' own logic of prioritization sits uneasily with the demand for ever stronger forces.

The third peculiarity of both documents is the way they deal with *allies*. Both the NSS and the NDS contain harsh criticism of U.S. allies, which appears all the more unexpected since both documents are treading softly on China and Russia. The NSS criticizes Europe for being too lenient on immigration, which could lead to its "civilizational erasure." And the NDS indulges in a rant about allies having systematically screwed the U.S. taxpayer. Even worse, the NDS attacks all 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."

This image of wily European allies and an equally wily U.S. "political establishment" may be intended as yet another nod to the MAGA-narrative, i.e. for domestic consumption. However, the obsession with blaming allies is a recurring theme in both documents. This is all the more worrisome given that President Trump can justifiably claim victory on having gotten NATO allies to spend much more on defense. However, if all that the allies get for shaping up is further criticism, one need not wonder why the term "de-risking" is now being used by Europeans when talking about the United States, and not just about China.⁹

Many reviewers have pointed out that both documents do not envisage an isolationist United States.¹⁰ The NDS, for its part, makes it clear that the United States will continue to play a role in NATO. The recent decisions to increase the European footprint in NATO's command structure points in the right direction. Still, the language in both documents does not inspire confidence that this U.S. administration will have the patience to readjust its multilateral defense relationships in a rational way. The Trump Administration will always be tempted to go for "quick fixes."

⁹ Nicholas Vinocur and Zoya Sheftalovich, Europe begins its slow retreat from US dependence, *Politico*, February 2, 2026, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-begins-retreat-united-states-dependence-donald-trump-rocks-transatlantic-relationship/>.

¹⁰ Matthew Kroenig, Two Cheers for the National Security Strategy, *Foreign Policy*, December 11, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/12/11/national-security-strategy-trump-economic-political-democracy/>.

President Trump suddenly arguing that the United States had to “own” Greenland is a case in point. This episode has damaged the transatlantic relationship more than any other incident in the past 70 years. Greenland is featured in the NDS, probably as a last-minute addition to give the President’s demands a semblance of strategic logic. However, arguing, as President Trump did at the Davos World Economic Forum, that the United States could not defend Greenland “on a lease” would in effect invalidate the very logic of alliances.¹¹ While these were the president’s personal views, European observers still are left to wonder how the U.S. intends to maintain a constructive relationship with its allies on the Old Continent.

The fourth point concerns the *role of the United States* in the international system. A key tenet of both documents is that, in many parts of the globe, the U.S. can maintain stability largely by playing the “enabler” for allies. This is a sensible assumption, provided that the U.S. definition of “enabler” is not too narrow—and that the opponents play along. However, if one considers Ukraine to be a test case of this approach, it already seems to be failing. By trying to be a detached peace broker, while largely accepting the Russian narrative and putting pressure on Ukraine rather than on Russia, the U.S. administration seems oblivious to the stakes involved. Not only does this approach risk to squander U.S. leverage, it also effectively exposes the clarion call of “peace through strength” as an empty slogan. Russia will not be the only country that might interpret a perceived semi-disengagement of the United States from certain regions as an opportunity to test Western “red lines.” That is why the stated intention of the NDS, namely to “maintain favorable balances of power in each of the world’s key regions,” may ultimately be much harder to achieve than the drafters envisage.

Fifth, *extended 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. The NDS appears to go out of its way to suppress any notion of China as a nuclear rival, even as it 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.” The “Golden Dome” missile defense system will contribute to America’s protection against such perils, but it has no role to play beyond defending the U.S. homeland (and Canada, which in President Trump’s words, is one of the many “freebies” received by the ungrateful Northern neighbor).¹²

¹¹ “And all we’re asking for is to get Greenland, including right title and ownership, because you need the ownership to defend it. You can’t defend it on a lease.” Transcript: President Trump Delivers an Address at the World Economic Forum in Davos, January 21, 2026, <https://www.democrats.senate.gov/newsroom/trump-transcripts/transcript-president-trump-delivers-an-address-at-the-world-economic-forum-in-davos-12126>.

¹² Ibid.

Shortly after the release of the NDS, senior U.S. Government officials delivered speeches to reassure their allies that extended deterrence would remain untouched.¹³ However, it is hard to believe that the omissions in the documents were merely an editorial oversight. Nuclear assurances should have been in the document itself, not in speeches that appear like an afterthought and thus have little traction among European audiences. The same holds true for the observation that the strengthening of nuclear sharing in NATO remains on track. While this is a welcome development, it is overshadowed by the dismissive attitude vis-à-vis allies that is on display in both documents. You don't defend what you resent.

Given the way in which the NDS defines away the Chinese nuclear challenge, however, one can only speculate how extended deterrence would have been handled had it been included in the document. The Trump Administration's rhetoric has led to a nervous debate in Europe about pursuing nuclear independence from Washington. Had the NSS and the NDS treated the delicate issue of extended nuclear deterrence with the same dismissive attitude vis-à-vis the allies that these documents reveal in other areas, the damage might have been even greater. In this perspective, the document's silence on whether and how U.S. nuclear forces relate to the deterrence of threats to Europe may not be the worst outcome. Another barrage of criticism of allies only would have deepened the current crisis, adding an additional sense of urgency to efforts of creating a "Euro Deterrent."¹⁴

Given their peculiar style and their partly contradictory content, it seems likely that the NSS and the NDS will soon fade into the background. President Trump has shown on many occasions that he is not guided by any document, not even by those produced by his own administration(s). His intuitive leadership style does not follow a script. Hence, while the two documents may offer some insights into the Trump Administration's thinking on certain key security issues, they will soon become "period pieces" of a particularly volatile period of U.S. history, both domestic and foreign. European allies will have little influence over these developments, yet they need to continue to engage with Washington, no matter how difficult. Nothing could be worse than if a disappointed Europe were to turn its back on the United States, thereby foregoing any chance of an eventual transatlantic rapprochement. You do not cancel your lease on the mere suspicion that your landlord will soon cancel it anyway.

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¹³ "Thus, for the United States, our responsibility is to be clear, candid, and consistent. We will continue to provide the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent. And we will also continue, in a more limited and focused fashion, to provide conventional capabilities that contribute to NATO's defense." Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the NATO Defense Ministerial, February 12, 2026, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4404801/remarks-by-under-secretary-of-war-for-policy-elbridge-colby-at-the-nato-defense/>.

¹⁴ Mind the Deterrence Gap: Assessing Europe's Nuclear Options, Report of the European Nuclear Study Group, February 2026, https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/2026/ENSG/Mind_the_Deterrence_Gap%E2%80%9393Report_of_the_ENSG.pdf.

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Although the Trump Administration failed to mention nuclear weapons proliferation or extended deterrence in the *National Security Strategy* or *National Defense Strategy*, the 2026 Iran war illustrates the importance of these two goals and the critical connection between them.

The United States and Israel have justified the latest bombing of Iran largely as a nuclear nonproliferation operation. Meanwhile, the war and President Trump's threats to "take" Greenland have shaken European and Middle Eastern states' faith in American security collaboration. Reflecting this uncertainty are the public determinations by Poland's prime minister and president, Turkey's foreign minister, and Germany's chancellor that their nations' security may ultimately require acquiring nuclear weapons of their own.

This shouldn't be surprising. Throughout the Cold War, hard-headed Western security analysts and officials understood that among the most reliable nuclear nonproliferation incentives for small and medium-sized Western nations were U.S. security guarantees to defend them if necessary with American nuclear arms. Italy, Germany, South Korea, and Japan all either dropped nuclear weapons programs or consideration of such efforts. At the time, American security assurances seemed credible enough to make it unnecessary for these countries to acquire nuclear arms of their own.

In these cases, nonproliferation strengthened extended deterrence as much as extended deterrence strengthened nonproliferation. By extending deterrence to U.S. security allies in Europe and Asia, Washington dissuaded these states from proliferating. This, in turn, helped persuade their neighbors—Australia, Sweden, and Switzerland—that they had no need to seek a nuclear weapon of their own. Similarly, keeping Taiwan, Iraq, and Iran from going nuclear helped increase the credibility of U.S. security pledges to ANZUS and key Middle Eastern states.

Unfortunately, this strategic logic is no longer fashionable. The United States also is now in the business of promoting "peaceful nuclear energy," domestically and abroad. This includes helping states like Saudi Arabia and South Korea to make nuclear fuel—a process that can bring states to the brink of bomb-making.

America also is enjoying a new enthusiasm for security unilateralism. With enough nuclear weapons and extremely effective air and missile defenses, some argue, the United States can dramatically reduce its extended deterrence commitments and even tolerate a certain amount of "friendly" nuclear proliferation.

Meanwhile, some in the academic world (and others, quietly within policy-making circles) insist that more weapons, at least amongst our allies, might be better. Friendly proliferation, they argue, would allow the United States to spend less on America's closest friends' defense—e.g. for South Korea, Japan, Germany, Poland, Turkey, etc.—and encourage "stability" and mutual deterrence with their adversaries in their respective regions.

Perhaps, but such optimism ignores the harsh realities of the 20th century, where various forms of non-nuclear military and diplomatic deterrence failed catastrophically prior to World War I and World War II. It also ignores the strong, historically demonstrated tendency nations have militarily to preempt their neighbors' efforts to acquire nuclear weapons.

All of this suggests that maintaining nonproliferation and extended deterrence is still desirable but now would require attention to a number of nettlesome near-term issues. In specific:

- 1) *Making sure the Ukraine war is properly resolved.* If peace comes at immense expense to Ukraine, it may weaken America's allies' faith that the United States has their back as well. If so, expect Turkey, Poland, Germany, and perhaps other NATO states, to get nuclear weapons of their own. This will only reduce Washington's agency in foreign and military affairs.
- 2) *Effectively backing Taipei's defense against Communist Chinese absorption.* Certainly, if Beijing succeeds in its efforts, South Korea, Japan, Australia and others may no longer believe America has their back. If so, expect them to get nuclear weapons of their own as well.
- 3) *Making America's recent offer of security guarantees to Saudi Arabia and Qatar credible.* Will these states hedge their bets by working with a nuclear-armed Pakistan or possibly a future nuclear-armed Turkey to guarantee their security? Or will some of them—e.g., Saudi Arabia—get nuclear weapons of their own?
- 4) *Extending deterrence convincingly to Turkey.* Ankara continues to signal that it may go nuclear. Can NATO and the United States neutralize these aspirations?
- 5) *Keeping Saudi and South Korean demands to make nuclear fuel on their soil at bay.* Will the United States delay making a subsequent arrangement with Saudi Arabia to help it make nuclear fuel? Will President Trump insist that South Korea get its enriched uranium from the United States? If so, neither country will acquire a nuclear weapons option as soon as they might otherwise. If not, just the reverse will be the case. This, in turn, will prompt their neighbors to develop nuclear weapons options of their own and significantly reduce their security reliance on the United States.
- 6) *Countering Chinese and Russian demands that the United States not deploy nuclear weapons in Asia and Europe.* Both Moscow and Beijing insist that these deployments violate the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Will Washington have a compelling counterargument or counter proposal?
- 7) *Assuring America's allies that whatever nuclear weapons testing the United States performs is done in accordance with their desires for some form of nuclear restraint.* All of America's Asian and European allies believe yield-producing nuclear testing would violate the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which they've all ratified. If the United States conducts yield-producing nuclear testing, will these allies see this as a snub of their own opinion and yet another argument for not relying on security assurances from Washington?

All of these tactical questions demand attention. Answering them, however, won't be enough. In addition, our government must answer a much larger question: how prepared is our military to wage new generation warfare?

Unlike the air war theory of the 1920s—upon which much of our current strategic concepts are based—new generation warfare contends countries can disable their enemies without physically obliterating them. Instead of threatening the physical decimation of a country's industrial and military complexes and population centers, new generation warfare targets to destroy or temporarily disable critical civilian infrastructure and military nodes essential to wage war. Holding these nodes at risk, along with waging effective information campaigns, would aim to break the will of the enemy's population to fight rather than physically flattening enemy states.

As fraught as new generation warfare may be, it promises to be far less bloody-fisted than air war theory-based strategies and nuclear war. It's unclear, however, if the world will be able to get to this less cataclysmic future. The trick will be to transition to new generation warfare quickly enough that reliance on nuclear threats can be pushed into the background before any nuclear arms are again fired in anger. For this, the world needs to buy more time by promoting sound extended deterrence and nuclear nonproliferation policies.

Proper development of such policies will require answering two questions. First, under what circumstances might a small-or medium-sized nations' use of nuclear weapons catalyze into a global superpower conflict? Second, which, if any, of these scenarios is a lesser included threat to dealing with Russia or China; which ones are not? My center is now focusing on these questions. Other nonprofits and our government should as well.
