

MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

The US National Security Strategy 2025: Competing for Power in a Fragmenting World

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January 15, 2026

Summary

The 2025 US NSS focuses on preventing hostile powers from dominating key regions by strengthening deterrence across nuclear, conventional, cyber and space domains, while continuing to invest in military readiness and modernisation. Its success will depend on whether the US can balance selective engagement with sustained alliance confidence and avoid miscalculation in an increasingly contested global environment.

The 2025 United States National Security Strategy (NSS) reflects a shift in how the US defines and pursues its national interests. Given that competition among major powers has intensified and global cooperation has weakened, the international system is becoming more divided and unstable. US policymakers see the post-Cold War period as essentially over, replaced by a world that is more fragmented, more competitive, and less predictable.

Compared to earlier strategies that placed stronger emphasis on broad values and global leadership, this strategy focuses more narrowly on protecting sovereignty, strengthening domestic and national resilience, and competing with rivals. At the same time, it leaves room for selective engagement where US interests align with those of others. This brief places the NSS 2025 within the broader context of global fragmentation and rising competition. It analyses the strategy’s core objectives and regional priorities and assesses the risks and potential consequences of this shift for the international order.

NSS 2025: Defining US National Interests and Priorities

The 2025 NSS reflects a world in which the post-Cold War order is eroding, with power no longer concentrated in a single dominant state but dispersed across regions, intensifying international competition.¹ In this environment, states are placing greater importance on sovereignty, resilience and strategic independence. Rapid technological change and intensifying security competition are increasing uncertainty and reshaping how countries cooperate, compete and manage conflict.

In this context, the NSS 2025 represents a clear departure from earlier US strategies. It argues that past approaches lacked focus, assumed unlimited American resources, and tied US policy too closely to international institutions that constrained flexibility.² According to the strategy, this resulted in unclear priorities, higher costs and reduced effectiveness. Therefore, NSS 2025 is framed as President Trump’s necessary and welcome correction, emphasising clearly defined national interests and realistic assessments of US capabilities aimed at protecting sovereignty and delivering tangible results.

At the core of the strategy is a straightforward definition of US national interests. The primary goal is survival and safety. This includes protecting US territory, securing the border, and strengthening critical infrastructure against military and cyber

¹ Leslie Vinjamuri, “[Competing Visions of International Order: Responses to US Power in a Fracturing World](#)”, Chatham House, March 2025; “[Global Risks Report 2025](#)”, World Economic Forum, 15 January 2025.

² “[National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#)”, The White House, November 2025.

threats.³ Maintaining the world’s most capable military remains central, supported by a credible nuclear deterrent and a strong industrial base.⁴ Economic strength is treated as equally important, with a focus on innovation, energy production and leadership in science and technology.⁵ Beyond material power, the strategy also highlights the importance of soft power and cultural confidence, arguing that internal unity and shared values are essential to long-term national resilience.⁶

The NSS 2025 then outlines what the US seeks from different regions and from the international system more broadly. In the Western Hemisphere, the priority is a secure neighbourhood free from hostile foreign influence or military presence. In the Indo-Pacific, the US aims to preserve a free and open regional order, protect freedom of navigation and resist coercion.⁷ In Europe, the focus is on maintaining allied confidence while encouraging partners to assume greater responsibility for their own defence. In the Middle East, US policy seeks to prevent adversaries from exploiting instability to threaten American interests.⁸ Globally, the strategy emphasises promoting US technologies and standards to sustain long-term economic and strategic influence.

To advance its objectives, the NSS highlights key US strengths: first, a stable and adaptable constitutional system; second, a dynamic economy with deep global capital markets; third, unmatched military power and global reach; and finally, strong cultural influence and soft power.⁹

Regional Priorities

The Western Hemisphere receives special emphasis, with the NSS presenting US policy as a modern extension of the Monroe Doctrine. This approach is organised around a strategy of “Enlist and Expand”.¹⁰ Enlistment focuses on strengthening cooperation with regional partners, adjusting the military posture to address hemispheric threats, expanding the naval and Coast Guard presence, securing access to key locations, and leveraging commercial diplomacy to deepen influence.¹¹ The expansion aims to position the US as the preferred partner by coordinating

³ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 16.

government efforts, limiting access for external powers, and leveraging private investment to advance economic and security goals.¹²

Asia is widely recognised as the primary arena of great-power competition and a central focus of US strategy. The Indo-Pacific is critical to global trade and technology supply chains, and Taiwan is a key strategic priority given its role in regional security and advanced manufacturing.¹³ The South China Sea is also central, both as a major trade route and a source of regional tension. To address these challenges, the strategy combines military deterrence with economic measures, including rebalancing ties with China and restoring a favourable military balance.¹⁴ This includes strengthening deterrence around Taiwan, denying aggression along the First Island Chain, maintaining freedom of navigation, and urging allies to contribute more to regional security.

The Middle East, by contrast, is no longer viewed as the central focus of US strategy. The NSS argues that earlier engagement was driven by energy dependence and Cold War dynamics that no longer apply in the same way. With a more diversified energy mix and strategic competition shifting towards Asia, the strategy envisions a reduced US role in the region. It also assesses that Iran’s ability to threaten regional stability has been weakened following US and Israeli military actions.¹⁵ As a result, US involvement is expected to focus more on partnerships, economic engagement, and long-term stability rather than large-scale military commitments.

India is presented as a key strategic partner whose growing economic and geopolitical influence aligns with US interests in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁶ The strategy emphasises deepening commercial ties with India as a foundation for stronger security cooperation. It also calls for closer coordination across the Western Hemisphere and Africa, particularly on critical minerals and strategic resources.¹⁷ Cooperation in the South China Sea reflects shared concerns over maritime security and the protection of international norms, positioning India as an essential partner across multiple regions.

Europe is portrayed as facing internal challenges, including weakened national identities and reduced strategic confidence, which have increased reliance on the US for security. While managing relations with Russia and maintaining deterrence remain essential, the NSS calls on European states to assume greater responsibility

¹² Ibid., p. 17.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 20, 23.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 27–28.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 21, 24.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 23.

for their own defence.¹⁸ It seeks to move away from viewing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as an ever-expanding alliance and instead refocus on its core defensive mission.¹⁹ Expanding US trade and investment in Europe is also seen as a way to strengthen transatlantic relations.

Finally, US policy towards Africa reflects a shift towards a more pragmatic, interest-based approach. Rather than prioritising ideology or political reform, the NSS emphasises conflict resolution, trade and investment. Cooperation in energy development and access to critical minerals are highlighted, recognising Africa’s growing role in global supply chains.²⁰ This approach aims to build durable partnerships that support stability while advancing US strategic and economic interests.

Shifts in Strategic Orientation

The US national security strategy has changed noticeably over the past decade, reflecting different views of America’s role in the world and how its power should be used. Each of the three most recent National Security Strategies—the 2017 Trump NSS, the 2022 Biden NSS and the 2025 Trump NSS—offers a distinct approach to competition, alliances and global leadership.

The 2017 Trump NSS marked a clear break from post-Cold War thinking. It openly acknowledged the return of great-power competition²¹ and rejected the assumption that US leadership should be unconditional. Instead, it emphasised reciprocity, military strength and economic security. Engagement with the world was framed in realist terms, with less reliance on broad multilateral commitments and greater focus on national advantage.²²

The 2022 Biden NSS moved in a different direction. It placed strong emphasis on multilateralism, alliances and the promotion of democratic values.²³ Competition with China and Russia was recognised as serious but manageable through rules-based institutions, collective action and international cooperation. US leadership was portrayed as essential to sustaining global order.

The 2025 Trump NSS further narrows this approach. It is more explicitly interest-driven, focusing on selective engagement and limiting US commitments to what are

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

²¹ Rajeesh Kumar, “[Will Great Power Competition Return?](#)”, Issue Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 6 April 2018.

²² “[National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#)”, The White House, December 2017.

²³ “[National Security Strategy](#)”, The White House, October 2022.

defined as vital national interests. Military and economic power are concentrated in priority regions, particularly the Indo-Pacific and the Western Hemisphere. The strategy stresses economic nationalism, technological separation from China, a reassessment of Europe and NATO, and minimal emphasis on democracy promotion (Table 1).²⁴

Table 1. Strategic Shift

Theme/Aspect	2017 (Trump)	2022 (Biden)	2025 (Trump)
Global Leadership & Alliances	Global leadership with alliances conditioned on reciprocity.	Strong multilateralism & broad partnership networks.	Conditional leadership focused on core US interests.
Great Power Competition	Great power competition has returned; must rearm and deter.	Competition is dangerous; alliances and rules to prevent war.	Compete where it counts; disengage elsewhere.
China	Revisionist power within broader competition.	China is the primary challenge.	Primary challenge. Focuses on decoupling, tech & supply chains.
Russia/Europe	Russia is seen as a revisionist; Europe is a relatively stable ally.	Russia is framed as a security challenge. Support NATO.	Europe reframed critically. Questions NATO's future.
Military & Defence	Peace through strength, maintain strong forces and alliances.	Strong forces, focus on China/Russia threats.	Military crucial, but regional focus first (WH & Indo-Pacific).

²⁴ [“National Security Strategy of the United States of America”](#), no. 2.

Economic Strategy & Trade	Economic security is important; fairness and reciprocity in trade are essential.	Global economic cooperation.	Economic nationalism, tariffs, reshoring, energy dominance.
Human Rights/Democracy	Promote values but within a realist frame.	Strong focus on human rights and democratic norms.	Minimal emphasis.

Source: Compiled by the author from the US National Security Strategy 2017, 2022, 2025.

In the Western Hemisphere, the 2017 NSS assigned the region moderate importance, viewing it mainly as a zone of stability.²⁵ China was a growing concern but not yet urgent; migration was treated as a security issue; and democracy promotion played a limited role. In 2022, the region’s importance declined further. It was framed as a partnership space in which China could be managed, migration was treated as a shared humanitarian challenge, and democracy promotion received greater emphasis.²⁶ By 2025, however, the Western Hemisphere had become a top priority and was described as the US strategic rear (Table 2).

Table 2. Strategic Shift (Western Hemisphere)

Aspect	2017 (Trump)	2022 (Biden)	2025 (Trump)
Strategic priority	Medium	Medium-Low	Very High
Framing	Stability zone	Partnership zone	Strategic rear/homeland
China concern	Present	Managed	Urgent threat

²⁵ “[National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#)”, no. 22, pp. 51.

²⁶ “[National Security Strategy](#)”, no. 23.

Migration	Security + law enforcement	Humanitarian/shared challenge	Core national security issue
Democracy focus	Moderate	High	Minimal
Use of pressure	Selective	Limited	Extensive

Source: Compiled by the author from the US National Security Strategy 2017, 2022, 2025.

The Indo-Pacific followed a similar trajectory of rising importance. In 2017, it was a secondary priority, seen mainly as a stability zone where China posed a concern but not an immediate crisis.²⁷ In 2022, the region remained important but was reframed as a partnership area, with competition with China managed through alliances and institutions and greater emphasis on democratic cooperation.²⁸ By 2025, the Indo-Pacific became the central focus of US strategy (Table 3). China is viewed as an urgent and systemic threat, while the US military and economic power is heavily concentrated in the region.²⁹

Table 3. Strategic Shift (Indo-Pacific)

Dimension	2017 (Trump)	2022 (Biden)	2025 (Trump)
Strategic priority	High	Highest	Highest
View of the region	Competitive balance	System-shaping arena	Power-competition zone
China framing	Revisionist power	Systemic rival	Primary adversary
Role of alliances	Important	Central	Conditional
Quad	Emerging	Institutionalized	Functional
Ideology	Limited	Strong	Minimal

²⁷ [“National Security Strategy of the United States of America”](#), no. 22, pp. 44–47.

²⁸ [“National Security Strategy”](#), no. 23.

²⁹ Ibid.

War avoidance	Implicit	Explicit priority	Secondary
US burden	High	Very high	Reduced

Source: Compiled by the author from the US National Security Strategy 2017, 2022, 2025.

Europe’s role also shifted across the three strategies. In 2017, Europe was essential, NATO was necessary, and Russia was identified as a revisionist threat, though Ukraine remained a secondary concern.³⁰ In 2022, Europe became a top priority. NATO was central to US strategy, Russia was seen as an acute military threat, and Ukraine moved to the centre of US policy.³¹ By 2025, Europe’s importance declined (Table 4). NATO membership and US leadership became more conditional, and Russia was treated as a manageable regional actor.³²

Table 4. Strategic Shift (Europe)

Dimension	2017 (Trump)	2022 (Biden)	2025 (Trump)
Strategic importance	High	Very High	Medium
NATO	Essential	Central & strengthened	Conditional
Russia framing	Revisionist threat	Acute military threat	Manageable regional actor
Ukraine	Peripheral	Central	De-emphasized
US leadership	Required	Indispensable	Optional
Burden sharing	Important	Less emphasized	Decisive condition
Ideology	Limited	Strong	Minimal

Source: Compiled by the author from the US National Security Strategy 2017, 2022, 2025.

³⁰ “[National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#)”, no. 22, pp. 47–48.

³¹ “[National Security Strategy](#)”, no. 23.

³² Ibid.

Similarly, US policy towards India also evolved over the years. In 2017, India was seen as a rising global power and a key partner in the Indo-Pacific, particularly through the Quad.³³ In 2022, India was considered critical to coalition-building and shared democratic values, playing a central role in shaping the regional order.³⁴ The latest NSS viewed India more narrowly as a partner for balancing China (Table 5). Cooperation focused on Indo-Pacific stability and commercial ties became more transactional.³⁵

Table 5. Strategic Shift (India)

Aspect	2017 (Trump)	2022 (Biden)	2025 (Trump)
Strategic Priority	High — India as a leading global power	Very High — partner in coalition building, shared values	High but narrower — partner for balancing China
Language Used	Strong partnership, leadership role	Democratic partner, alliance network	Partner in Indo-Pacific stability & commercial cooperation
Role in Indo-Pacific	Core partner in Quad and regional balance	Core partner in shaping regional order	Functional partner in security cooperation
Broad Regional Leadership	Emphasized	Emphasized	Less emphasised, regional focus
Strategic Autonomy Acknowledgement	Implicit partnership	Multilateral values	Transactional cooperation

Source: Compiled by the author from the US National Security Strategy 2017, 2022, 2025.

³³ [“National Security Strategy of the United States of America”](#), no. 22.

³⁴ [“National Security Strategy”](#), no. 23.

³⁵ Ibid.

Finally, approaches to alliances and global governance shifted significantly. The 2017 Trump NSS was sceptical of alliances and distrustful of international institutions. The 2022 Biden NSS reversed this stance, treating alliances as core strategic assets and strengthening global governance. The 2025 NSS evaluates alliances based on performance and burden sharing, treats institutions as optional, and places less emphasis on international governance.

Conclusion: Implications for the Global Order

The 2025 NSS signals a clear shift in how the US understands and seeks to shape the global order. Rather than aiming to transform the international system or promote a universal set of norms, the strategy accepts long-term competition, especially with China, as a permanent feature of global politics. US policy focuses on preventing hostile powers from dominating key regions by strengthening deterrence across nuclear, conventional, cyber and space domains, while continuing to invest in military readiness and modernisation.

Alliances and partnerships remain essential, but their value is increasingly measured instrumentally. Burden sharing, flexibility and concrete contributions take precedence over shared values, while economic security has become a core pillar of national security. Resilient supply chains, protection of strategic industries, and leadership in critical technologies are treated as essential to sustaining US power and autonomy.

This realist, interest-based approach offers greater strategic focus but also carries risks. More conditional and transactional cooperation may weaken alliance cohesion, reduce trust among partners, and accelerate fragmentation in the international system. De-emphasising norms and institutions could limit US influence in regions outside its immediate priorities and constrain cooperation on transnational challenges that require collective action.

Ultimately, the NSS 2025 outlines a strategy that seeks to manage competition rather than resolve it. Its success will depend on whether the US can balance selective engagement with sustained alliance confidence and avoid miscalculation in an increasingly contested global environment. The strategy reflects a pragmatic response to a changing world, but one whose long-term implications for US leadership and global stability remain uncertain.

About the Author



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