



Primer: Thematic Similarities Between the New National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy

Burden-shifting is now the stated grand strategy of the republic in a world of renewed imperialism and spheres of influence.

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The Trump administration recently published its new National Defense Strategy (NDS) and National Security Strategy (NSS). These key documents articulate the United States' long-term, bipartisan grand strategy. They seek to rationalize major shifts in national priorities, provide clear guidance to government agencies, and signal intentions to both allies and adversaries. They were mandated by the Goldwater–Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, which requires the administration to produce a comprehensive description and discussion of the nation's worldwide interests, goals, objectives, foreign policy, global commitments, and defense capabilities, thereby institutionalizing a structured framework for aligning American security efforts across administrations.

Previous important versions of these documents include President George H. W. Bush's 1991 NSS, which attempted to plan the new post–Cold War world order; President George W. Bush's 2005 NDS, which formalized the War on Terror and promotion of democracy across the globe; President Donald Trump's 2017 NSS, which officially declared the return of great power competition; and President Joe Biden's 2022 NSS, which briefly argued for a global rivalry between democracies and autocracies.

The State Department's new [NSS](#), released in November 2025, marks a significant shift toward a more realist foreign policy. It repudiates past approaches as unfocused and overly committed to global dominance and multilateralism, and it rejects perpetual hegemony in favor of prioritizing defense and American economic and technological primacy. Its core interests are protecting the homeland, securing supply chains (Venezuela and Greenland are important in this context), preventing hostile dominance in key regions, and supporting allies' security only when aligned

with tangible American benefits instead of pursuing abstract goals such as the promotion of global democracy.

The new NSS formalizes and entrenches the paradigm of burden-shifting, an idea that was first outlined and explored in the “Dormant NATO” doctrine, in place of the conventional framework of burden-sharing. It explicitly assigns primary accountability for regional security to America’s more affluent allies, particularly those on the European continent. The NSS asserts in unequivocal terms, that the era in which the United States unilaterally sustained the global order has concluded and states that prosperous partners—most notably in Europe—must assume a substantially greater share of the defense burden. “The days of the United States propping up the entire world order like Atlas are over,” it says. “We count among our many allies and partners dozens of wealthy, sophisticated nations that must assume primary responsibility for their regions and contribute far more to our collective defense.”

The document then proceeds to repudiate the United States’ foreign policy over the last quarter century: “After the end of the Cold War, American foreign policy elites convinced themselves that permanent American domination of the entire world was in the best interests of our country. Yet the affairs of other countries are our concern only if their activities directly threaten our interests.” A few concrete policies are outlined: building up the “healthy” nations of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe through “commercial ties and weapons sales, and political collaboration and education exchanges”; opening up European markets to U.S. goods and services; ensuring fair treatment for Americans working in Europe; and finally, and perhaps most importantly, “ending the perception, and preventing the reality, of NATO as a perpetually expanding alliance.” Regarding Europe and NATO, the document adopts a conditional, at times contentious, stance.

The NSS urges Europe to develop “civilizational self-confidence,” assume primary responsibility for its defense, and “stand on its own feet.” It opposes the indefinite expansion of NATO and makes American support conditional on reciprocal defense spending (including higher targets such as pledges for 5 percent GDP spent on defense in some references), market access for American goods, and alignment with American priorities. The strategy warns that diverging internal cultural and demographic trends in Europe could undermine the coherence of the alliance and advocates for stronger bilateral ties that respect sovereign identities. Regarding China, the strategy frames competition as primarily economic and strategic, aiming to reverse trade imbalances, intellectual property theft, unfair practices, and supply chain vulnerabilities. It

emphasizes maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific, promoting freedom of navigation, supporting deterrence around Taiwan and its allies, and preventing Chinese regional domination, but it lays out these objectives without heavy ideological framing. China is treated as a major competitor requiring managed engagement through deterrence, economic tools, and Indo-Pacific partnerships, though subordinated to the priorities of the Western Hemisphere. In sum, the document stresses burden-shifting, regional self-reliance, and sovereignty-focused alliances. Critics, however, label it revisionist and nationalist for reframing traditional commitments and the great power rivalry around narrow U.S. interests rather than broad multilateralism.

The Trump administration's 2026 [NDS](#), released by the Pentagon in January 2026, also outlines a more selective, prioritized approach to U.S. military posture. It establishes a clear hierarchy of interests: homeland defense first, followed by strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific (primarily against China), with Europe and other regions in a secondary but still relevant tier. The document also reflects a broader shift toward strategic restraint, burden-shifting, and reallocation of resources away from expansive global commitments. China is identified as the United States' primary long-term strategic competitor, yet the document adopts a restrained, nonideological tone in framing its response. "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," the document argues, adding that the U.S. needs to be realistic about China's buildup of its military and that, "our goal in doing so is not to dominate China; nor is it to strangle or humiliate them. Rather, our goal is simple: To prevent anyone, including China, from being able to dominate us or our allies—in essence, to set the military conditions required to achieve the NSS goal of a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific that allows all of us to enjoy a decent peace."

The document focuses on deterrence through military strength, resilience, and denial strategies (as advocated by the Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby in his book [The Strategy of Denial](#)) to prevent Chinese regional dominance or coercive leverage in the Indo-Pacific rather than portraying China as an existential threat or encouraging confrontation. Explicit mentions of Taiwan are avoided, and the strategy promotes diplomatic and military-to-military engagement to manage risks of escalation. Conflict is not deemed inevitable; China is viewed as a permanent great power rival requiring balanced competition.

The NDS then turns to Russia, which it says "will remain a persistent but manageable threat to NATO's eastern members for the foreseeable future. Indeed, although Russia suffers from a

variety of demographic and economic difficulties, its ongoing war in Ukraine shows that it still retains deep reservoirs of military and industrial power. Fortunately, our NATO allies are substantially more powerful than Russia—it is not even close. Germany’s economy alone dwarfs that of Russia.” It adds that “our NATO allies are therefore strongly positioned to take primary responsibility for Europe’s conventional defense, with critical but more limited American support. This includes taking the lead in supporting Ukraine’s defense.”

As concerns Europe and NATO, the document focuses on realism and responsibility. Russia remains a disruptive threat to European security, it argues, especially on NATO’s eastern flank, but it is not a direct existential danger to the American homeland. The strategy asserts that European allies are expected to lead their own conventional defense, with the United States providing critical but more limited and conditional support. This includes reduced troop commitments and expectations for significantly higher European defense spending, industrial capacity, and planning to reduce dependence on American power. American aid to Ukraine and European stability are deemed important but secondary to Europe’s primary responsibility in its own defense.

Thematic Similarities and a Way Forward

The NSS and NDS both argue in effect for shifting “conventional” deterrence to local allies in the Middle East and Europe. A logical extension of that strategy would be to give Europe a fixed timeline for that shift in the remaining three years of this administration. Both documents talk of restraint in Europe and the Middle East and imply a strategy of burden-shifting. Another thematic similarity between the documents is that both call for competition with China while focusing on coexistence and the rebuilding of core industrial and civilizational strength at home. The latter objective is perhaps the larger change in theory. Arguably the most important claim in the NDS is that China is not only a peer power but the United States’ biggest rival since the nineteenth century. Structural, lopsided multipolarity is taken as a baseline assumption, suggesting that the cost of pursuing global hegemony is unsustainable and possibly fatal.

The sudden strategic realignment among prominent documents invites rigorous interrogation and implies that there is an emerging consensus that the United States is currently grappling with imperial overstretch, a condition characterized by a relative decline due to its pursuit of global hegemony and a fiscal trajectory that is no longer sustainable under current global commitments. This realignment is reinforced by the shifting power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, where China

is increasingly viewed as a peer competitor that has successfully established its own regional sphere of influence. Concurrently, there is a growing admission that the proxy conflict in Ukraine has been a strategic failure. While hostilities may persist, the prevailing assessment suggests that the Russian Federation has achieved its primary objectives, a reality that the Trump administration appears to have internalized.

The logic of multipolarity dictates an intensified struggle among great powers for control over critical resources as commodities such as rare earth minerals, semiconductors, and defensible energy supplies are increasingly treated as strategic necessities rather than mere economic assets. That view in turn leads to spirals of competition, spheres of interests, outright annexations, and bloc formation. Historically, this scramble has often meant either conquests or economic coercion, generating cycles of strategic insecurity; competition for markets, manpower, and resources; and accelerating techno-industrial races.

These dynamics are compounded by a widening gap in military technology between leading powers and the rest of the world alongside a growing surplus of educated but underemployed elites whose lack of opportunities fuels domestic unrest and populist politics. At the same time, large-scale migration from peripheral regions suffering from disorder and weak governance into wealthier core states destabilizes host societies while undermining the very regions that require stability to address the root causes of migration.

Multipolarity often leads to an imperial system, and these dynamics are playing out today as these interacting pressures create a structural environment that closely resembles the instability of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. All available evidence therefore suggests that the unipolar moment of the post-Cold War era has ended and has given way to a new imperial era. This transition toward a multipolar or imperial international order requires a corrective that potentially aims to limit the risk of a catastrophic kinetic confrontation between the United States and China and attempts to simultaneously grow strength and pursue a regional sphere of influence first, with the Western Hemisphere, Western Europe, and East Asia being the important areas of focus.

These elements can be pursued through a strategy that acknowledges that greater European self-reliance frees American resources, attention, and bandwidth for prioritizing the Indo-Pacific. NATO's credibility hinges on allies' investments and capabilities, marking a departure from post-Cold War assumptions of indefinite underwriting of defense by the United States. Overall,

the new NSS and NDS officially acknowledge and signal an adaptation to a multipolar world, prioritizing a focus on homeland security, management of China through deterrence and engagement, and a repositioning of Europe as a capable, self-reliant partner rather than a dependent.