



Insight Forward



Realism, Restraint, and Revisionism

An Assessment of the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy



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INTRODUCTION

Realism as a Framework for Strategic Evaluation

The [2025 National Security Strategy](#) (NSS) released under President Donald J. Trump represents a striking recalibration of U.S. grand strategy. It blends elements of classical and structural realism, restraint, and offshore balancing, alongside domestically oriented political and cultural themes that complicate its theoretical lineage. This report evaluates the NSS through a realist lens,



examining its hierarchy of interests, geographic prioritization, treatment of alliances, economic-industrial statecraft, and hemispheric doctrine. The analysis identifies areas of alignment with realist theory as articulated by Emma Ashford, John Mearsheimer, and broader restrainer/offshore-balancing scholarship, while also highlighting contradictions, vulnerabilities, and potential systemic consequences. The NSS's coherence ultimately hinges on disciplined execution, strategic patience, and the ability to reconcile domestic politics with long-term geopolitical constraints.

Realism provides a powerful analytic framework for evaluating grand strategy. Defined broadly, realism prioritizes national interests, power, geography, material constraints, and the distribution of capabilities; it rejects idealist assumptions about universal values, moral crusades, or the inherent benevolence of international institutions. Within the realist tradition, restrainers emphasize avoiding overextension, minimizing unnecessary military commitments, and aligning ends with means. Offshore balancers focus on preserving regional stability through local partners while retaining U.S. capacity to intervene only when vital interests are threatened. The 2025 NSS appears, at first glance, to embrace many of these tenets. It elevates core interests over peripheral ones, integrates economic and technological security into national power, reduces emphasis on democracy promotion, and calls for greater burden-shifting. However, the document also injects cultural and demographic themes that are uncharacteristic of classical realism and revises long-standing assumptions about the role of alliances. This blend of realism, populism, and revisionism warrants careful analysis.

Overview of the 2025 NSS

1. A hemispheric hierarchy of interests, designating the Western Hemisphere as the center of gravity for U.S. national security.
2. Burden-shifting and reduced U.S. role in Europe, where allies are urged to assume primary responsibility for their defense and regional conflicts.
3. Emphasis on resource security, particularly critical minerals, energy independence, and technological sovereignty.

4. Adoption of a narrower foreign policy, foregrounding material interests and deprioritizing ideological or humanitarian interventions.
5. Cultural and demographic framing, linking issues such as immigration and social cohesion to national security.
6. Strategic restraint in military commitments, consistent with a revised offshore balancing approach.
7. In essence, the document seeks to redefine U.S. strategy around a smaller set of vital interests, more aggressive hemispheric dominance, and a domestic-industrial renewal agenda.

AREAS OF CONVERGENCE WITH A REALIST / RESTRAINT STRATEGY

Read on its own terms, the 2025 NSS is the most self-consciously “realist” American strategy document since the end of the Cold War. It begins from a clear hierarchy of interests that privileges the security of the homeland, control of the immediate neighborhood, preservation of favorable balances of power in the Indo-Pacific and Middle East, and protection of the economic-industrial foundations of U.S. power. The document defines foreign policy almost entirely as the pursuit of “core national interests,” explicitly rejecting any aspiration to “permanent American domination of the entire world,” a formulation that repudiates liberal-hegemonic ambitions while echoing restraint arguments about the limits of U.S. capabilities. The formal text makes this hierarchy explicit by placing the Western Hemisphere, critical supply chains, and domestic industrial capacity at the center of the strategic narrative.

This prioritization reflects an offshore-balancing logic familiar from Mearsheimer and from Emma Ashford’s “realist restrainer” frame. Europe is consciously relegated to a [lower tier of concern](#) as



the underlying logic holds that Europe now sits behind the Western Hemisphere, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East in U.S. priorities, on the assumption that no single hegemon can dominate the continent and that scarce U.S. resources must concentrate on nearer and more dangerous theaters. The NSS operationalizes this by treating European security as something Europeans should increasingly underwrite, while the United States reserves discretion for crises that directly touch U.S. territory, maritime approaches, or core economic interests. This is offshore balancing in practice, even if the rhetoric remains wrapped in “America First” language.

The document’s economic and technological agenda also tracks with modern realist thinking. It treats critical minerals, energy independence, advanced manufacturing, and supply-chain

resilience as central instruments of statecraft rather than technical trade issues. The NSS argues that the United States must never again be strategically dependent on a rival for key inputs and that tariffs, industrial policy, and technology controls are legitimate tools of national security. This is one of the strategy's [most coherent elements](#), linking economic power, industrial capacity, and geostrategic resilience in a way earlier NSS documents often treated only in passing.

Finally, the NSS sheds most of the liberal-internationalist language about democracy promotion and values promotion as primary goals of U.S. policy. Where previous strategies cloaked power politics in the rhetoric of a "rules-based international order," this document is bluntly transactional. It accepts spheres of influence in practice, focuses on preventing hostile control of key regions rather than reshaping their domestic orders, and insists that U.S. allies must contribute materially if they expect sustained U.S. engagement. Atlantic Council experts [highlighted this shift](#): they describe the document as a "major departure" from the post-Cold War objective of global liberal leadership and as a move toward a narrower conception of U.S. obligations abroad. In these respects, the NSS reflects a genuine realist and restrainer sensibility as it tries to align ambitions with material constraints and to focus on what matters most for long-term American strength.

REALIST RED FLAGS AND INTERNAL CONTRADICTIONS

The realist alignment is real but partial. Several features of the NSS cut against the discipline that realism requires and pose nontrivial risks for implementation. The first is the degree of personalization and partisan framing. In many ways, the document reads less like a national strategy and more like a manifesto for "President Trump's second administration," complete with hagiographic language about a "new golden age" and "The President of Peace." Rick Landgraf from War on the Rocks [offered the criticism](#) that "when a national security strategy elevates the president as protagonist rather than the country, it blurs the line between institutional strategy and political messaging. That alters how allies gauge reliability, how agencies interpret guidance, and how adversaries assess continuity beyond one person." This personalization undermines a core



realist requirement, which is that strategies outlast leaders and signal state interests rather than the preferences of a single political faction. If allies and adversaries read the NSS as a campaign document, they will discount its guidance and hedge against a potential reversal under the next administration.

The second red flag is the elevation of immigration, "civilizational cohesion," and cultural conflict to the level of organizing national-security principles. The NSS

declares border security "the primary element of national security" and proposes to end "the era of mass migration," while also framing the "spiritual and cultural health" of the United States and

the prevalence of “traditional families” as prerequisites for strategic success. That framing stretches the concept of national security into domestic culture war. Realism does not deny the importance of social cohesion, but it relies on a parsimonious definition of interests. When everything controversial in domestic politics becomes a security issue, it becomes harder to prioritize, to trade off objectives, and to maintain a clear signal about what the United States will actually fight for abroad.

Third, the treatment of allies sits uneasily with realist coalition logic. The NSS criticizes European governments for “unrealistic expectations” and treats their domestic politics and cultural trends as indicators of declining reliability. Importantly, the administration effectively demotes Europe to fourth-order status and normalizes the idea that parts of Europe fall within a Russian sphere of influence, while U.S. attention shifts to the Western Hemisphere and China. This approach not only downgrades Europe but also treats it as a potential ideological adversary rather than a strategic asset. From a realist perspective, that choice sacrifices a key set of experienced, capable partners in favor of a more unilateral posture that will require greater U.S. expenditure over time if crises escalate.

A fourth contradiction lies in the economic section. The NSS calls for a Hamiltonian program of reindustrialization, tariffs, extensive reshoring, and comprehensive supply-chain insulation. It frames this as an answer to decades of “globalist” mismanagement. Yet [CSIS commentary](#) points out that the document does not fully reconcile the fiscal demands of large-scale industrial policy, a higher defense budget, and tax and spending promises made elsewhere. Such ambition risks becoming aspirational without a serious debate about tradeoffs, especially given the stated objective of a “Golden Dome” missile shield and expanded hemispheric military presence. Realism demands hard budget choices, and the NSS often defers those choices into rhetorical space.

Finally, there is a notable asymmetry in how the document treats sovereignty. It denounces “sovereignty-sapping” international organizations and foreign influence in U.S. politics, yet it also presumes a right to comment on and shape the internal cultural and political debates of European partners and Latin American neighbors, particularly around migration, speech, and “traditional values.” That double standard undermines the credibility of the administration’s sovereignty rhetoric and invites counter-balancing from states that resent being treated as objects of ideological critique. For a realist, this is a self-generated friction that erodes the very freedom of action the NSS claims to protect.

STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS AND SECOND-ORDER EFFECTS

Even if one accepts the NSS’s priorities as conceptually coherent, the international and domestic structures in which it must operate introduce friction that realism cannot ignore. The global system is already moving toward competitive multipolarity. A strategy that publicly devalues Europe and narrows U.S. commitments will not produce a vacuum. It will invite new regional bargaining. European actors are already discussing greater defense autonomy, higher defense spending

targets, and new industrial initiatives in response to perceived U.S. downgrading. Senior European leaders are also [now speak openly](#) about the need for European security independence in light of a U.S. strategy that portrays European allies as weak, divided, and culturally decayed. Over time, this dynamic shifts the transatlantic relationship from a hub-and-spoke model built around U.S. leadership to a looser pattern of coordination among increasingly autonomous poles. And the U.S. might not like Europe's decisions when they act independently.

In the Western Hemisphere, the Trump Corollary announces a more explicit sphere-of-influence claim. With [that frame](#), the NSS commits to "assert and enforce" this corollary to keep hostile powers out of the hemisphere and prevent mass migration and loss of critical assets. That language resonates with classical Monroe Doctrine logic, but the social and political context is different. Latin American states have decades of experience with U.S. intervention, a more diversified set of economic partners, and domestic publics that are sensitive to perceived violations of sovereignty. A hemispheric strategy that leans too heavily on coercion in the name of migration control or critical-asset security risks driving governments toward alternative patrons and deepening anti-American narratives. Realist strategy recognizes that spheres of influence generate counter-coalitions as well as dominance.

The China question is an additional structural constraint. Several external assessments, including The China Academy's [critique](#) that the NSS "still underestimates China," argue that the document blends serious economic competition language with an underdeveloped account of how to



manage a long-term rivalry with a peer competitor. If Washington draws resources away from forward presence in Asia while focusing on hemispheric enforcement and domestic culture wars, Beijing will likely interpret this as a window to consolidate regional influence, even if U.S. rhetoric remains tough. Alliances in Asia become even more important in that environment. If those allies see Washington walking away from Europe and subordinating foreign policy to migration politics, they may hedge as well.

Domestically, the NSS is embedded in a polarized political ecosystem. It should be stressed how unusual it is for a strategy document to foreground partisan narratives and culture-war language to this degree. That choice will almost certainly limit the document's life span. Opposition parties will treat the NSS as a symbol of MAGA realignment rather than a neutral articulation of national interests. Bureaucratic actors will anticipate reversals and may hedge in implementation. Long-term investments in industrial policy, force posture, and alliance restructuring require more continuity than that. Structural realism can tell you what a prudent strategy should look like; it cannot guarantee that domestic politics will allow it to be sustained.

PROSPECTS FOR SUCCESS ACROSS TIME HORIZONS

Assessing the potential success of the NSS requires disaggregating time horizons. **In the short term, the strategy has plausible pathways to partial success.** By narrowing U.S. ambitions, scaling back rhetorical commitments to universal liberal norms, and insisting that allies assume more responsibility, it reduces the formal gap between ends and means that has plagued U.S. policy since the early 2000s. One of the NSS's strengths lie where it builds on enduring principles such as preventing hostile control of key regions, sustaining nuclear deterrence, and integrating economic security more fully into statecraft. If the administration can translate the supply-chain, energy, and tech-leadership elements into concrete policy, the United States could emerge with a more resilient economic base and fewer open-ended military commitments.

The medium-term picture is more ambiguous. The NSS has a clear emphasis on economic statecraft and realistically acknowledges that the United States cannot carry the full cost of the European security order indefinitely. However, alarm bells arise where the document underplays China's systemic challenge, treats European allies as cultural adversaries, and inflates migration and cultural cohesion into central organizing principles. Those choices create friction with partners, invite strategic miscalculation by competitors, and risk distracting policymakers from the most consequential great-power issues. A medium-term NSS that succeeds would need to de-politicize some of this framing in practice, even if the document itself cannot be rewritten.

Over the long term, the probability that this NSS succeeds as a durable grand strategy is low unless it evolves into something less personalized and more institutional. The document can serve as a useful provocation that forces debate about priorities and resource constraints, but it lacks a fully developed theory of how to manage long-term competition with major autocracies while reordering regional commitments. Realist strategy requires not only a hierarchy of interests but also a credible coalition architecture, clear red lines, and a stable domestic consensus about the basic shape of U.S. engagement. The NSS currently offers a hierarchy and a slogan but remains thin on coalition design and domestic consensus. Without those elements, its structural insights risk being carried forward in fragmentary fashion by successors who will interpret "America First" through their own political filters.

FURTHER QUESTIONS ANSWERED

- **How will the United States maintain credibility in deprioritized regions such as Europe?** From a realist standpoint, credibility is not a mystical asset but a function of perceived interests and capabilities. The NSS can maintain credibility in Europe only if it matches its rhetorical downgrade with a transparent and predictable posture. That means clearly stating what the United States will still defend, what it expects Europeans to handle, and what conditions would trigger U.S. re-engagement. European leaders already understand that U.S. strategic focus has moved, but they are uncertain about where the new red lines lie. If Washington continues to oscillate between threats to walk away from NATO and episodic reassurance, it will bleed

credibility faster than a more brutally honest but consistent posture would. The NSS's long-term success in Europe depends on whether it can induce Europeans to step up while still anchoring a minimum level of deterrence, particularly on NATO's eastern flank.

- **Can economic resilience and supply-chain security substitute for strong alliances?** They can strengthen U.S. autonomy but cannot fully substitute for alliances in a multipolar system. Economic and industrial resilience helps the United States absorb shocks and reduces the leverage that rivals can exert through coercive interdependence. That is a genuine strategic gain and one of the NSS's solid contributions. However, alliances provide things that supply-chain reform cannot: access, intelligence cooperation, political legitimacy, and additional capabilities in crises. Even in an "America First" framework, the NSS still implicitly relies on allies in the Indo-Pacific to contain China and on regional partners in the Middle East to manage local security dilemmas. A purely autarkic or solitary strategy would be far costlier and less effective. The realist answer, therefore, is that resilience and alliances are complementary, and they work best in tandem, not as substitutes.
- **What institutional reforms are required to make this NSS viable over time?** Three categories of reform are indispensable. First, strategic planning capacity inside the NSC, State Department, Defense Department, and economic agencies must be rebuilt to handle the integrated geoeconomic agenda that the NSS demands. That includes new analytical units focused on critical minerals, technological ecosystems, and industrial capacity as strategic variables, rather than leaving these to fragmented bureaucratic silos. Second, alliance management needs modernization. If the United States is going to practice tougher burden-sharing and reduced forward presence, it must also invest in new consultation mechanisms, more flexible coalition formats, and clearer contingency planning with partners. The NSS implies a significant reconfiguration of U.S. commitments without specifying the institutional machinery that will manage the transition. Third, interagency coordination on technology, trade, and sanctions must be strengthened so that the economic instruments the strategy relies on are not undercut by domestic lobbying or bureaucratic turf battles. Without such reforms, the NSS risks becoming a list of aspirations that collide with the existing machinery of government.
- **How will domestic polarization shape the NSS's trajectory and durability?** Domestic polarization is the single largest threat to the NSS as a coherent grand strategy. Because the document explicitly embeds culture-war narratives and partisan self-branding, it will likely be viewed by half the political system as illegitimate on arrival. It is exceptionally unusual for a national security strategy to lean so heavily into intra-American political conflicts and culture-war framing. That choice all but guarantees that the NSS will not enjoy the kind of bipartisan acceptance that earlier strategies often did, even when they were contested on the margins. A realist would see this as a self-inflicted constraint. Grand strategy requires a minimum of domestic consensus about the nature of threats and the hierarchy of interests. If every change of administration brings an equal and opposite repudiation, allies and adversaries will treat U.S. documents as temporary talking points rather than binding guidance. The NSS's realist components may survive, but only as fragments absorbed into future, less personalized strategies.

IMPACTS TO CORPORATIONS

For multinational corporations, the NSS hardwires geopolitics into day-to-day business decisions in a way that is both clarifying and destabilizing. On the positive side, the strategy is unusually explicit that economic vitality, industrial capacity, technological leadership, and supply-chain resilience are now central pillars of U.S. national power. That creates opportunities for firms that align themselves with Washington’s geoeconomic agenda. Those able to help the United States reshore or nearshore production, secure hemisphere-based supply chains, and deepen control of key technologies can expect preferential treatment, subsidies, and durable political support. For energy majors, mining houses, defense primes, and advanced manufacturing and automation companies, this NSS signals a long demand cycle linked to state power rather than short political fashion.

The same logic, however, increases policy and regulatory risk for globally integrated firms. By explicitly blurring the line between national security and economic policy, the NSS implies that



export controls, tariffs, investment screening, sanctions, and industrial policy will be deployed more often and with broader justifications. The strategy elevates economic statecraft without fully acknowledging how fragile and dynamic U.S. innovative capacity and financial openness actually are. For multinationals with cross-border R&D, dual-use technology portfolios, or extensive China and EU exposure, this means higher uncertainty around market access and regulatory constraints. The National Security Institute [puts it bluntly](#). If industrial capacity and supply chains are now security variables, corporate behavior in these domains will be monitored and, when necessary, coerced. That is an intelligible environment for

firms that can adapt, but it is far from the relatively predictable rules-based system of the 1990s and 2000s.

The NSS’s hemispheric turn and “Trump Corollary” also reshape the geography of corporate opportunity and risk. By ranking the Western Hemisphere as the apex priority for U.S. security and economic engagement, the strategy signals long-term U.S. attention and leverage in North, Central, and South America. Multinationals that can credibly position themselves as partners in building a “more sophisticated Western Hemisphere” through nearshoring to Mexico or Brazil, investment in regional logistics, or joint ventures on critical minerals will likely benefit from both U.S. and host-government incentives. For example, IKEA’s [decision to ramp up](#) U.S. production in response to rising tariffs captures the early corporate adjustment. Firms are pivoting toward production closer to consumption markets, even at higher unit cost, to reduce exposure to tariff risk and shipping volatility. However, the same hemispheric assertion raises the probability of political backlash, regulatory nationalism, and societal resistance in Latin America, particularly in

extractive sectors. Companies that appear too closely tied to U.S. strategic designs will credibly find themselves caught between Washington's expectations and local governments' need to show distance from perceived U.S. dominance.

On trade and supply chains, the NSS effectively institutionalizes the "age of tariffs and uncertainty" rather than treating Trump-era measures as a temporary aberration. Analyses from [J.P. Morgan](#), the [Tax Foundation](#), and [CEPR](#) on the impact of Trump's tariffs already document higher input costs, greater investor uncertainty, and disruptions to global demand forecasting and inventory planning. The new strategy folds those tools into a broader security doctrine. The upside for some firms is a predictable push toward diversification away from China and other strategic competitors, with clear political cover for building "China-plus-one" or hemisphere-centered supply chains. The downside is that trade rules become more contingent on episodic security judgments. Multinationals must assume that tariff schedules, export controls, and investment restrictions can be tightened or loosened quickly to serve bargaining needs with Beijing, Brussels, or Brasília, as suggested by [recent reporting](#) on how Washington paused sanctions on China's MSS to preserve a trade truce linked to rare earths and chips. That kind of tactical linkage is rational in statecraft terms, but it complicates long-horizon corporate planning.

Alliance downgrading and the ideological turn toward Europe introduce a different class of risks for corporations whose business models depend on transatlantic regulatory alignment and political trust. The NSS's treatment of Europe as a lower-tier priority and the accompanying



rhetoric about "civilizational erasure" and demographic decline sharpen the perception of political distance between Washington and key EU capitals. Over time, this invites regulatory divergence. Europe will likely double down on autonomous standards in data, AI, ESG, and competition policy in ways that explicitly hedge against U.S. preferences. For multinationals operating across both jurisdictions, that means more fragmented compliance regimes, higher legal

risk, and possible conflict of laws, especially around data localization, privacy, content moderation, and dual-use technology controls. At the same time, reduced U.S. willingness to underwrite European security will credibly spur EU members to increase defense spending and industrial policy, creating commercial opportunities for defense and cybersecurity firms that can navigate both U.S. and EU procurement systems, but at the price of greater political complexity.

The NSS's emphasis on technology, AI, robotics, and critical infrastructure creates asymmetric opportunities by sector. Industrial automation and advanced manufacturing companies stand to benefit directly from the administration's push for robotics and reshoring as tools of national power. Emerging [robotics initiatives](#) is leading Washington to court robotics CEOs and framing

automation as essential to catching up with China on industrial robotics. Defense, cyber, and dual-use tech firms similarly gain from being seen as instruments of strategic competition. But tighter export controls, human-rights-linked sanctions, and data-sovereignty rules will constrain tech companies' global expansion, particularly in China and other authoritarian markets. Meanwhile, consumer-facing multinationals face the prospect of more volatile demand due to tariff-driven price swings, politicized boycotts linked to culture-war issues, and the NSS's willingness to treat corporate behavior on content moderation, speech, and migration as matters of national concern. The same document that promises industrial partnership also implicitly threatens reputational and regulatory consequences for firms that run against its cultural and political narratives.

Finally, the NSS intensifies the need for boards and executive teams to treat geopolitical risk as a core dimension of corporate strategy rather than an external background condition. The linkage between security and economic policy does not just affect defense contractors or energy majors; it affects financial institutions, logistics providers, consumer brands, and platform companies whose operations cross national lines. The practical implication is that multinationals will need more robust internal intelligence, scenario planning, and compliance architectures. They will have to model outcomes such as hemispheric sanctions regimes, sudden export-control expansions, or alliance breakdowns that affect standards and market access. Some firms will exploit the NSS to secure rents and protective regulation in key sectors. Others will find that an environment defined by spheres of influence, trade weaponization, and culturalized security erodes the predictability that underpinned the last three decades of corporate globalization. From an analytic standpoint, the NSS does not end globalization for multinationals, but it shifts its character from efficiency-maximizing integration to a more fragmented, politically contingent landscape where resilience, optionality, and geopolitical alignment become central strategic variables.

To support systematic monitoring of how evolving geopolitical dynamics shape corporate risk, consult Insight Forward's [*Top 10 Geopolitical Risks for Businesses in 2026*](#).

CONCLUSION

The 2025 National Security Strategy is a genuine attempt to put a realist and restrainer imprint on U.S. grand strategy. It rejects liberal-hegemonic ambitions, articulates a clear hierarchy of interests, embraces offshore balancing, and places economic-industrial resilience at the center of national power. These are nontrivial adjustments after two decades of expansive internationalism, and they align in important respects with the kind of realism that recognizes structural constraints, prioritizes core interests, and treats military power as finite. At the same time, the document carries serious liabilities from a realist perspective. It personalizes national strategy around a single leader, imports domestic culture wars into the core of national security, treats European allies as ideological antagonists, and assumes that economic nationalism and hemispheric dominance can proceed without generating counter-balancing abroad. The NSS is coherent where it narrows purpose and invests in state capacity, and it is vulnerable where it confuses partisan identity with strategic interest.

Whether this NSS becomes a successful grand strategy depends less on its theoretical foundations than on execution and evolution. In the best case, its realist core could be institutionalized in more measured, less personalized forms, producing a durable shift toward restraint, geoeconomic statecraft, and calibrated regional commitments. In the more likely case, the document will function as an important transitional artifact. It will signal the end of the post-Cold War liberal-hegemonic project and the arrival of a more transactional, interest-driven U.S. foreign policy, but many of its specific formulations will be revised or rejected as domestic politics and systemic pressures impose their own logic. For a realist analyst, the task is to extract and develop the strategy's structurally sound elements while remaining clear-eyed about the contradictions that will shape its fate.

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