

Jakub Bornio

## **The U.S. National Security Strategy and the Security of Central and Eastern Europe**

**The U.S. National Security Strategy, published by the administration of Donald Trump, is a fundamental document diagnosing changes in the international security environment and outlining the United States' efforts to adapt to new geopolitical conditions. The Strategy's assumptions are of key importance for the security of central and eastern European states, whose long-standing security guarantor is now seeking to adjust to new mechanisms shaping the global balance of power and to transform them.**

**General remarks on the 2025 National Security Strategy.** On 4 December 2025, the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump published the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS 2025). The NSS is the most important document defining the strategic directions of U.S. foreign and security policy. Other documents operationalizing U.S. policy in specific areas—such as the National Defense Strategy and the Strategic Posture Review—are subsequently expected to build upon its assumptions.<sup>1,2</sup> The document is most likely the product of a compromise reached among representatives of individual departments within the Trump administration.<sup>3</sup> This is suggested by certain internal inconsistencies, including unevenly distributed emphasis on economic and axiological dimensions across different geographic regions, as well as variations in narrative style between sections. The NSS issued by President Trump's second administration differs markedly from those published by previous administrations, above all in terms of narrative. Whereas earlier strategies, written in a clearly diplomatic and often aspirational tone<sup>4</sup>, created the impression of equal attention being paid to almost all geographic areas, NSS 2025 explicitly prioritizes U.S. areas of interest. The distinctive narrative and unique character of NSS 2025 also stem from the fact that the document functions not only as an instrument of strategic communication, but also as a form of cognitive action directed at adversaries the United States seeks to deter, as well as at allies whose sense of insecurity Washington aims to leverage for its own particular interests.

**Abandoning global primacy?** In analytical, journalistic, and political circles, it has become common to claim that NSS 2025 assumes a withdrawal from the role the United States previously played in the international system. Although the Strategy explicitly criticizes the pursuit of global dominance that guided U.S. foreign policy after the Cold War<sup>5</sup>, declarations of a break with this doctrine are largely rhetorical. In reality, the “unipolar moment” ended long before the publication of NSS 2025, as a result of China's growing power and the assertiveness of other

<sup>1</sup> Both documents are being developed within the so-called “Restraint” faction in the structures of the Pentagon. Secretary of War Peter Hegseth commissioned the National Defense Strategy from Undersecretary Elbridge Colby as early as the beginning of May 2025. For more on the “Restraint” faction, see: J. Bornio, M. Stefan, “The Dilemma of US Strategic absence in Europe”, in: J. Bornio (ed.), *NATO after the Summit in The Hague. Strategic challenges and regional adaptation*, Lublin 2025, pp. 21–52, <https://ies.lublin.pl/ies-policy-papers/pp2025-001/> [18.12.2025].

<sup>2</sup> Previously, these also included other documents, such as the Defense Planning Guidance.

<sup>3</sup> In U.S. analytical circles, a longer version of the NSS was also in circulation (possibly one of the earlier drafts or a version modified by one of the factions within the Trump administration), which contained proposals such as a new “pentarchy” composed of the United States, China, Russia, India, and Japan. M. Myers, ‘*Make Europe Great Again*’ and more from a longer version of the National Security Strategy, Defense One, 09.12.2025, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2025/12/make-europe-great-again-and-more-longer-version-national-security-strategy/410038/> [18.12.2025].

<sup>4</sup> This wishful thinking is explicitly identified as part of the criticism of previous NSS documents. See, for example: *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> “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”. *National Security Strategy*, op. cit., p. 1.



international actors with whom the United States proved unable to cope. In this sense, the provisions of NSS 2025 do not constitute a renunciation of global primacy—since the United States no longer possesses it in the form known from the 1990s—but rather an acknowledgment of an already existing reality. Similarly, the criticism contained in NSS 2025 and the drive to reconfigure the liberal international system based on international organizations and free trade—which for many years underpinned U.S. hegemony—primarily reflect the fact that this system enabled China to emerge as the United States' most significant systemic rival<sup>6</sup> and no longer allows Washington to maintain a dominant position. Questioning the hegemonic policy pursued by previous administrations, which did yield tangible benefits for the United States<sup>7</sup>, is therefore more an attempt by a shrinking empire to "save face" than a fundamental doctrinal shift.

**A "favorable balance of power."** In place of primacy, the Trump administration proposes the creation of a balance-of-power system. This is intended as a response to a multipolar international reality and refers primarily to the military dimension of great-power competition, particularly in Eurasia (see footnote 3). A key element of this concept, however, is that the balance is to be "favorable" both to the United States and to its allies in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>8</sup> The underlying assumption may be the creation of an Indo-Pacific variant of the historical *pax Britannica*, with the United States acting as a balancing power that manages local conflicts in order to prevent China from gaining strategic advantages. Importantly, despite references to the Monroe Doctrine—or, more precisely, to a "Trumpian version of the Monroe Doctrine" (*the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine*)<sup>9</sup>—NSS 2025 is not an isolationist strategy, either in terms of its objectives (e.g., economic expansion) or in the actions the United States intends to take to achieve them (e.g., maintaining a military presence in Eurasia).

**Implications for the security of Central and Eastern Europe.** From the perspective of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the most significant consequence of NSS 2025 and other actions by the Trump administration—particularly the Indo-Pacific balance-of-power concept—is the de-prioritization of other traditional Eurasian theaters, namely Europe and the Middle East. Recent U.S. efforts to end or freeze numerous conflicts, including the war in Ukraine, stem from a strategic calculation. At its core lies the assumption that China is a beneficiary of the war in Ukraine and would likewise benefit from other potential conflicts that could tie down U.S. resources. As a result of the war in Ukraine, part of U.S. capabilities has been redirected to the European theater, limiting American resources available for competition with China in the Indo-Pacific. In addition, largely due to international sanctions, China has succeeded in making Russia increasingly dependent on it.

Although the war in Ukraine may appear to an Indo-Pacific-focused United States as a "peripheral" conflict, NSS 2025 provides no grounds for concluding that Washington intends to abandon its network of allies, including those in Europe. On the contrary, the alliance system is treated as a core resource of U.S. foreign and security policy. With regard to the European theater, NSS 2025 calls for "promoting European greatness".<sup>10</sup> This goal primarily entails strengthening European defense capabilities, relieving the United States of part of the burden of providing security to Europe—i.e., Europeanizing the continent's security system<sup>11</sup>—and explicitly aligning Europe with the United States in systemic competition with China. Some analytical centers (mainly European) reacted with surprise—and seemingly incorrectly—to the fact that Russia is not explicitly described in NSS 2025 as an adversary. However, specific provisions of the Strategy assume a competitive character of relations between

<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that the internal factors emphasized in the Strategy should be underestimated, including, among others, the shrinking of the middle class.

<sup>7</sup> For example, control over Middle Eastern hydrocarbon markets, which was crucial prior to the Shale Revolution.

<sup>8</sup> *National Security Strategy*, op. cit., pp. 22–23.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 5, 15.

<sup>10</sup> This analysis does not address the axiological and journalistic-political reflections found in those parts of the NSS dealing with the ideological dispute between the MAGA camp and the political milieu dominant in the European Union.

<sup>11</sup> To some extent, this process is already underway as a result of increased defense spending by European NATO members ([IEŚ Commentaries, No. 1293](#); [IEŚ Commentaries, No. 1294](#); [IEŚ Commentaries, No. 1387](#)), Europe assuming greater financial responsibility for supporting Ukraine, or the proposal to appoint a representative of one of the European NATO members' armed forces as the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).



U.S. European allies and Russia<sup>12</sup>, as well as the establishment of “strategic stability”—that is, a form of balance between Europe and Russia intended to prevent a conflict undesirable from the U.S. perspective.

This does not mean, however, that the specific provisions of NSS 2025 do not entail risks for the European security architecture, including for the CEE region, which is most exposed to pressure from Russia. In NSS 2025, the Trump administration states that Europeans’ belief in an existential threat from Russia is illusory, arguing that “European allies enjoy a significant hard power advantage over Russia by almost every measure, save nuclear weapons”<sup>13</sup>. An arithmetic comparison of European and Russian military potential is, however, an overly simplistic approach, as Europe is not a geopolitically coherent actor and operates in more than just the eastern security direction. Moreover, the belief in European supremacy over Russia reflects an Americentric perspective. In assessing threats, what matters more than the American diagnosis is how the situation is perceived in Moscow—and since 1999, the primary reference point for Russia’s policy toward CEE has been U.S. authority rather than European capabilities. It may therefore prove that any potential withdrawal of U.S. capabilities from Europe, in line with de-prioritization, will be exploited by Russia to test a Europeanized deterrence system. Although it does not currently appear that the United States intends to abandon its allied assets in CEE, it cannot be ruled out that Washington’s desire to pull Russia away from its close relationship with China will ultimately take precedence over taking a clear stance and providing support to European allies in the event of a hypothetical NATO–Russia crisis.

NSS 2025 also attaches more importance to the state-centric nature of the international system. In the document, the Trump administration openly questions the capabilities and reliability of some European allies.<sup>14</sup> The proposed response is the conclusion of bilateral arrangements with individual states in specific regions. These are intended to provide countries that align with U.S. interests with security guarantees as well as other benefits, including economic and technological ones.<sup>15</sup> In this context, it should be noted that to effectively balance Russia, the United States does not require the entirety of NATO, and such provisions may point to the risk that security guarantees will be extended only to selected NATO members—effectively signaling a potential dismantling of the Alliance. NSS 2025 also breaks with the tradition of doctrinal NATO enlargement.<sup>16</sup> These assumptions, combined with, among other factors, the recent withdrawal of part of the U.S. military contingent from Romania, indicate that the United States is prepared to apply a “carrot-and-stick” approach<sup>17</sup> and is clearly playing on Europeans’ fears.

The increased emphasis on bilateral cooperation is also linked to the Trump administration’s explicit aversion toward European Union institutions. The sources of this critical stance, however, lie not in issues related to hard security, but in the administration’s dissatisfaction with the EU’s protectionist trade policy, which in many areas falls under the exclusive competence of the European Commission. Bilateral arrangements may therefore be used by the U.S. administration as a tool for leveraging EU policy from within.

---

<sup>12</sup> “We will need a strong Europe to help us successfully compete, and to work in concert with us to prevent any adversary from dominating Europe”, *National Security Strategy*, op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> “European allies enjoy a significant hard power advantage over Russia by almost every measure, save nuclear weapons”, *National Security Strategy*, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> “As such, it is far from obvious whether certain European countries will have economies and militaries strong enough to remain reliable allies”, *National Security Strategy*, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> See the remarks by Secretary of War Peter Hegseth delivered two days after the publication of NSS 2025, in which he states this explicitly, pointing to Israel, South Korea, Poland, Germany, and the Baltic states. U.S. Department of War, *Remarks by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth at the Reagan National Defense Forum (As Delivered)*, 06.12.2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4354431/remarks-by-secretary-of-war-pete-hegseth-at-the-reagan-national-defense-forum-a/> [18.12.2025].

<sup>16</sup> “Ending the perception, and preventing the reality, of NATO as a perpetually expanding alliance”, *National Security Strategy*, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> Romania was chosen as the country from which part of the U.S. troops stationed on NATO’s eastern flank would be withdrawn not only because it faces a relatively lower operational and tactical threat from Russia, but also because Romania has been restrained in increasing defense spending.