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The United States National Defense Strategy and the Security of Central and Eastern Europe

The United States National Defense Strategy, published by the Department of War, operationalises and further specifies the assumptions of U.S. foreign policy articulated in the National Security Strategy. The Pentagon's vision of the international environment assumes that U.S. policy will be guided by a doctrine of "practical realism", the prioritisation of the Indo-Pacific theatre, the deterrence of adversaries, and support for so-called "model allies". These policies confront the states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) with a range of strategic dilemmas.

The 2026 National Defense Strategy. On 23 January 2026, the Department of War released the United States National Defense Strategy (NDS). The document operationalises the assumptions of the National Security Strategy (NSS) published less than two months earlier (see [IES Commentaries](#), no. 1492). In substantive terms, the NDS largely confirms the core premises of the NSS, while also providing greater precision regarding the strategic objectives and instruments the United States intends to employ in the implementation of its security policy in the political and military domain. Unlike the NSS, the NDS is not the product of an interdepartmental consensus within President Donald Trump's administration, but rather a document developed within a Pentagon currently dominated by the hard core of the so-called "restrainers"¹. Secretary Pete Hegseth commissioned its preparation from Under Secretary Elbridge Colby in May 2025. This context is significant for assessing the implications the document may have for the international environment, including for Central and Eastern Europe.

"Practical Realism, Not Isolationism": The Substance of the NDS. The document opens with a memorandum signed by Secretary Hegseth, in which he outlines the principal assumptions of U.S. defence policy. At its core—subsequently elaborated throughout the document—is the safeguarding of national security and the protection of national interests through the stabilisation of the international system based on the concept of deterrence by denial². Later sections of the NDS explicitly state that the objective of the United States is to "deter China in the Indo-Pacific region through strength [a demonstration of strength – J.B.], rather than confrontation". The Secretary of War also declares a departure from the doctrine of interventionism, which had led to "endless wars", while simultaneously emphasising that U.S. actions will not be isolationist but will instead be grounded in a model of "practical realism" subordinated to the concept of "America First".

In practice, this entails the prioritisation of interests and threats and the adjustment of geographical areas of engagement accordingly³. This approach stems from the diagnosis that, given the current level of global engagement, the United States is neither able nor likely to be able to counter China effectively—as the principal strategic threat—owing to limited resources. The strong emphasis on realism by "restrainers"⁴ and the Trump

¹ For more on the "restrainers", see: J. Bornio, M. Stefan, *The Dilemma of U.S. 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/> [accessed 27 January 2026].

² This is succinctly captured by the words: "We will support a policy of actual peace through strength. We will be the sword and shield to deter war, with the goal of peace—but ready to fight and win the nation's necessary wars if called upon", contained in the preface to the NDS.

³ "Instead, the Department will prioritize the most important, consequential, and dangerous threats to Americans' interests." The geographical areas of engagement in both the NDS and the NSS have been ranked according to priority as follows: the Western Hemisphere, the Indo-Pacific, and the remaining traditional theatres of Eurasia, namely Europe and the Middle East.

⁴ See further: J. Bornio, M. Stefan, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

administration also implies a foreign policy guided by a narrowly understood national interest, accompanied by the marginalisation of values and a general questioning of the principles of the liberal international order (including the rationale for international organisations and international law), a tendency that can already be observed in the administration's practice. The rejection of isolationism also features in the NDS, primarily in the context of alliance policy. The United States does not intend to abandon alliances, but rather to remodel them in accordance with the principle of burden sharing.

Reversal of the Cold War Theatres. The NDS explicitly states that the Pentagon considers the contemporary security environment to be the most "dangerous" that the United States has faced in its history. This merely confirms earlier analyses by the restrainers, in which China was identified as a threat far greater than any previously posed by the USSR, Germany, or Japan⁵. An obvious consequence of this diagnosis is the reversal of the logic that governed the global order during the Cold War. The European theatre, which was prioritised during that period, is supplanted by the Indo-Pacific theatre, with all the attendant consequences. These include not only a reconfiguration of U.S. engagement in Europe⁶, but above all the risk of destabilisation – a permanent feature of the security environment in the Indo-Pacific during the Cold War – associated with such a shift. While the United States aims to establish a system of strategic stability, understood as a balance of power between the European component of NATO and Russia, such an arrangement does not preclude the occurrence of proxy wars in Europe and its vicinity.

The significance of the Indo-Pacific for the United States, however, derives not solely from the threats emanating from the region. The NDS, like the NSS, places considerable emphasis on geoeconomic competition, underscoring that the region will soon account for more than half of global GDP. Hence the implicit – though not explicitly declared – desire within the Trump administration to relocate the centre of decision-making in global processes to the Indo-Pacific and possibly to create a "new pentarchy"⁷. From the U.S. perspective, Europe is losing importance not only as an arena of military competition, but also as an economic one⁸. Among countries representing Europe's strongest economies and within EU institutions, this is likely to generate a temptation towards economic hedging in the EU–China–U.S. triangle⁹, and to encourage efforts to deepen economic relations with other economies, such as Mercosur or India. This, in turn, places CEE states – whose security policies are based on a close alliance with the United States – before a strategic dilemma.

Russia in the NDS. While the approach to Russia in the NSS was mistakenly interpreted by some observers as non-hostile (see *IEŚ Commentaries*, no. 1492), the NDS clearly places Russia alongside other U.S. adversaries, namely China, Iran, and North Korea. Moreover, the document explicitly states that Russia has the potential to generate threats to the United States in the Western Hemisphere. Despite this, the Trump administration advocates shifting the bulk of the conventional burden of balancing Russia onto the European component of NATO. This generates specific risks (see *IEŚ Commentaries*, no. 1492). It should be noted, however, that burden

⁵ E. Colby, *China, Not Russia, Still Poses the Greatest Challenge to U.S. Security*, 1 July 2022, *The National Interest*, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-not-russia-still-poses-greatest-challenge-us-security-203228> [accessed 27 January 2026].

⁶ Most likely this will translate into the reduction in the overall number of troops in Europe and the relocation of some of them to the eastern flank.

⁷ Within U.S. analytical circles, a longer version of the NSS was also circulating (possibly an earlier draft or a modification prepared by one of the factions within the Trump administration), which included postulates such as the establishment of a new pentarchy composed of the United States, China, Russia, India, and Japan. See: M. Myers, "Make Europe Great Again" and More from a Longer Version of the National Security Strategy", *Defense One*, 9 December 2025, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2025/12/make-europe-great-again-and-more-longer-version-national-security-strategy/410038/> [accessed 27 January 2026].

⁸ The NDS states this explicitly in the words: "...although Europe remains important, it has a smaller and decreasing share of global economic power".

⁹ An illustration of this tendency was President Emmanuel Macron's statement at the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos, in which he called for an increase in Chinese foreign direct investment in Europe. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMJqlohjPYs> [accessed 27 January 2026].

sharing does not entail a complete withdrawal of U.S. support for partners, but rather its limitation and the subsidisation of allies in key sectors—presumably where they face shortfalls (e.g. nuclear deterrence, satellite reconnaissance, intelligence and related capabilities), or in areas particularly exposed to hostile influence (e.g. the eastern flank).

The Concept of the Model Ally. The NDS also preliminarily operationalises the concept of the “model ally”, which has been present in the rhetoric of the Trump administration for some time. To date, Secretary Hegseth has applied this designation to, *inter alia*, Israel, the Baltic states, and Poland¹⁰—countries that invest in their own security at a level expected by the U.S. administration and can therefore count on its favour. Using the example of Israel’s response to the Hamas attack of 7 October 2025, the NDS defines a model ally as a state willing and able to defend its own security and to align with U.S. preferences in the context of deterring regional adversaries—both in terms of increased defence spending and the fulfilment of contracts with U.S. arms suppliers. The NDS indicates that such states may expect U.S. support in areas including “arms sales, defense industrial collaboration, intelligence-sharing”. As demonstrated by U.S. strikes on Iran in June 2025, however, American assistance may be considerably broader, if only “that leave our nations better off”. Potential support is therefore not unconditional, and the United States expects it to be as limited as possible.

Implications for Central and Eastern Europe

- The NDS strongly reinforces the assumptions set out in the NSS, with deprioritisation at their core. A consequence of this is an effort to “Europeanise” NATO, and thus also the pillars of the security architecture in Central and Eastern Europe. There is a risk that Russia—whose primary reference point in its policy towards the region for decades has been the United States—may seek to test a future Europeanised security system.
- The concept of the model ally and other actions by the U.S. administration clearly indicate a preference for conducting security policy on the basis of bilateral arrangements. From the U.S. perspective, balancing Russia does not require equal participation by the entirety of NATO. The United States exploits the security dilemma facing CEE states and may seek to use it to undermine the unity of NATO’s European component in order to advance its own interests, for example economic ones in the context of EU trade policy.
- At the same time, the concept of the model ally offers CEE states an opportunity to leverage U.S. support to strengthen their security and international agency. This will require skilful manoeuvring within the realities of an alliance of junior partners with a great power whose policy is guided by a balance-of-power logic and which possesses numerous levers *vis-à-vis* its allies, including the security lever.
- In the face of a shift in the U.S. security paradigm, Western European states—less exposed to an existential threat from Russia—may pursue a hedging strategy that will generate additional strategic dilemmas for CEE countries, whose security is anchored in the alliance with the United States. The tension experienced by CEE states between supporting the United States as the primary security provider and aligning with European allies was already evident in the context of the dispute over Greenland. European allies were keen to “invite” Poland, as a regional leader in Central and Eastern Europe, to participate in symbolic initiatives supporting Denmark¹¹, at a time when the actual intentions of the U.S. administration remained unclear.
- The U.S. National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy envisage the creation of an international system relatively favourable to U.S. interests. It should therefore be assumed that these assumptions are not merely a feature of the Trump administration, but a durable element of U.S. foreign and security policy.

¹⁰ Germany is also identified as a country that is becoming a model ally. Secretary P. Hegseth explicitly used the phrase “increasingly Germany”. The United States, moreover, expects that German capabilities, *inter alia*, will be employed in balancing Russia in Europe.

¹¹ See the joint statement by European leaders on Greenland of 6 January 2026.