

## **New National Security Strategy Is Heavy on Rhetoric, Light on Detail**

*di Mark Hertling*

EVERY GENERAL OR ADMIRAL WEARING the uniform today—and every colonel sitting in a seminar at one of our service war colleges, as well as countless diplomats, civil servants, and many of their foreign counterparts—will anxiously read the new National Security Strategy. They do so because the NSS reveals far more than broad policy intent. It signals the president’s priorities, identifies which regions and missions will receive attention or neglect, and shapes how commanders and their staff must plan future operations and campaigns. A good NSS doesn’t merely describe what America hopes for; it also tells the national security community what must be protected, what must be deterred, and what must be resourced. It is the progenitor of a whole family of other documents that also provide required guidance: the National Defense Strategy, Joint Strategic Planning System, and the theater and service plans. Those documents—requiring detailed work and much coordination among the Joint Staff, the services, and the civilian leadership in the Pentagon—ultimately shape the daily actions of soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, guardians, coasties, and diplomats around the world.

I have seen this process from different angles. During the Bush administration, after September 11th, I served on the Joint Staff, and our staff section contributed to the development of the National Defense Strategy that flowed from an NSS that had been hastily written to account for the terrorist attack. We were asked to translate new presidential guidance into defense realities. Later in my career, as the commanding general of the U.S. Army in Europe, I watched U.S. European Command publish its theater guidance, based on the Pentagon-produced NDS, which in turn was based on the White House’s NSS. All those documents defined my units’ role in missions such

as theater security cooperation, the preparation and forward movement of forces, and the execution of contingency plans across a complex region.

Those varied vantage points taught me a simple truth: any president's national strategy must offer a coherent relationship among ends, ways, and means across multiple levels—global, regional, and inside specific commands. And that is the major fault in the [second Trump administration's NSS](#), published last week. It repeatedly describes strategy as the connection between ends and means. Any war college professor—or even a first-year strategy student—will immediately recognize that this formulation is incomplete. The *ways* by which a nation applies its instruments of power to move from aspiration to achievement are an indispensable element. Without them, strategy becomes a set of lofty aspirations rather than a viable and executable plan. (Eric Edelman also noted this fault in [his assessment of the NSS](#).)

The document's claim that strategy connects only ends and means is more than conceptual sloppiness; it creates operational gaps. Strategy is the alignment of ends, ways, and means within a specific context. The *ways* matter because they determine how the U.S. military executes actions in the South China Sea or deterrence in the Baltics, how diplomats shape regional coalitions, how economic tools reinforce security objectives, and how interagency partners synchronize their efforts.

To grossly simplify, treating strategy as matter of ends and means alone is a little like saying, *I want to take a vacation, and I have money in the bank; problem solved*. It ignores important questions like how to use the money (the means) to achieve the end (going on vacation): Is anyone going with you? How will you travel there? Who will mind the house while you're gone? In strategy, the analogous questions are even more complicated, which is why clear, specific guidance from the White House is so important—and why Congress mandates that each new administration publish an NSS. Additionally, the introduction to the 2025 NSS signed by President Trump is the most political—and least accurate—portion of the document. It claims that the administration has restored sovereign borders, ended wars, revived alliances, reindustrialized America, and achieved unprecedented peace in eight conflicts. These assertions do not reflect intelligence assessments or observable reality.

Any effective strategy must be grounded in accurate assessments. If the opening pages of an NSS present accomplishments that have not occurred, planners across government will quickly debate whether to treat those claims as literal guidance or rhetorical flourish. Either choice produces distortion.

From my time stationed overseas, I know well that allies also read these documents carefully—often with more rigor than most Americans. Our allies (and foes) study them in their war colleges, debate them in parliaments, and treat them as authoritative clues about America’s intentions. Exaggerated claims and imprecise framing generate predictable reactions: confusion, skepticism, and doubts about whether the United States still anchors its national strategy in reality. Or, in some cases—as we see with [Russia’s immediate approval](#) of our capstone strategic document—delight in what they see. That in itself is troubling.

Here’s an example. When the Obama administration announced the “[pivot to Asia](#),” the absence of clearly articulated ways became immediately apparent—and problematic for me as a regional commander. I was in Tbilisi, Georgia when the original announcement went public, and within hours I received a call from Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, who wanted to know what the shift meant for his nation’s defense. Other allies had questions, too, and our headquarters scrambled for guidance. No one yet understood the operational adjustments, basing implications, repercussions for military families, or readiness consequences. Washington had shifted ends and signaled a shift in means; we had to determine the ways.

Any strategic shifts, while expected, ripple through the entire force. They influence credibility, deterrence, and trust. When the ways are underdeveloped or ignored at the strategic level, they become improvised—and often chaotic—at the theater and tactical level.

The new NSS also claims that post–Cold War American “elites” sought “permanent American domination of the entire world.” This framing is historically inaccurate and strategically counterproductive. The military officers, diplomats, development professionals, and civil servants who shaped post–Cold War strategy were not pursuing domination; they were building alliances, partnerships, and shared norms aimed at preventing another global catastrophe. We did not always succeed, and we certainly

made mistakes, but the effort was motivated by stability, and the current NSS attacks the foundation on which American and allied security rest.

The section in the document outlining what America wants—security, prosperity, resilient infrastructure, technological strength, and a strong military—is well written and consistent with longstanding American values. But unfortunately, the emphasis leans heavily toward military and economic power, with comparatively little attention to diplomacy and information, which are equally critical elements of national power. De-emphasizing diplomacy narrows the nation’s options and increases the likelihood that the military continues to be the default tool of first resort, a trend we in the military have seen over the last several decades.

The NSS accurately lists America’s strengths: a large and innovative economy, a formidable technology sector, a capable military, broad alliances, and a substantial industrial base. But it glosses over the stresses on the defense industrial base, the recruiting and retention challenges across the military services, and the skepticism among allies created by abrupt shifts in American policy. It also manages to present alliances as both indispensable and deeply flawed. It alternately describes our allies as strategic assets and as culturally weakened or politically unreliable drains on our national resources. This kind of narrative will be seen negatively by our friends, and as a potential wedge by our enemies. In both cases, this is *not* how strong alliances are built and maintained.

The NSS’s section on principles defines the administration’s approach largely through negation—“pragmatic without being ‘pragmatist,’ realistic without being ‘realist,’ principled without being ‘idealistic,’ muscular without being ‘hawkish,’ and restrained without being ‘dovish.’” Such language may work in political speeches, but it is meaningless to military planners and confusing to allied partners who depend on clarity to design their own strategies. The document later proclaims a preference for non-interventionism while boasting of an unprecedented number of diplomatic interventions and ceasefires allegedly achieved in the first ten months of the administration. The tension between these statements raises questions about whether the administration intends to intervene less, intervene differently, or intervene only when it can declare success unilaterally.

The NSS attempts to describe priorities in the Western Hemisphere, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, but leaves significant gaps. In Europe, the ongoing conflict is described vaguely as “the Ukraine War,” obscuring the fact that Russia is the aggressor. The document offers no clear articulation of how the outcome of this war will reshape European security for decades. Europe is framed almost exclusively in terms of demographic decline and political malaise, rather than as a region whose stability underpins U.S. strategic posture. In Africa, the NSS warns of growing Islamist extremism even as it hints at disbanding U.S. Africa Command—the very headquarters responsible for integrating military, diplomatic, and development tools across the continent. A strategy cannot identify a threat in one sentence and remove the ways and means to address it in the next.

Across the Arctic, cyber, space, and the information domain, the document is conspicuously thin, despite these being central arenas of geopolitical competition. The NSS offers no meaningful guidance for integrating these domains into regional or global plans. Diplomatic and economic mechanisms are mentioned but never integrated into coherent regional approaches. All of these issues will force the military combatant commanders and their subordinate service components to guess at priorities as they build campaign plans, engagement strategies, and force-movement timelines.

Nowhere is the NSS’s blindness to the importance of ways more evident than in its Asia guidance, where the strategy lists essential tasks—countering predatory economics, revitalizing the industrial base, strengthening alliances, securing supply chains, expanding energy dominance, transforming military posture—but offers no clear sequencing, resourcing, or diplomatic strategy. These proposed undertakings are huge. They require defined approaches, actions, time, predictability, and credible signaling to allies and adversaries alike. Without understanding the difficulty of the ways linked to successful strategy, the tasks become aspirations rather than a solid base for future plans.

A National Security Strategy is not a press release. It is a governing document that directs federal departments and agencies on the vision, the allocation of resources, and how to act. Diplomats use it to coordinate coalitions and communicate American policy to allies and adversaries alike; intelligence analysts use it to set priorities; combatant

commanders and their staffs use it to develop campaign plans, allocate forces, and move troops and families around the globe. When a strategy contains inaccuracies, contradictions, or unrealistic assumptions, the burden of reconciliation falls on those who must execute it. That increases risk, creates friction with allies, complicates planning, encourages our adversaries to take advantage of our confusion, and asks our young men and women in uniform to execute a strategy that may not be grounded in realistic assessments or workable ways and means.

Strategy requires honesty, clarity, and alignment. This NSS presents bold objectives, but it is undercut by omissions and inconsistencies that make effective execution difficult if not impossible.

Those who have lived through the publications and translation of strategy into operations know the consequence: When ends, ways, and means are misaligned at the top, the strain is felt at every level below—and eventually, on the ground, where it matters most.