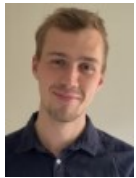


Jonny Hall

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Trump's 2025 National Security Strategy is a clear articulation of the administration's nativism and illiberalism



*Earlier this month the Trump administration quietly published its National Security Strategy (NSS) for 2025. **Jonny Hall** writes that the NSS is a helpful resource to better understand Trump's foreign policy: one which turns its back on the "rules-based international order" in favor of a foreign policy that reflects the Trump administration's ideological preferences and domestic priorities.*

There is an irony in the contrast between how the Trump administration's national security strategies have been released across both his presidential terms. In 2017, Trump devoted a 30-minute set-piece **speech** to his administration's National Security Strategy (NSS), which was infamous for its marked differences from the strategy itself. As I **reviewed** at the time, much of the commentary focused on this contrast and whether that meant that the strategy was worthy of any serious analysis or not.

Trump's 2025 National Security Strategy

In 2025, however, the delayed NSS – which seems to much better represent the administration's positions and seems written for "**a domestic audience**" – was released on 4 December with a late-night whimper. As far as I can see, Trump has also not referred to the strategy even in passing. (It would be remiss of me to not mention that, in contrast to previous versions, **the document** looks as if it has been produced by a high school student who has just discovered some basic Microsoft Word formatting tools.) Does all that mean, as one pundit has **argued**, that the current administration sees the NSS "mostly as a box-checking exercise" and that we "should discount it accordingly"?

To the contrary, the 2025 NSS is a good resource in the ongoing quest to better understand the foreign policy of the current administration. Whilst the Trump administration's foreign policy will

continue to reflect the inconsistency and erraticism of the president, the strategy outlines key components of an “America First” foreign policy.

As a starting point, the strategy itself is noticeably Trumpian in its hyperbole. The 2025 NSS mentions Trump some 28 times in comparison to the six references to the president in the 2017 NSS. The document lauds “President Trump’s necessary, welcome correction” to US grand strategy since the end of the Cold War before claiming that he “has leveraged his dealmaking ability to secure unprecedented peace in eight conflicts” across the world to “cement ... his legacy as The President of Peace.” These eight cases, as one commentator put it, “are all tendentious”. My point is that far from being the hard-nosed realist appraisal of the world that the document claims to be, the NSS fully embraces the highly questionable claims made by Trump (both with this example and about the world more generally). Somewhat paradoxically, this makes it worthy of our attention.

Rejecting the current global order

The document revolves around a complete rejection of the so-called “rules-based international order” that Trump has been consistently denouncing since the 1980s. The positive references to the Marshall Plan and the United Nations of the 2017 NSS are long gone. Likewise, the idea of “champion[ing] American values” is removed, with “values” not appearing once. Instead, Trump’s economically focused worldview manifests in the document’s emphasis on a strong industrial base, whilst also affecting the US’ desired relationship with the world. The 2017 NSS’s focus on “great power competition” is notably absent, with China not being explicitly mentioned until two-thirds of the way through the document. Instead, the relationship between the US and China is conceived economically, with the document even referring to its desire to pursue “a genuinely mutually advantageous economic relationship with Beijing”. Notably, Taiwan is portrayed almost exclusively as an economic issue. Trump’s penchant for non-democracies continues with references to “reestablish strategic stability with Russia.”

The document is also replete with references to cultural issues that Trump’s rhetoric and policies revolve around. The NSS is searingly anti-migration, with (illegal) immigration and drug trafficking portrayed as major national security threats that justify the much-discussed “Trump Corollary” to the “Monroe Doctrine” in Latin America. These arguments are currently manifesting in the US’ military actions towards Venezuela. Further, this anti-migration stance is not restricted to the US’ “backyard”, as the NSS warns of “civilisational erasure” in Europe and calls for the US to “help Europe correct its current trajectory” with “the growing influence of patriotic European parties”. These are not meaningless words but a continuation of the ethno-nationalist principles articulated in J. D. Vance’s speech at the 2025 Munich Security Conference which lectured European countries of threats “from within”. As in that speech, the section on concrete foreign policy strategies towards Europe is noticeably thin, as the foreign policy arena continues to be a “vessel” for Trump to reach his domestic base.



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An incoherent and inconsistent strategy

Certainly, the strategy can be dismissed for the incoherencies that reflect the inevitable bureaucratic wrangling that crafting these documents involve. For example, the document makes a few references to maintaining the US' "unrivaled" soft power whilst lambasting its traditional allies. But more than anything, the NSS exposes the inconsistencies and shortfalls of an "America First" strategy on its own terms. Most obviously, the document repeatedly claims that the US should not "impose" change in other countries whilst taking positions directly at odds with this. Whether it be putting forward paternalistic claims to Latin America, ignoring Russia's full-scale invasion of a sovereign ally, or encouraging European voters to elect right-wing nationalist parties, the Trump administration's proclaimed emphasis on sovereignty as an organising principle of international politics is wafer thin and ultimately contingent on its ideology.

This document will not provide a blueprint that Trump will follow with his foreign policy choices. But that it would be is an unrealistic expectation, and NSSs are **better thought of** as how an administration wishes to present itself to domestic and international audiences. This strategy, more than its predecessors, reflects the reality of domestic influence in US foreign policy, with the strategy providing a clear and meaningful reflection of the current administration's **nativism and illiberalism**. As an articulation of that worldview, it is worthy of our attention.

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