



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

POLICY BRIEF

The US' National Defense Strategy 2026

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President Donald J. Trump announced the capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro, following Operation Absolute Resolve, a joint U.S. military extraction in Venezuela's capital of Caracas, on January 3, 2026. Source: [The White House](#)
The Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group, led by the world's largest aircraft carrier, USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78), operating in the Eastern Pacific during Operation Southern Spear in late December 2025. Source: [X/US Southern President](#) Donald J. Trump delivers remarks to senior military officials at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., September 30, 2025. Source: [The White House](#)

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by

Lalit Kapur

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The US' National Defense Strategy 2026

by

Lalit Kapur

Section 941 of the US National Defense Authorization Act for 2017 requires the Secretary of Defense to provide in January, every four years, a National Defense Strategy (NDS) to the Secretaries of the Military Departments, the Chiefs of Staff of the armed forces, the commanders of the unified and specified combatant commands, and other elements of the then Department of Defense (DoD). To be provided in classified form with an unclassified summary, the NDS is to include, *inter alia*, the priority missions of the DoD, the assumed strategic environment including the most critical and enduring threats to the security of the United States, and a strategic framework to guide the Department on how to prioritise among the threats and missions specified.

NDS 2018

The first unclassified NDS was officially released during the first Trump administration, in January 2018¹. In the globalised but still largely unipolar world of that time, it for the first time acknowledged the re-emergence of long-term strategic competition from revisionist powers as the central challenge to US prosperity and security. Foremost among these powers was China, seen as leveraging military modernisation, influence operations and predatory economics to coerce neighbouring countries and reorder the Indo-Pacific to its advantage. China was also assessed as seeking Indo-Pacific hegemony in the near term and displacement of the US to achieve global pre-eminence in the future. The second challenge was Russia, seeking veto authority over governmental, economic and diplomatic decisions over nations on its periphery, to shatter NATO, and change European and Middle East security and economic structures in its favour. Other consequential threats were rogue regimes such as North Korea and Iran. The DoD's strategy to counter these challenges was building a more lethal Joint Force, strengthening alliances and attracting new partners, and reforming the Department's business practices for greater performance and affordability.

¹ Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, January 19, 2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/18/2002302061/-1/-1/1/2018-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-SUMMARY.PDF>

NDS 2022

The next edition of the DoD's NDS was published by the Biden administration in October 2022². It again visualised China as the most comprehensive and serious challenge to US national security. Of particular concern was China's coercive and increasingly aggressive endeavour to refashion the Indo-Pacific and the international system to suit its interests and authoritarian preferences. It identified China as the pacing challenge, seeking to undermine US alliances and security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. It said China's increasingly provocative rhetoric and coercive activity towards Taiwan was destabilising and threatened the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait, the East and South China Seas, and the Line of Actual Control (on the border with India).

In parallel, Russia was seen as a serious threat, seeking to use force to impose border changes and reimpose an imperial sphere of influence. NDS 2022 stated that China and Russia also posed dangerous challenges to safety and security in the homeland, even as terrorist threats persisted. Other persistent threats that were identified included North Korea, Iran and Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs).

The DoD prioritised its objectives as defending the homeland, paces to the growing multi-domain threat posed by China; deterring strategic attacks against the US, allies and partners; and deterring aggression while being prepared to prevail in conflict. It prioritised the China challenge in the Indo-Pacific followed by the Russian challenge in Europe; and building a more resilient Joint Force and defense ecosystem. Close cooperation with allies and partners was seen as foundational for US national security interests and to address the challenges presented by China and Russia. AUKUS and the QUAD were seen as key initiatives to foster strategic advantage. Advancing the Major Defence Partnership with India to enhance its ability to deter PRC aggression and ensure a free and open Indian Ocean was mentioned as a key objective. At the same time, the DoD said it would maintain its bedrock commitment to NATO collective security and right-size its forward military presence in the Middle East.

NDS 2026

The 2026 edition of the US NDS, released on January 23³, 2026, differs from its predecessors. Although the challengers it identifies remain the same, the approach

² 2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, October 27, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>

³ Department of War, 2026 National Defense Strategy, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>

towards dealing with them is significantly different. The memorandum of promulgation castigates previous governments for neglecting to put Americans and their concrete interests first, and for having squandered US military advantages and the lives, goodwill and resources of its people in grandiose nation-building projects and self-congratulatory pledges to uphold abstractions like the rules-based international order. It says the Department will no longer be distracted by interventionism, endless wars, regime change and nation building (evidently, the recent US action to capture Maduro in Venezuela, and threats against Cuba and the Panama Canal, are not perceived as interventions). It recognises that it is neither America's duty nor in its interest to act everywhere on its own. Nor will the US make up for the security shortfalls of its allies arising from their leaders' own irresponsible choices.

As in NSS 2025⁴, the introductory paragraphs of NDS 2026 are focused on adulation of President Trump's achievements. NDS 2018 had described America as emerging from a period of strategic atrophy. NDS 2026 says Trump assumed office in January 2025 with America's borders overrun, narco-terrorists and other enemies growing more powerful throughout the Western Hemisphere, US access to key terrain like the Panama Canal and Greenland increasingly in doubt, the previous administration having encouraged NATO allies to free ride leaving the alliance unable to deter or respond effectively to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and China growing more powerful in the Indo-Pacific, the world's largest and most dynamic market, with significant implications for US security, freedom and prosperity. It sees an increasing risk of America being drawn into simultaneous major wars across theatres.

Going further, NDS 2026 accuses America's foreign policy establishment of having neglected the nation's homeland defences to facilitate the illegal migration of people and the unchecked, unfair flow of goods. Consequently, the nation has been overwhelmed by a flood of illegal aliens and narcotics have poured across its borders. US interests are seen as having come under threat throughout the Western Hemisphere, and adversary influence has grown, not only leaving the US less stable and secure, but also threatening US access to key terrain throughout the hemisphere. These elements align with the perceived priorities of President Trump's MAGA support base.

⁴ For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, US National Security Strategy 2025, December 9, 2025, https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/storage/uploads/publications_file/publication_DPG%20Policy_Brief_X_Issue_27.pdf

The Security Environment as Described by NDS 2026

China is seen as the second most powerful country in the world, behind only the US, and the most powerful country relative to the US since the 19th century. Although it faces significant economic, demographic and societal challenges, its power is growing. This matters for the US, as the Indo-Pacific will soon make up more than half of the global economy, directly impacting the American people's ability to trade and engage from a position of strength in the Indo-Pacific. If China is able to dominate the Indo-Pacific, it will effectively be able to veto US access to the world's economic centre of gravity, with enduring implications for US economic prospects. NSS 2025 thus directs the Department of War (DoW, the new name for DoD) to maintain a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, and to ensure that China cannot dominate the US or its allies. The objective is a "decent peace" on terms favourable to America, but which China can also accept and live under. There is no mention of Taiwan, the East and South China Seas, or the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the India-China border.

Russia is seen as a persistent but manageable threat to NATO's eastern members. It is, however, in no position to make a bid for European hegemony. European NATO dwarfs Russia in economic scale, population and thus latent military power. NATO allies are substantially more powerful than Russia (Germany's economy alone dwarfs that of Russia). They have committed to raise defence spending to the new global standard of 5% of GDP, with 3.5% invested in hard military capabilities. They are thus strongly placed to assume primary responsibility for Europe's conventional defence, with more limited US support. Thus, while the Department will remain engaged in Europe, it will prioritise defending the US homeland and deterring China.

Iran's regime is weaker and more vulnerable than it has been for decades. Israeli operations have left Hezbollah and Hamas severely degraded. Iran's effort to obtain nuclear weapons continues, while Iran's proxies in the region could rebuild infrastructure and capability. However, Israel, described as a model ally, has demonstrated that it is both willing and able to defend itself with critical but limited support from the US. US partners in the Gulf are increasingly willing and capable of doing more to defend themselves against Iran and its proxies. The US DoW will thus foster integration between regional partners, to enable them to do more together.

The DPRK, with its large but poorly maintained military forces, is seen as posing a direct military threat to ROK and Japan, more so as its missile forces are capable of striking targets in both countries with conventional and nuclear weapons. DPRK nuclear forces are also seen as capable of threatening the US homeland.

Strategic Approach

The strategic approach adopted by NDS 2026 to deal with this environment focuses on four distinct lines of effort: defending the homeland; deterring China in the Indo-Pacific through strength, not confrontation; increasing burden-sharing with US allies and partners; and supercharging the US defense industrial base.

To defend the homeland, the foremost priority, the US will secure its borders, counter narco-terrorists in the Western Hemisphere, secure key terrain (especially Greenland, the Panama Canal and the Gulf of America) and ensure that the Monroe doctrine is upheld; defend America's skies with President Trump's Golden Dome; modernise and adapt US nuclear forces; deter and defend against cyber threats; and counter Islamic terrorists.

For China, the DoW commits to engaging PLA counterparts through a wide range of formats, using these engagements to convey President Trump's vision of a "decent peace" in the Indo-Pacific, where trade flows openly and fairly, all can prosper and US interests are respected. At the same time, it will ensure that Trump is always able to negotiate from a position of strength. Toward this end, it will build, posture and sustain a strong denial defence along the First Island Chain. It will also work with allies and partners to incentivise them to do more for collective defence, especially denial defence. It will ensure that the Joint Force always has the ability to conduct devastating strikes and operations against targets anywhere in the world, including directly from the US homeland.

The DoW will prioritise strengthening incentives for allies and partners to take primary responsibility for their own defence in Europe, the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula, with critical but limited support from US forces. It will simultaneously make it easy for allies and partners to take on a greater share of the burden for collective defence, including through close cooperation on force and operational planning. Canada and Mexico are seen as having strong roles in hemispheric defence, while Canada also has a vital role in helping defend North America against air, missile and undersea threats. Europe will be incentivised to assume primary responsibility for its own conventional defence and to focus its efforts and resources on Europe. In the Middle East, DoW will empower regional allies and partners to take primary responsibility to deter and defend against Iran and its proxies, while maintaining the ability to take focused, decisive action to defend US interests. South Korea is seen as capable of taking on primary responsibility for deterring North Korea.

The US Defence Industrial Base is seen as undergirding other pillars of the NDS. The DoW will take urgent action to mobilise, renew and secure it, and to supercharge American defence industry so that it is ready to meet the challenges of the era.

Implications of NDS 2026

At the outset, NDS 2026 reinforces views questioning whether the idea of American exceptionalism, the belief that the US is morally superior and has a mission to spread its democratic values and lead and guide the world, is still relevant. The NDS unambiguously states that the DoW will no longer be distracted by interventionism, endless wars and regime change. The America First philosophy that guides it reinforces the image of “the ugly American”, brash, bullying, demanding and resorting to coercion to obtain desired ends. Theodore Roosevelt’s aphorism “speak softly and carry a big stick”, implying just action, the absence of bluff and decisive activity, has been replaced by a philosophy of “speak loudly and threaten often”. This is evident from US threats against Cuba, Greenland and Iran.

This change is coupled with the realisation that the stick the US displays is not big enough to worry other great powers, especially those in a no-limits partnership, leading to restraint in dealing with them. This is evident in US moderation in acting against China and Russia, which implicitly acknowledges the end of history unipolar moment has passed.

Prioritisation of homeland defence and adoption of the Trump corollary to the Monroe Doctrine⁵ effectively declares the Western Hemisphere as the US sphere of influence, where other great powers will not be allowed to obtain a foothold. Over the years, China has become the top trading partner for South America and the second largest for Latin America and the Caribbean. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing has invested heavily in numerous critical infrastructure (ports, space and telecommunications) projects, challenging traditional US influence and raising security concerns about strategic, dual-use assets. Russia, on the other hand, maintains strong military ties with Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua; is accused of spreading anti-West disinformation in the region; and of creating instability to counter US foreign policy. These developments prompt action to secure the regional US base, notwithstanding the example it sets for other great powers to seek similar spheres of influence in their respective regions. The US can be expected to pull back some of its

⁵ “After years of neglect, the Department of War will restore American military dominance in the Western Hemisphere. We will use it to protect our Homeland and our access to key terrain throughout the region. We will also deny adversaries’ ability to position forces or other threatening capabilities in our hemisphere. This is the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine – a commonsense and potent restoration of American power and prerogatives in this hemisphere, consistent with American’s interests.

military resources deployed in other parts of the world, effectively depleting US capacity to deal with challenges in other regions.

The change in the NDS approach towards China, from a pacing challenge to a strategic competitor with whom a decent peace under acceptable terms is possible, is striking. The explicit avoidance of confrontation with China indicates that both Taiwan Strait transits and FONOPs in the South China Sea will be reduced or discontinued. Notably, there has been no FONOP under the current Trump administration. How the changed US approach will shape the actions of Southeast Asia, on which Beijing seeks to impose subordinate status, remains to be seen. The key question in the Western Pacific is whether commitments to build US strength, without a demonstrated will in the years ahead, will suffice to deter China and its burgeoning economic and military capability. This question will be asked by US allies and partners, who will have to resort to hedging and balancing. Pressures on both Japan and South Korea to go nuclear will grow.

Similarly, the change in outlook towards Russia, from an acute threat seeking to reimpose an imperial sphere of influence to a manageable threat limited to NATO's eastern members, is striking. NDS 2026 takes the risk of focusing on defending against the threat Russia poses to the homeland and playing a role in nuclear deterrence, while leaving the conventional Russian threat to Europe. Further, the NDS reinforces the belief that the US considers Ukraine a European issue, to be resolved by Europe. European nations will question if NATO's Article 5 will be triggered by Russian grey zone activity, including sabotage, cyberattacks and coercion. Pressures on European nations, especially Germany, to go nuclear will grow.

The NDS 2026 thrust towards greater burden sharing by allies and partners is notable. This is also likely to lead to a restructuring of forward deployed US forces in Korea, the Middle East and Europe. As stated by the NDS, allies have for too long gone along with the US subsidising their defence. The US will now be clear and blunt about the urgent need for them to do more. The NDS records the global standard set by Trump for spending 3.5% of the GDP on core military capability and an additional 1.5% on security related spending. While NATO countries have accepted this norm, allies in Asia are yet to do so. The norm will bring increased pressure on Japan, Australia and South Korea to hike defence spending substantially. It will thus reshape the security policies of Asian allies.

Finally, the outlook towards partners, including India, stands transformed. Strengthening alliances while attracting of new partners was the second line of effort in NDS 2018. This was reflected in resuscitation of the Quad, as well as acceptance of

the Indo-Pacific strategic construct and indeed renaming of the US Pacific Command. The 2026 NDS no longer seeks to attract partners. The US economic coercion of India has already resulted in an uneasy hiatus in bilateral relations. The Quad is clearly no longer a US priority. Neither India nor the Quad find any mention in the NDS. This position appears unlikely to change in the near future.

In sum, NDS 2026 reiterates a vision of the US pursuing unilateral and naked self-interest underpinned by unrestrained use of its military capability against weaker powers, but without the sagacious leadership of a rules-based order that took the US to global pre-eminence. It pushes allies to defend and secure their interests without the benefit of an assured US umbrella. This will inevitably reshape the policies of US allies as well as partners. Whether it will provide continued security in a world defined by increasing great power competition remains to be seen. Issue-based coalitions of the willing and like-minded middle powers will emerge and power rebalancing continues and multipolarity gains traction. For India, this is a timely wake-up call to persist with strategic autonomy and devote greater energy to building comprehensive national power.



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