

America's Managed Retreat: How the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy Shifts the Burden to Allies

By
Sidra Shaukat

The United States' 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) is a document that has been written under the shadow of economic strain and military overreach, and it raises the slogan of "America First" while shifting the burden to partners and allies. The document was presented as a thoughtful adjustment of American priorities and speaks the language of restraint, fairness, and realism. However, underneath a confident tone, Washington is attempting to preserve primacy by redistributing the costs and risks of global order onto its allies, especially in Asia and Europe.

The [strategy](#) emerged from a moment of truth. Years of military overstretch, industrial erosion, and fiscal strain have collided with domestic anxieties over migration, trade imbalances, and energy security. The document acknowledges, indirectly, that the United States can no longer afford to be everywhere, doing everything, for everyone. In response, it narrows the definition of what truly matters for the United States—the Western Hemisphere.

The Western Hemisphere is elevated as the primary theater of concern by invoking a 200-year-old policy of the [Monroe Doctrine](#) that rejects external influence close to home. The Middle East is quietly downgraded, its strategic relevance diminished by American [energy independence](#). Europe, which was once a central theater to Washington's worldview, is urged to take primary responsibility for its own security and political future by restoring stability within the region.

The strategy is not one of isolationism, as the NSS is careful to reject that label. As per the [document](#), the United States will continue to prevent adversaries from dominating key regions. Nowhere is this commitment clearer than in the Indo-Pacific, where China is described as a main competitor. But while the ends remain familiar, the means have changed. The burden of maintaining or reinforcing regional balance is no longer something Washington is willing, or claims it should ever have been expected, to carry alone.

The Indo-Pacific strategy outlined in the NSS revolves around the First Island Chain, the arc of territory stretching from Japan through Taiwan to the Philippines. This geography is cast as the front line of any future conflict in East Asia. The United States pledges to build a force capable of denying aggression anywhere along this chain; however, it also emphasizes that such denial must be collective. Diplomacy will be used to press allies to increase defense spending and investment in deterrence-focused capabilities. In effect, the strategy seeks to integrate partnered militaries into a dense denial network in which primary responsibility lies with regional partners, with the U.S. aiding through commercial matters, technology sharing, and defense procurement.

There is a cold logic to this approach. If successful, it would complicate any Chinese military campaign, raising costs through layered defenses, maritime surveillance, anti-ship missiles, cyber capabilities, and hardened infrastructure. It would allow the United States to concentrate on high-end enablers such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and missile defense, while others invest in the less glamorous but more geographically exposed components of deterrence.

This move can be seen as a reconfiguration designed to make competition with China cheaper and more sustainable for Washington.

Nevertheless, for America's partners, the strategy feels less like empowerment and more like exposure. Japan offers the clearest example. Tokyo is amid a historic military buildup. Its defense budget now exceeds [9 trillion yen](#) and is on track to reach 2 percent of its GDP, a threshold once unthinkable in a country shaped by postwar pacifism. Japan is acquiring [long-range](#) standoff missiles, expanding [coastal defenses](#), and revising its [security doctrines](#) to prepare for contingencies that explicitly include Taiwan. These steps reflect genuine threat perceptions, particularly as Chinese military activity intensifies near Japanese territory. But they also reveal how burden shifting works in practice, and Japan is expected to bear frontline risks in a conflict whose escalation dynamics it might not be able to fully control.

South Korea's dilemma is even starker. Long praised as a model non-proliferation state, Seoul built its security on trust in the American nuclear umbrella. That trust is now fraying. North Korea's arsenal has grown more sophisticated, and its missiles are more mobile and survivable. At the same time, the South Koreans are increasingly [skeptical](#) that Washington would risk Los Angeles or New York to save Seoul, particularly amid U.S. political polarization and the personalization of foreign policy under President Donald Trump. The NSS urges partners to spend more and do more for collective defense, but it cannot dispel the fundamental fear that extended deterrence may fail at the moment of truth. The result is a [once-taboo debate](#) over whether South Korea needs its own nuclear weapons, a debate that speaks volumes about how burden shifting erodes confidence even as it seeks to strengthen deterrence.

The Philippines illustrates another facet of this strategy. Cast as a frontline state in the South China Sea, Manila is offered expanded U.S. access under the [Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement](#). The benefits are tangible; however, the risks are also profound. [Philippine lawmakers](#) have openly questioned whether hosting U.S. forces makes the country a target without ensuring reciprocal American vulnerability. There is a lingering fear of becoming a buffer state, absorbing grey-zone pressure while great powers manage escalation elsewhere. These developments urged Manila to deepen ties with Washington, but simultaneously [diversify partnerships](#) with Japan, France, India, and regional neighbors to avoid being locked into a proxy role.

These anxieties are compounded by the broader signals the NSS sends about American leadership. The document features President Trump with unusual prominence, underscoring how closely U.S. strategy is now associated with a single, mercurial figure. Its harsh treatment of European allies will not go unnoticed in Asia, where confidence in U.S. commitments has always rested as much on perception as on capability. The strategy also stated that "the outsized influence of larger, richer, and stronger nations is a timeless truth of international relations." This assertion is most striking because it indicates that international order rests on the rule of the major powers. This framing implicitly places major powers (Washington, Moscow, and Beijing) in an exclusive tier of decisive actors and reminds the middle powers that their agency has limits. For allies asked to shoulder greater burdens, such language offers little reassurance.

A familiar Asia strategy thus sits alongside a more disquieting and unsettled redefinition of global leadership. The United States still seeks to shape outcomes, deter adversaries, and preserve its primacy. But it increasingly does so by asking others to stand closer to the fire. Whether allies will continue to accept that role, without firmer guarantees and clearer commitments, may determine not only the future of the Indo-Pacific but the credibility of American power itself.

Sidra Shaukat is a Research Officer at the [Strategic Vision Institute](#) (SVI), a leading Pakistani think tank focused on nuclear and strategic affairs. Her research and commentary have addressed peaceful uses of nuclear technologies, Pakistan's Nuclear Regulatory Authority, nuclear diplomacy, and broader geostrategic developments in South Asia, Europe, and the Middle East across various platforms. A full list of her publications is available on [SVI's](#) website. Views Expressed in this article are author's own.