

Managing the Transatlantic Relationship in the Absence of US Leadership: Understanding the Trump Administration's National Security Strategy

Paul Fritch
March 2026

GCSP Policy Brief No.25

Geneva Centre for Security Policy

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) is an international foundation that aims to advance global cooperation, security and peace. The foundation is supported by the Swiss government and governed by 54 member states. The GCSP provides a unique 360° approach to learn about and solve global challenges. The foundation's mission is to educate leaders, facilitate dialogue, advise through in-house research, inspire new ideas and connect experts to develop sustainable solutions to build a more peaceful future.

The GCSP Policy Briefs Series

The GCSP Policy Briefs series addresses current security issues, deduces policy implications and proposes policy recommendations. It aims to directly inform policy- and decision-making of states, international organisations and the private sector.

Under the leadership of Ambassador Thomas Greminger, Executive Director of the GCSP, the series is edited by Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan, Director of the Geopolitics and Global Futures Department, and Doctor Tobias Vestner, Director of the Research and Policy Advice Department & Head of Security and Law, and managed by Ms Christine Garnier Simon, Administration and Coordination Manager, GCSP Geopolitics and Global Futures.

Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Maison de la paix

Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2D

P.O. Box 1295

1211 Geneva 1

Switzerland

Tel: + 41 22 730 96 00

Contact: www.gcsp.ch/contact

www.gcsp.ch

ISBN: 978-2-88947-456-1

©Geneva Centre for Security Policy, March 2026

The views, information and opinions expressed in this publication are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the GCSP or the members of its Foundation Council. The GCSP is not responsible for the accuracy of the information.



About the author

Paul Fritch is a Non-Resident Executive Fellow at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy and a Senior Non-Resident Fellow at the Middle East Institute Switzerland. A former career member of the US Foreign Service, he has served in senior executive positions at NATO and the OSCE, and represented the US Department of State in the interagency working groups tasked with developing the 2022 National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and National Military Strategy.

Introduction

The Trump administration's December 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS)¹ represents a radical shift in US foreign policy, involving a move from global leadership of a rules-based international order to unabashed nationalism and regional hegemony. The new strategy no longer views the country's sprawling network of alliances and partnerships and its ability to attract and integrate high-level talent from around the world as unique strengths, but rather as vulnerabilities to be mitigated.

However, as jarring as these substantive changes are, the document's structural changes and the irregular process that produced it may prove more significant in demonstrating just how sharply Washington is turning away from 80 years of bipartisan foreign policy consensus. The change is evident not just in the Trump administration's policies, but – crucially – in the decision-making process that produces them. The new NSS is best understood as the formalisation of the administration's abandonment of traditional policy coordination and strategic planning itself, an effort that has included the removal of senior career diplomats,² military commanders,³ and intelligence officers;⁴ the systematic dismissal of senior judge advocates general⁵ and inspectors general;⁶ and the firing of many National Security Council (NSC) staff.⁷ The collective result of these steps, which find their natural culmination in the NSS and the National Defense Strategy (NDS) that followed in January 2026,⁸ is a policymaking process that is less informed by objective intelligence and analysis, less constrained by legal and policy advice or alliance consultation, and thus more subject to

¹ President of the United States, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

² J. Hansler, *Trump administration removes dozens of career diplomats from overseas posts*, CNN, 22 December 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/12/22/politics/diplomats-removed-trump-state>

³ C. Demarest, *The growing list of military ousters under Trump 2.0*, Axios, 27 August 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2025/08/27/beck-kruse-pentagon-hegseth-fired>

⁴ L.C. Baldor, *Congress demands answers after Trump abruptly fires head of National Security Agency*, PBS News, 4 April 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/congress-demands-answers-after-trump-abruptly-fires-head-of-national-security-agency>

⁵ US Department of War, *Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth statement on general officer nominations*, US Department of War, 21 February 2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4074482/secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-statement-on-general-officer-nominations/>

⁶ House Oversight Committee Minority Staff, *Rebuking late-night purge of inspectors general, House Democratic ranking members demand President Trump comply with the law*, 25 January 2025, <https://democrats-appropriations.house.gov/news/press-releases/rebuking-late-night-purge-inspectors-general-house-democratic-ranking-members>

⁷ G. Slattes and S. Holland, *White House National Security Council slashes staff in dramatic restructuring, sources say*, Reuters, 23 May 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/white-house-national-security-council-hit-by-more-firings-sources-say-2025-05-23/>

⁸ US Department of War, *2026 NDS: National Defense Strategy: Restoring peace through strength for a new golden age of America*, US Department of War, 23 January 2026, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>



impulsiveness and ideological influence. Both of these developments – a new “America First” nationalism that eschews multilateral constraints and an erratic decision-making process that produces unpredictable and often impracticable outcomes – require a fundamental assessment by the country’s partners of their approach to the United States, both bilaterally and within established multilateral frameworks.

This Policy Brief examines the practical implications of the 2025 NSS and the dramatically changed decision-making process it represents. For transatlantic allies and other middle powers, the central question is no longer whether US strategy has changed, but how to operate effectively in an environment of reduced predictability and diminished US strategic anchoring.

What is a National Security Strategy?

Each incoming US administration issues a National Security Strategy outlining the then president’s priorities and overall vision in the national security sphere. The NSS provides an overall framework for more detailed planning and strategy documents, such as the NDS, National Military Strategy (NMS), and theatre-specific campaign and contingency plans. It also guides decisions taken by the federal bureaucracy, and signals intent to allies and adversaries. While no strategy can foresee every possible security challenge, a typical NSS serves as a useful guide to the principles and philosophy that guide an administration’s policymaking processes.

Given the comprehensive scope of the NSS and its centrality to a president’s foreign and security policy, previous administrations (including Trump’s 2017-2021 term in office⁹) have taken the drafting process very seriously. The text is reviewed and agreed at various levels by an inclusive and formal interagency process chaired by the NSC. Agency positions and agreed interim outcomes are documented in “statements of conclusions”, which serve as formal policy statements and provide important input to the parallel development of the NDS and NMS. This lengthy process permits an incoming administration to test its ideas against external realities and to react in real time to changes in the strategic environment; for example, both the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks and the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in fundamental reorientations of draft strategies.

Previous administrations have devoted equally painstaking attention to the development of comprehensive NSS rollout strategies targeted at specific audiences, with tailored messages for the media, Washington-based embassies, and US missions abroad (for use with both host governments and host-country publics).

⁹ President of the United States, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

Security challenges posed by the 2025 NSS

Strategic reorientation

Substantively, the differences between the 2025 NSS and previous iterations are stark. The document abandons the overall strategic framework of a global, multidisciplinary competition between the United States and China (first introduced in 2017 by Trump's first administration). Gone too is a focus on the "acute threat" posed by Russian aggression in Europe, and virtually any mention at all of Iran and North Korea as first-tier strategic challenges. Instead, the new NSS embraces a "balance of power" model that implicitly cedes regional spheres of influence to China in Asia and Russia in Europe. It reframes US-Chinese competition as primarily economic and limited to the Indo-Pacific region, and identifies the main threat to Europe not as Russian aggression, but rather the "civilisational erasure" that could result from immigration-driven demographic changes.

The strategy casts the United States primarily as a regional power that aspires to hegemony in the Western Hemisphere (asserting an undefined "Trump Corollary" to the 1823 Monroe Doctrine), and defines the core national interest in this region as preventing immigration into the country. Formerly articulated US interests in other regions fall away almost entirely. The NSS recasts the Middle East primarily as a potential source of trade and investment opportunities, downplaying the traditional US role in guaranteeing military stability and freedom of navigation in the region. To the extent that it sets forth a vision for Africa at all, the NSS focuses on retroactively justifying the abolition of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and showcasing the president's purported peacemaking skills.

The direction of these policy changes aside, their abruptness is itself a major departure from previous NSSs. Past administrations have taken care to signal continuity, even in the face of major policy shifts. The 2025 iteration does something no previous strategy has done: it redefines as *threats* trends and developments previous administrations have counted among the country's *strengths*, most notably in its treatment of immigration and multilateralism. Where the 2022 NSS noted that "Since the founding of our Nation, America has been strengthened and renewed by immigrants seeking opportunity and refuge on our shores – a unique strategic advantage",¹⁰ the 2025 version declares, "We want a world in which migration is not merely 'orderly' but one in which sovereign countries work together to stop rather than facilitate destabilizing population flows". This 180-degree reversal rejects not just US historical traditions, but also objective analysis of the economic advantages that derive from the country's ability to attract and integrate both top-tier

¹⁰ President of the United States, *National Security Strategy*, The White House, October 2022, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

scientific talent and a large, motivated workforce to offset declining birth rates. Similarly, previous NSSs identified the country's extensive network of alliances and partnerships as its "most important strategic asset", while the 2025 version complains of allies seeking "to offload the cost of their defense onto the American people", and characterises international institutions as "driven by outright anti-Americanism". For US partners, the significance lies not only in the policy shift itself, but in its limited institutional (and public) buy-in beyond the top ranks of the administration.

Unpredictable and non-transparent decision-making

While the policy reorientation discussed above presents substantial challenges for the United States' transatlantic allies and partners, the format and process changes of the new NSS signal something even more significant. The document is just 30 pages long (roughly half the length of previous versions), with the first seven of these dedicated to denigrating previous administrations and showcasing seemingly unrelated domestic political initiatives (such as the elimination of diversity programmes). A reduction in length is not inherently problematic – brevity can be strategic – but here it results in the omission of entire pillars of modern national security. The document devotes minimal analytic attention to cyber security and climate change. Somewhat more surprisingly, it does not address the national security implications of pandemics and public health crises. And it devotes less attention to terrorism than any NSS since the Cold War (which is again surprising, given the Trump administration's reliance on terrorism designations to justify a range of specific legal and military actions).

The first seven pages of the document are devoted to claiming specific successes for the president and denigrating prior administrations. This is not a mere violation of norms of politesse: it risks constraining policy options and promoting a culture of self-censorship that could leave major blind spots in US security policy. The administration's critics are already highlighting the contradictions between Trump's justification for renewed military action against Iran and the claim, enshrined in the NSS, that "In [June 2025's] Operation Midnight Hammer, we obliterated Iran's nuclear enrichment capacity". The NSS makes the similarly sweeping claim that "President Trump has leveraged his dealmaking ability to secure unprecedented peace in eight conflicts throughout the world". Some of these "conflicts" did not exist (at least as military confrontations), while others remain active despite nominal peace deals or ceasefires. An NSS that declares them resolved risks discouraging diplomats and intelligence analysts from reporting information that challenges the administration's official narrative. Similarly, the NSS's framing of hemispheric threats through an ideological, rather than an analytical, lens provides doctrinal cover for risky and escalatory actions.

Perhaps most jarring, however, was the lack of any formal interagency process for the strategy's development or promotion. In previous administrations, the main value of the NSS stemmed less from the finished product than from the process that produced it. A formal interagency drafting structure provided the

opportunity to test assumptions and build broad understanding of and support for the administration's goals throughout the interagency community, Congress, and the wider Washington foreign policy establishment.

The lack of a formal, NSC-led process to develop the 2025 NSS limits the document's utility as a tool for guiding the bureaucracy. It also fails to resolve contradictions in its strategic goals. For example, it aims for the United States "to remain the world's most scientifically and technologically advanced and innovative country", while the administration's actual policies have slashed federal research funding, attacked leading universities, and imposed new restrictions on visas for foreign students and tech workers. Its stated desire "to maintain the United States' unrivaled 'soft power' through which we exercise positive influence throughout the world that furthers our interests" stands in contrast with the destruction of USAID and historically low trust in the United States in international public opinion polls. Its claim that "our openness, transparency, trustworthiness, commitment to freedom and innovation, and free market capitalism – will continue to make us the global partner of first choice" comes as traditional US trading partners have reoriented supply chains and pursued closer relations with China to avoid punitive US tariffs. Ordinarily, a disciplined interagency drafting process would permit senior policymakers to identify, address, and avoid such contradictions.

Meanwhile, the lack of a coordinated rollout plan limits the strategy's capacity to court allies and deter adversaries. Unsurprisingly, European leaders have been sharply critical of the document, particularly its language calling for cooperation with like-minded European Union (EU) member states against the continental bloc as a whole and overt support for right-wing anti-immigration political parties across Europe. Germany's chancellor has labelled these elements "unacceptable";¹¹ Latin American leaders have expressed similar concern over the document's tone and content, in particular the declaration of a new, as yet undefined "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine (an echo of the 1905 Roosevelt Corollary, which declared a unilateral right to intervene militarily throughout the hemisphere as an "international police force"); while senior Russian officials have praised the new NSS as "largely consistent with our vision".¹²

The January 2026 capture of Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro, the sudden attempt to acquire Greenland, and the February 2026 attack on Iran underscore how the NSS's vague doctrinal language can be invoked to justify abrupt, high-risk actions unmoored from the traditional restraints of Congressional authorisation, alliance consultation, and legal review. While the long-term effects of these actions remain unclear, the risks of an uncoordinated strategy are already evident. Take the Venezuela case, for example: the administration's

¹¹ Die Bundesregierung, *Regierungspressekonferenz vom 8. Dezember 2025*, Die Bundesregierung, 8 December 2025, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/regierungspressekonferenz-vom-8-dezember-2025-2398408>

¹² TASS, *Disappearance of 'Russian threat' from US national security strategy positive - Kremlin*, TASS, 7 December 2026, <https://tass.com/politics/2054865>

characterisation of the Caracas raid as a “law enforcement operation” and its de facto recognition of Vice President Delcy Rodríguez as the country’s new leader are inherently contradictory. Diplomatic efforts to build ex post facto support for (or at least limit condemnation of) the US action were complicated by additional public threats in the wake of the attack against Colombia,¹³ Cuba,¹⁴ Mexico,¹⁵ and even NATO ally Denmark.¹⁶ In previous administrations, such contradictions would likely have been resolved through interagency review before operational decisions were taken.

Institutional breakdown

As noted above, the NSS offers general guidance to steer decisions taken by the US national security bureaucracy. As time goes by, such decisions will embed the strategy’s overall policy direction more firmly in US policy. This can already be seen in the administration’s new NDS,¹⁷ released in January 2026. The NDS, produced largely in the Pentagon under the authority of the secretary of defense, benefits from a much more structured review process in established channels in the Joint Staff, the military services, Combatant Commands (COCOMs), and the Office of the Secretary of Defense. While interagency input into the NDS is generally more limited than in the case of the NSS, previous defense secretaries have sought it out proactively, in order to ensure consistency between the two strategy documents and the complementarity of military and non-military means of national power. This does not appear to have happened this year. While the NDS takes less definitive – and thus more analytical – approaches to individual security threats such as the Israel-Gaza conflict and the Iranian nuclear programme, it reflects the NSS both in its gaps (at 30 pages, the new NDS is less than half the length of the 2022 version) and in its fundamental reconceptualisation of what were, until recently, considered first-order national security threats. The NDS explicitly rejects what it calls “cloud-castle abstractions like the rules-based international order”. China is downgraded from the “pacing challenge” for the US military to a regional problem of “deterrence” and “access”. Russia is no longer presented as an “acute threat” posing “serious and continuing risks” across a wide variety of domains (nuclear, conventional, cyber, “gray zone”), but rather a “persistent but manageable” challenge for which European allies should take

¹³ Reuters, *Trump threatens military operation against Colombia, after Venezuela raid*, Reuters, 5 January 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/trump-says-new-military-operation-focused-colombia-sounds-good-him-2026-01-05/>

¹⁴ D.J. Trump, *Truth Social post*, Truth Social, 11 January 2026, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/115876460615555838>

¹⁵ Bloomberg, *Sheinbaum says Trump's Mexican invasion threat isn't serious*, Bloomberg, 5 January 2026, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-01-05/sheinbaum-says-trump-s-threats-to-invade-mexico-aren-t-serious>

¹⁶ D.J. Trump, *Truth Social post*, Truth Social, 14 January 2026, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/115893255826342514>

¹⁷ US Department of War, *National Defense Strategy*, 2026

primary responsibility. The previous focus on climate change, pandemics, and other transboundary challenges is replaced by blurred lines between military threats and domestic immigration enforcement. Because the Joint Staff draws on the NDS to develop an NMS, theatre-level posture and contingency plans, and other military and planning documents, decisions that reflect the new administration's policy agenda will become more concrete and more granular.

At the same time, as executive branch processes grind on, the administration will face serious obstacles, both domestically and internationally, to the realisation of its vision. The failure of the NSS process to build a broad consensus throughout the Washington security policy community is evident in the dissonance between the NSS and the Fiscal Year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)¹⁸. If the NSS outlines the president's overall vision, the NDAA (which, unlike the NSS, has the force of law) imposes practical obligations and constraints on the executive branch's use of key tools of national power. Inconsistencies between the two can lead to confusion within the federal bureaucracy and among foreign partners as to the essential nature of US policy.

The current NDAA, signed into law by President Trump on 18 December 2025 (two weeks after the release of the NSS) contradicts the new NSS in important ways. It imposes binding restrictions on the administration's efforts to reduce the US military presence in Europe and its role in NATO, and approves US\$400 million in new direct security assistance to Ukraine. It imposes similar restrictions on any potential reduction in US military support for Japan and South Korea. In Latin America, it requires additional transparency and accountability for the administration's air strikes on alleged drug boats, linking the defense secretary's travel budget to the provision of additional information to Congressional overseers, and fails to echo the NSS focus on an allegedly existential hemispheric struggle against mass migration. Its overall assessment of the strategic environment – “an axis of aggressors comprised of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea ... share weapons, resources, and a unifying objective: to dismantle American influence around the world” – is much more in line with the worldview of the 2022 NSS than its successor. (The legislation also declines to rename the Department of Defense as the Department of War.¹⁹) The president's public focus on the acquisition of Greenland was similarly disconnected from legislative reality – it is inconceivable that any US action to take the island by force or coercion would lead to the Congressional action needed to make it a US territory.

Planning assumptions – the backbone of US security policy – cannot meaningfully incorporate a strategy contradicted by binding statute. The Joint Staff, COCOMs, state regional and functional bureaus, the intelligence community, and other foreign affairs agencies, all of which are legally bound to comply with the

¹⁸ US Congress, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026*, US Congress, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/1071/text>

¹⁹ Despite this, references to key documents in this Policy Brief give the Department of War as the origin, following what appears on their title pages.

NDAA, will be hard-pressed to reconcile its provisions with the key goals of the NSS. For US allies and partners, awareness of these disconnects is essential. European leaders cannot assume that the administration's positions represent coherent US policies, and need to cultivate a much wider range of contacts, including with Congress.

Policy recommendations: a challenge to the “middle powers”

The United States' transatlantic allies have been critical of elements of the new NSS that touch on domestic politics and demographic trends in EU member states. Some have taken discrete actions in response to specific problematic US policies (such as the United Kingdom (UK) suspending intelligence cooperation over legally questionable US air strikes on civilian vessels in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific,²⁰ and initially denying the United States permission to use UK bases for attacks on Iran²¹). But until recently, they resisted coming to terms with the fundamentally changed contours of both the international order and the transatlantic relationship represented by the new NSS.

This began to change at the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos. European leaders pushed back forcefully and successfully against Trump's Greenland rhetoric and his threats of the imposition of punitive tariffs on those who opposed his territorial ambitions. Canadian prime minister [AP1.1]Mark Carney went further, framing Washington's turn away from the rules-based international order as “a rupture, not a transition”, and pointing out that the underlying cracks in the international system ran deeper than Trump and his new strategy. Echoing the work of MIT scholars Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman on “weaponized interdependence”,²² he noted how the “rules” of the “rules-based order” had always been selectively applied, and how over the past two decades the United States had shown itself increasingly willing to leverage its unique role at the centre of the international financial system to achieve national policy goals. Carney also identified the limits of Trump's “America First” approach: a great power, even a hegemon, that abandons “even the pretense of rules and values for the unhindered pursuit of their power and interests” will ultimately find diminishing returns as allies forge more diverse economic and security relationships to hedge against their dependency. He called on the so-called

²⁰ D. Sabbagh and J. Borger, *UK pauses intelligence-sharing with US on suspected drug vessels in Caribbean*, The Guardian, 11 November 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/nov/11/uk-suspends-intelligence-sharing-with-us-amid-airstrikes-in-the-caribbean>

²¹ UK Parliament, *Middle East (Hansard, House of Commons, Vol. 781)*, Statement by the Prime Minister, Hansard, 2 March 2026, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2026-03-02/debates/C3BE6001-08B4-4DF8-8193-A4BFF0C57E9B/MiddleEast>

²² H. Farrell and A.L. Newman, *Weaponized interdependence: How global economic networks shape state coercion*, International Security, 2019, <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/44/1/42/12237/Weaponized-Interdependence-How-Global-Economic>

“middle powers” – those who rely on a predictable international order for trade and security, and do not aspire to external spheres of influence – to pursue a “variable geometry” of “different coalitions for different issues based on common values and interests”.²³

So how can US allies respond to the changed strategic direction (and heightened unpredictability) coming from Washington?

European leaders should draw two clear lessons from the Greenland episode: that the Trump administration's policy initiatives will often be less predictable and more provocative than US allies have come to expect, and that they will not necessarily be fully thought through or represent a solid consensus across the US government. Dealing honestly with the problem is a necessary first step, and the recent Davos forum and Munich Security Conference provide some encouragement in this regard. For much of the first year of President Trump's second term, European leaders have approached the new administration with a combination of flattery, appeasement, and denial. This clearly has not worked. In a world in which the United States openly recognises great power ambitions and regional spheres of influence, European leaders need to send a clear message that the EU, and not Vladimir Putin's Russia, is Europe's most important power centre. The following recommendations offer a potential way forward in coping with Washington's changed strategic approach.

Short term: managing unpredictability

- **Publicly articulate and defend principled red lines.** When Washington's rhetoric runs afoul of the basic principles of the Washington Treaty, Helsinki Decalogue, and United Nations (UN) Charter, the EU and its member states should say so loudly and clearly, rather than euphemistically seeking a “mutually acceptable solution”. The more the unacceptable is made to seem reasonable, the more cover the administration will have to build support for what are broadly unpopular policy decisions, even in Washington. When similar issues arise over the next three years (and they will), European leaders should work directly with Congress to articulate their red lines and promote respect for agreed principles.
- **Expand and institutionalise US-European contacts.** Given the extensive dissonance between the US executive and legislative branches, and the lack of public support for major planks of the Trump administration's agenda, European leaders should expand their contacts with Congress and Washington-based think-tanks and their US-focused public diplomacy efforts.
- **Increase the visibility of European contributions to NATO.** European allies need to raise the profile of their contributions and reframe the alliance as a two-way street: while Europeans benefit from US security guarantees, the US

²³ World Economic Forum, *Davos 2026: Special address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada*, World Economic Forum, 20 January 2026, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/>

military's global reach is largely dependent on access to European facilities and support. The goal should be to counter the idea that the alliance is a club in which European defence expenditures constitute “dues” to be paid to the United States.

- **Strengthen contingency planning for abrupt US policy shifts.** As the February 2026 US-Israeli attacks on Iran make clear, Washington can be expected to take action on issues of fundamental strategic importance to Europe in unpredictable ways, without prior consultation, analytical rigour, or legal constraint. Europe needs to become more agile in responding to such actions, both practically and in its public messaging.

Medium term: building strategic resilience

- **Diplomatic resilience: lead proactively on Ukraine.** On Ukraine, the EU should articulate its own vision of an acceptable political settlement and take an active lead in negotiations with Moscow, Kyiv, and Washington, rather than simply relying on Trump's special envoy to guide the process. Europe will be impacted more directly than the United States by this conflict and its ultimate resolution, and holds many of the incentives that might encourage the conflict parties to move toward compromise (association and eventual EU membership for Ukraine; market access and the disposition of frozen assets for Russia). Given the erratic nature of the Witkoff-Kushner-led negotiating process, the EU and its member states can no longer afford to approach the conflict primarily in a reactive mode.
- **Security resilience: strengthen defence-related industrial production and strategic planning.** European defence expenditures have been trending upwards since Russia's 2014 aggression against Ukraine, accelerating after the 2022 invasion and again under Trump administration pressure to meet increased NATO spending targets. This investment must be strategic, aimed at developing Europe's own defence-industrial base rather than deepening dependence on the United States through the purchase of US-made armaments. EU members also need to devote more attention to strategic planning, breaking down national siloes in this regard.
- **Economic resilience: diversify supply chains and enforce trade reciprocity.** On trade, the EU, Canada, and like-minded countries must be more agile in responding to Trump's tariff threats with retaliatory measures of their own in order to restore balance and predictability to the relationship. Both the EU-Mercosur Partnership agreement and the “strategic partnership” agreed between Canada and China, both finalised in January 2026, suggest ways in which the “middle powers” might take steps to sustain a rules-based international order in the absence of clear US leadership.
- **Global coalition-building: develop “variable geometry” coalitions.** European leaders should look increasingly to supplement their transatlantic engagement with coalitions of like-minded “middle powers” worldwide to strengthen trade, maritime security, technology governance, and other areas of shared

interest without relying exclusively on US-anchored institutions. The January 2026 EU-Mercosur trade pact provides a useful model in this regard.

Long term: a balanced transatlantic partnership

If diminished US strategic anchoring proves durable across administrations, European adaptation will require deeper structural adjustment.

- **Reframe the transatlantic relationship as a partnership of equals.** The current dynamic, even if sustained, need not spell the end of the transatlantic partnership. But to sustain that partnership over the long term, Europe needs to be more capable and more assertive, assuming a share of the role traditionally played by the United States in enforcing the rules of a notional international order.
- **Institutionalise “middle power” coalitions.** In addition to investment in the development of national and European capabilities, this process will require the expansion and deepening of ties with like-minded countries beyond Europe to promote the achievement of strategic security and economic objectives.
- **Strengthen multilateral frameworks.** In a world in which the United States no longer has an interest in leading multilateral institutions, Europe must fill the vacuum Washington leaves behind in the UN, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and elsewhere, developing creative strategies for a decentralised multilateralism that reinforces a rules-based order rather than degenerating into unconstrained multipolarism.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the substance and structure of the 2025 NSS, together with the process that produced it, reveal both a policy agenda and policymaking process unmoored from core principles that have guided US statecraft for generations. The NSS abandons core national security interests that have enjoyed broad bipartisan support across multiple administrations, retreating instead into a narrow, domestically divisive narrative that neither reassures allies nor deters adversaries. Its sharp break from established policymaking frameworks, its rejection of a global leadership role for the United States (and an underpinning of values for its national security policy), and its dismissal of pressing transnational challenges will strain even long-standing alliances while providing encouragement and opportunities to adversaries. Meanwhile, the absence of an inclusive interagency process to test its core assumptions and build understanding of and consensus behind its key goals will limit its utility as a guide for policymakers. More troubling still, the widening gap between the NSS and the legislative, political, and economic realities that will shape US engagement abroad suggests a strategy rooted in ideological improvisation rather than clear-eyed analysis of the world as it is. Indeed, less than two



months after the NSS's adoption, the United States finds itself engaged in new, potentially open-ended military commitments in Venezuela and Iran and a self-inflicted crisis over the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a NATO member state. In the absence of consistent US strategic anchoring, the durability of the transatlantic relationship will depend less on Washington's coherence than on Europe's unity, institutional resilience, and willingness to assume a larger share of strategic responsibility.

Building Peace Together

Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Maison de la paix
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2D
P.O. Box 1295
1211 Geneva 1
Switzerland
Tel: + 41 22 730 96 00
Contact: www.gcsp.ch/contact
www.gcsp.ch

ISBN: 978-2-88947-456-1



GCSP
Geneva Centre for
Security Policy