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Negative Sum Game: The 2025 US National Security Strategy and Implications for Canada

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Unpopular Populism

After much anticipation, and more than a little trepidation, from the international community, the first US *National Security Strategy* of the second Donald Trump administration was published earlier this month,¹ amid global concerns about growing US isolationism, unilateralism, and hyper-nationalism. The document reflected several contrarian and populist trends in Washington's current foreign relations. These include conflating the "deadly failures" of the Biden government, rejecting globalization and free trade and blaming unspecified "elites" for pursuing these goals, treating migration as a near-net negative, downplaying the protection of democratic governments, and denying climate change (calling the concept a "disastrous ideology" and a threat to US interests).

Also striking was what was missing from the document, including any mention of nuclear disarmament, hybrid conflict, artificial intelligence, and technological competition, or addressing poverty and underdevelopment as a security challenge. There was also no direct mention of the threats posed by authoritarian regimes and softening democracy in many parts of the world. Also absent was any mention in the strategy of the Arctic, which has been a growing concern for both Canada and Northern Europe. American Arctic policy has been at best erratic for the past decade, and the second Trump administration has reiterated its stance against environmental policies and the green transition, further damaging its stature in the far north. Washington's strategic cooperation with Canada and European governments in the Arctic is now an open question at a time when NATO is focusing more directly on northern security.

Using the incoherent concept of "flexible realism," the document sought to justify "maintaining good relations with countries whose governing systems and societies differ from ours even as we push like-minded friends to uphold our shared norms," while describing the need for the US to eschew hegemony, while at the same time advocating hegemony to prevent the development of a challenger power, while also at the same time seeking to not influence other states' behaviour. This Escher metaphor was further extended in the strategy document by trumpeting American soft power, though ignoring the rapid wastage of such power through punitive and

politicized tariff policies and consistent transactional and zero-sum approaches to foreign policy, especially towards longstanding friends and allies, including Canada.

One aspect of the strategy which had been well-anticipated was a refocusing of America's strategic interests towards the Western Hemisphere. The paper did not hide its connections to the nineteenth century Monroe Doctrine, which affirmed US hegemony over the Americas while acting to prevent European influence and incursions in the region. Such thinking has been reflected in the second Trump administration since the beginning of this year, including renewed calls by Washington to "acquire" Greenland and retake the Panama Canal, while repeatedly referring to Canada as potential future American territory. The NSS paper also referred to a "Trump Corollary" to the initial Monroe Doctrine, an echo of the 1904 "Roosevelt Corollary" which justified US armed intervention in Latin America to discourage and repulse European activities.² In the NSS paper's warmed-over version of the Monroe Doctrine, governments in the region were framed as facing US attempts to "discourage their collaboration with others."

It remains to be seen to what degree the new NSS document will actually affect American foreign policy going forward, especially considering the contradictions both within the paper and between the paper and current foreign policy, especially the current deteriorating security situation in the Caribbean and the possibility of more direct US military action against the Nicolás Maduro regime in Venezuela.³ As well, the mercurial nature of the US government's foreign policy, especially towards great powers, since the beginning of the year also calls into question this NSS paper's long-term durability. Nonetheless, what do the contents of the paper potential mean for Canada's regional foreign policy and security interests, and how could Ottawa respond?

Less "We," More "Me"

The doublethink inherent in the NSS paper's statement on protecting core American values, namely that Washington "will oppose elite-driven, anti-democratic restrictions on core liberties in Europe, the Anglosphere, and the rest of the democratic world, especially among our allies," suggests that the domestic politics of US partners would be open to American pressure, the nature of which may be difficult to predict given the Trump administration's shifting definitions of what constitutes "elites," and its mercurial approaches to what should be considered a threat to American interests.

Moreover, as Ottawa seeks to strengthen relations in Europe, including developing joint support for Ukraine, the hostile tone which the NSS document takes towards Europe potentially places Canada in a more difficult position. The strategy supports the "growing influence of patriotic European parties" while bashing the European Union as a barrier to "political liberty and sovereignty." If these views do herald more open support in the US government for interventionism in other Western governments, what should the responses be in Canada and Europe? As well, the NSS paper calls for a swift end to the Ukraine conflict and the requirement to "reestablish strategic stability with Russia," adding to concerns that the US is dedicated to walking away from Kyiv regardless of the quality, or lack thereof, of the ultimate peace deal. This could result in an eventual green light to Moscow to continue to threaten other parts of Europe and potentially the Arctic.

The 2025 NSS paper also confirmed the growing policy divergence between the United States and other NATO members, including Ottawa, on Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. The document called for an "expeditious cessation of hostilities," adding to looming concerns that Washington is seeking to walk away from Ukraine, even with a deal which pleases the Kremlin. Inevitably, the Russian government has since praised the NSS paper, which not only adopts a more conciliatory tone towards Moscow but implies that EU interference is responsible for delays in a US-led end to the conflict.⁴ As well, the strategy questions the need for NATO to expand further, and suggesting that Washington would organize a "burden-sharing network" within the alliance which would "use economic tools to align incentives." Canada, like other NATO members, are in the process of augmenting military budgets to ensure a five percent of GDP baseline, but this takes place at a time when the overall role of the alliance, and its abilities to deter aggression, are now under question. If Canada is to be considered part of the Trump government's walled-off Western Hemisphere concept, then what would be the future bilateral defence relationship, a question which factors into issues such as the US-backed Golden Dome missile system initiative, and the future of NORAD.⁵

The autarkic tendencies of the US strategic plan were also illustrated in the call for the country to "secure" access to critical supply chains and materials, noting the early policies of Alexander Hamilton and his recommendations, set within his 1791 *Report on the Subject of Manufactures*,⁶ that America should not be dependent on foreign powers for key economic essentials. One of the major reasons why the Trump administration had expressed support for control over Greenland, while suggesting that Canada become "the 51st state," was based on the need to obtain sources of raw materials necessary for economic development and military use.

In October 2025, the American government announced that it was seeking minority stakes in two Vancouver-based critical mineral firms, leading to questions about aftershocks in Canadian economic security. The Mark Carney government had already announced this autumn that it would seek to develop a Canadian stockpile of rare earths, and promote new mining objectives, in order to reduce its vulnerability to Chinese exports.⁷ Some actors within Canada had already examined the possibility of developing alternative rare earth supplies, with one example being the initiative by the Saskatchewan Research Council (SRC) to open a rare earths processing plant in Saskatoon, which is expected to be fully online by 2027.⁸

Another contradiction within the NSS document was the announced policy of "commercial diplomacy" via the ongoing use of "using tariffs and reciprocal trade agreements." First, the haphazard and erratic use of tariffs by the Trump administration, including on Canada, has caused considerable damage to trust between the US and its friends and allies in recent months, have had a negligible effect on the American economy. They also have raised concerns about the weaponization of such policies and their potential to erode venerable trade regimes. These events have also placed China in a position of being the "sober-minded" economic partner, and Canada is among many countries which have started to consider warming economic relations with Beijing as a hedging strategy against potential future American intransigence.⁹ With the NSS document calling upon the United States to guard against "detrimental outside influence," however, there is the question of whether improved Sino-Canada trade would constitute a tripwire in Washington.

Second, the supposed support of reciprocal trade agreements also flies in the face of the US government's current disdain for free trade, suggested that any such deals would be one-sided at best. For example, this month the Trump government suggested that it may allow the CUSMA North American trade agreement to expire in 2026.¹⁰ These statements will likely provide other governments, including Ottawa, to pursue strengthened trade agreements elsewhere, such as Canadian initiatives to improve economic diplomacy in Europe and the Asia-Pacific.

Potential Responses in Canada

Although “hedging” and soft balancing strategies are becoming commonplace talking points in policy circles as Canada and other governments are forced to navigate more unpredictable great power interests, these concepts nonetheless offer some responses for Ottawa should the strategies within the NSS document continue to be pursued by Washington. The Carney government has begun the process of approaching friends in Europe and East Asia for improved cooperation in trade and mutual security interests, including in the Arctic, while there has been an emphasis on improving Canada's domestic economy as well as its defensive capabilities. The next question will be whether the United States' views of a world of competing spheres of influence become a reverie or solidify into hard policy,¹¹ and if it is the latter, what options does Ottawa have in maintaining its foreign policy independence under such conditions?

An underlying theme of the 2025 version of the NSS is that transactional approaches to foreign and defence policy are now central to American thinking, and that the US would intensify its ‘hub and spoke’ approach to international engagements. Although it is possible that many of the arguments made in this strategy will be superseded by events within Washington and its inner circles, the paper still gives Ottawa much to consider as it overhauls its own foreign policy in the new year.

Notes

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

² John M. Thompson, “Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of the Roosevelt Corollary,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 26(4)(2015): 571-90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2015.1096658>.

³ Allan Woods, “Two Reasons Why Canada Should be Wary as Donald Trump Targets Venezuela,” *Toronto Star*, 10 December 2025, https://www.thestar.com/news/world/two-reasons-why-canada-should-be-wary-as-donald-trump-targets-venezuela/article_fc038836-1dbb-43eb-b06c-8862767134b3.html.

⁴ Rachel Muller-Heyndyk, “New US Security Strategy Aligns with Russia's Vision, Moscow Says,” *BBC News*, 7 December 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cpvd01g2kww0>.

⁵ P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “NORAD Modernization, Golden Dome, and/or “Canadian Shield”? Canada Needs its Own Narrative,” *North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network – Quick Impact*, 9 October 2025, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/25oct9-NORADmod-NDDN-lackenbauer-QI.pdf>.

⁶ “Alexander Hamilton’s Final Version of the Report on the Subject of Manufactures, [Philadelphia, December 5, 1791, Communicated on December 5, 1791],” *National Archives*,

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-10-02-0001-0007#ARHN-01-10-02-0001-0007-fn-0123-ptr>.

⁷ Mark Gollom, “The Trump Administration is Investing in Canadian Critical Mineral Companies. But Ottawa Can Stop It,” *CBC News*, 13 October 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/trump-investment-critical-minerals-canada-9.6932122>; “Canada Plans Mining, Rare Earths Stakes to Combat China,” *Bloomberg News*, 14 November 2025, <https://www.mining.com/web/canada-plans-mining-rare-earths-stakes-to-combat-china/>.

⁸ “SRC Rare Earth Processing Facility First to Produce Rare Earth Metals in North America,” *Government of Saskatchewan*, 18 September 2024, <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/news-and-media/2024/september/18/src-rare-earth-processing-facility-first-to-produce-rare-earth-metals-in-north-america>; “Rare Earth Processing Facility,” *Research Council of Saskatchewan*, <https://www.src.sk.ca/campaigns/rare-earth-processing-facility>; Niall McGee, “Saskatchewan Faces Major Obstacles as it Aims to Compete with China in Processing Rare Earth Minerals,” *Globe and Mail*, 2 October 2024, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/article-saskatchewan-faces-major-obstacles-as-it-aims-to-compete-with-china-in/>.

⁹ Lisa Xing, “3 Ways Canada and China can Reset their Relations in Trump’s New Trade World,” *CBC News*, 23 November 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/canada-carney-china-tariffs-xi-9.6986876>.

¹⁰ Mike Crowley, “US Businesses Love CUSMA. Why is Donald Trump Threatening to Pull Out?” *CBC News*, 6 December 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/trump-tariffs-canada-us-mexico-agreement-cusma-usmca-trade-9.7004814>.

¹¹ Greg Grandin, “Trump Wants to Carve Up the World. It’s a Blueprint for Disaster,” *The New York Times*, 15 December 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/15/opinion/monroe-doctrine-trump.html>.