

No Strategy Lasts Forever

by Kamran Bokhari - December 18, 2025

The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy carries far-reaching consequences for countries that, over the past eight decades, have labored to persuade successive American administrations that U.S. support – security, financial or diplomatic – served Washington’s own interests. Over time, it became almost routine for diplomats and lobbyists across thematic and geographic portfolios to argue that the country or region they championed merited leading attention from U.S. policymakers. With a paradigmatic shift now underway inside the U.S. government, both foreign stakeholders and domestic policy advocates will face a far steeper challenge in convincing U.S. leaders that scarce national resources must be committed to any given issue or arena.

The following excerpts from the Trump administration’s 2025 National Security Strategy are especially revealing:

- “Not every country, region, issue, or cause – however worthy – can be the focus of American strategy.”
- “American strategies since the end of the Cold War have fallen short – they have been laundry lists of wishes or desired end states; have not clearly defined what we want but instead stated vague platitudes; and have often misjudged what we should want.”
- “Our elites badly miscalculated America’s willingness to shoulder forever global burdens to which the American people saw no connection to the national interest. They overestimated America’s ability to fund, simultaneously, a massive welfare-regulatory-administrative state alongside a massive military, diplomatic, intelligence, and foreign aid complex.”
- “It has become customary for documents such as this to mention every part of the world and issue, on the assumption that any oversight signifies a blind spot or a snub. As a result, such documents become bloated and unfocused – the opposite of what a strategy should be. To focus and prioritize is to choose – to acknowledge that not everything matters equally, to everyone.”

This is a radical departure from the practice of American foreign policy over the past 80 years, and it is critical to examine it. To do so, it is important first to consider how Washington got into the business of carrying the burden of the world. In fact, the debate between the self-styled internationalists and so-called isolationists dates back to the late 1800s. The United States oscillated

between outward engagement and inward focus from the late 19th century until the conclusion of World War II, after which the debate was decisively resolved in favor of sustained global engagement.

The Spanish-American War and World War I pulled Washington into global power politics, but each episode was followed by an effort to recenter on the home front and limit foreign entanglements. This pattern reflected an unresolved strategic debate over whether America's security could be preserved through geographic insulation or whether it required active management of the international system. World War II ended that debate by demonstrating that U.S. power and security were inseparable from the global balance, locking in a seemingly permanent commitment to international engagement.

No strategy is designed to endure indefinitely. At any strategy's inception, the central question is not how long the new paradigm will remain relevant, but how to make it capable of managing the emerging realities of the moment. That emphasis is both deliberate and understandable, reflecting the urgency imposed by rapidly shifting conditions and the absence of long-term certainty. No government ever fully knows the optimal way to navigate the challenges it faces; strategy is forged through adaptation much more than foresight.

This is precisely what happened when the Roosevelt administration decided to join the Second World War: A convergence of strategic, economic and ideological pressures finally eroded its reluctance to engage globally. Informed by risk aversion and the memory of World War I, Washington in the 1930s sought to maintain distance from conflicts on the Eurasian landmass. That position became untenable as Germany and Japan reshaped global balances in ways that threatened U.S. interests. Economic measures, from the Lend-Lease Act to embargoes against Japan, increasingly entangled the United States in the conflict, linking American industrial and financial power directly to the survival of its allies.

The attack on Pearl Harbor crystallized these pressures, transforming a cautious, reactive posture into full-scale engagement and marking a decisive end to the long-standing debate over whether the United States could afford to remain outside the international arena. The die was cast there and then, because when the United States committed itself to World War II, both Europe and Asia had already been largely devastated by years of ceaseless conflict. By the time the U.S. aligned with the Soviet Union against the Third Reich, the Red Army's advance and the strategic balance on the ground made Soviet control of Eastern Europe largely inevitable. In addition, the destruction of colonial powers in Western Europe and Japan enabled decolonization and the emergence of independent, sovereign states that would constitute the Third World.

Thus, there is no fine dividing line between the end of World War II and the start of the Cold War, which set the stage for sustained U.S. engagement with the world. The demands of rebuilding postwar Europe and Asia, dealing with scores of newly independent nations and making sure that the Soviet Union did not exploit this situation to its advantage required nothing less than America's full participation in global affairs. To establish a favorable balance of power, Washington devised an elaborate global architecture known as the liberal rules-based international order. It consisted of multilateral and international institutions, including the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and NATO.

In other words, the post-1945 international system was initially a tool for the United States, the emerging superpower, to shape and manage global affairs. Over the decades, this order came to be seen as the new normal, a perception reinforced by the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. But while it represented the latest stage in the evolution of the international system, it was an exceptional departure from human history. The critical error lay in assuming that the U.S. would (or could) sustain such intensive and comprehensive management of the world order indefinitely.

The lessons of the post-1945 era underscore why the current shift in U.S. strategy is so consequential. For decades, the United States treated the global order as a project worth intensive, constant management, creating expectations (both abroad and at home) that American power would reliably uphold security, economic stability and multilateral governance. That period of extraordinary engagement, however, was historically exceptional, and the assumption that it could continue indefinitely was flawed. Today, as the 2025 National Security Strategy signals a recalibration of priorities, countries and policymakers that once relied on America's habitual commitment must contend with a far more selective and constrained framework.

In an era when strategic attention and resources are increasingly finite, both foreign stakeholders and domestic policy advocates can no longer rely on automatic American involvement or support. Every request for security assistance, diplomatic backing or economic investment must now be justified against competing priorities, demonstrating clear alignment with U.S. interests and a tangible payoff for national objectives. As a result, the calculus of influence has become more rigorous, rewarding those who can persuasively link their issues to enduring American priorities, while sidelining appeals grounded in precedent.

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