

The U.S. NSS as a Realist Document

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Introduction

The geopolitical events with which 2026 has made its debut have made some analysts question their basic understanding of the world order that President Trump has been slowly but surely constructing throughout his second term. As scandalous as it was impressive, Maduro's capture was not predicted by political commentators. Many thought that Trump's administration was forced to choose between conventional military intervention and neutrality. Furthermore, Trump's internal² and external³ political opposition, as well as some relevant voices in the area of policy analysis⁴ had basically agreed on two accounts: (i) that U.S. military action in Venezuela would not benefit the American national interest and (ii) that any military intervention would lead to a disastrous regional conflict. Contemporary U.S. restrainers usually argue that military interventions tend to transform into long-term wars and nation-building projects. These anxieties were completely thwarted by the reality of what has been ironically referred to as "the American Special Military Operation", contrasting the ease and swiftness with which the U.S. has neutralized executive Venezuelan power with Vladimir Putin's so-called "Special Military Operation", which has devolved into trench warfare, much too similar to the Western front during WWI. The question is: what is the cause for the short-sightedness that many have shown in regard to the geopolitical actions of the U.S. up until now? I would venture to answer by pointing towards an understudied and somewhat recently published short, yet pivotal, document: the U.S. 2025 National Security Strategy.

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² <https://www.kaine.senate.gov/press-releases/kaine-schumer-and-schiff-slam-use-of-procedural-motion-to-sidestep-their-venezuela-war-powers-resolution>, "The American people don't want endless wars that risk the lives of American service members and cost the taxpayers billions." according to U.S. Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer.

³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazils-lula-warns-us-intervention-venezuela-could-be-catastrophic-2025-12-20/>, "armed intervention in Venezuela would be a humanitarian catastrophe" according to president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/5/opening-pandoras-box-what-happens-if-the-us-attacks-venezuela> and <https://www.defensepriorities.org/press-releases/pushing-regime-change-in-venezuela-is-a-terrible-idea/>

The military doctrine contained by the U.S. NSS

It is in this document that we find a common thread for recent actions and it may help us understand the things to come. The NSS has been seen as a formalization of Trump's instincts. It is these instincts which are scrutinizing (and sometimes entirely replacing) the usual traditional commitments that the U.S. had upheld prior to the current presidential term. Trump prioritizes transactional bilateral relations between states. One of the lines of his inaugural speech summarizes his views on successful governance: "The United States will once again consider itself a growing nation – one that increases our wealth, expands our territory, builds our cities, raises our expectations, and carries our flag into new and beautiful horizons."⁵ The NSS projects the same image of increase, expansion and growth – specifically, territorial expansion is discussed as a potential goal: "This [defending ourselves and preserving our way of life] will require expanding American access to critical minerals and materials while countering predatory economic practices."⁶, "Establishing or expanding access in strategically important locations [in the Western Hemisphere]."⁷ The NSS does not present an isolationist view of American politics, but, instead, it is subtly relaying the conditions for intervention. The ambiguous language that both Trump and the NSS opt for whenever discussing crossing the line between economic diplomacy and military intervention is ingeniously used as a tool of strategic deterrence⁸. Not imposing red lines can help the U.S. avoid potential ridicule if they end up not being willing to enforce them for fear of escalation. This way, being dragged into a hot conflict becomes less probable. Having this kind of decisional freedom can be useful for reasonably calculating cost-effective and casualty-minimizing military operations. We have already seen this in 2025 in Somalia, Iraq, Yemen, Iran Syria, Nigeria and, now, in Venezuela as well. This attitude upsets both some of Trump's voters, who are genuine isolationists and strict restrainers and European allies, who view American "flexible realism" regarding NATO and European defense as a sign that the U.S. has abandoned the European states in their cold conflict with the Russian Federation.

⁵ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/>

⁶ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>, p. 10

⁷ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>, p. 16

⁸ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/americas/fate-america-first>, "Ambiguity reduces the risk of escalation while maintaining a credible threat of action."

Defensive realism in the NSS

The Russian military aggression in Ukraine has been at the center of most recent discussions of realism. Unfortunately, many confusions are peddled in such contexts. The most fertile ground for such misconceptions is the difference between realism as a theory and realism as a national stance. Mearsheimer's brand of realism, called "offensive realism", maintains that Russia and China are realist states, due to the stern manner in which they pursue their national interest and because they are not advocating for any universally applicable principles of governance (unlike liberal and communist states who are theoretically equivalent for Mearsheimer's realism). This is a terribly politicized point of view, which better accomplishes the task of criticizing Western states than the goal of realist theory: a realistic and unbiased view of things, to cut a long story short. Mearsheimer's realism is, in practice, a means to justify revisionism against the unipolar post-Cold War *status quo*. He pays most of his attention to the supposed wrongdoings of Western policy which are thought to be fueling the revisionist *ressentiment* seen in countries such as Russia and its bandwagoning supporters (such as Iran and Belarus). To states belonging to the West, he mostly prescribes compromises, while Russian or Chinese attempts at pursuing their own national interest seems to always be justified. Even in the aftermath of the capture of Maduro, he publicly stated that Venezuela posed "no real threat", that Trump's order "violated international law" and that this operation would ultimately end in ineffective and useless "nation-building"⁹. Meanwhile, the U.S. has been using the momentum gained through this action. It has already moved on to pursuing different goals and there are no signs that there will be any "boots on the ground" nation-building, despite Mearsheimer's concerns. Defensive realist theorists, like Kenneth Walz, would probably assess this as a great example of force being used by a great power to defend the *status quo*. In fact, this is what the NSS is advocating for: trying to adapt the unipolar post-Cold War *status quo* to the new reality of the U.S.-China duopoly. The somewhat brash methods that the Trump administration has chosen and its somewhat militaristic tone serve a pragmatic goal. They are there to signal that Americans are capable of strategically adapting to this new reality on their own (i.e. they do not need some other great power to nudge them) and that their allies should take their intentions seriously and try to support this new defense architecture as much as possible.

⁹ <https://x.com/i/broadcasts/1zqJVdepYzMKb?s=20>

Who is the real realist?

We should pay attention to claims that Russia is a realist state. It's one thing to speculate on the causes of the Russian invasion and on what the Western states could or could not have done to avoid it and another thing to claim that Russian military and economic decisions are reflective of a realist state strategy. Russian politicians constantly use escalatory and derogatory language in relation to European states, which does not resemble the calculated demeanor of a realist agent. In comparison, the American NSS intelligently uses ambiguous language to avoid offending enemies, reserving blunt words for allies who are – *supposedly* – able to absorb the impact of the well-meaning critique. Furthermore, the document even specifies that, among other things, “President Trump’s foreign policy is [...] realistic without being ‘realist’”¹⁰. It is only natural for a realist to try to deny and conceal one’s realism, as this can be helpful in diplomatic contexts.

This is not all: a realist should be prudent, never wasteful. Modern critics describing Kissinger as a bad representative of realist policy because he did not hasten to secure peace in Vietnam might have a point¹¹. There’s a case to be made that the Vietnam war was a long and wasteful conflict which was not and could not have been decisive in any way: victory would not have strengthened the international credibility of the U.S.; loss would not have diminished it. This is much more than what can be said about the Russian aggression in Ukraine: Russia lost some of its credibility, at least in the Western world, merely by invading Ukraine. Moreover, Russia has had massive casualties, already having lost many more troops, relative to its population, than the U.S. did in Vietnam¹². Perhaps the most damning reason for which Russia is not and should not be seen as a realist state is that it has allowed its internal propaganda to breed a large and uncontrollable sort of hypernationalism. Excessive amounts of movies centered on the “Patriotic War”¹³, ethnic slurs aimed at Ukrainians¹⁴ and the proliferation of an alienating narrative that

¹⁰ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>, p. 8

¹¹ <https://www.compactmag.com/article/making-realism-great-again/>, “[...] former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, failed to practice realism when he sabotaged US peace talks with North Vietnam”.

¹² <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-battlefield-woes-ukraine>, “Russia will likely hit the 1 million casualty mark in the summer of 2025 – a stunning and grisly milestone. [...] Russian fatalities in Ukraine (in just over three years) are 15 times larger than the Soviet Union’s decade-long war in Afghanistan and 10 times larger than Russia’s 13 years of war in Chechnya.” The U.S. lost approximately 58 thousand soldiers in Vietnam, while having a population of 216 million in the closing year of the war, 1975. According to the CSIS 2025 analysis, Russia had lost 250 thousand soldiers, while having a total population of about 144 million people. The ratios of the fatalities to the respective populations are meant to quantify the impact that the war had on each state.

¹³ <https://english.spbu.ru/news-events/calendar/best-soviet-films-great-patriotic-war>

¹⁴ <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-examining-the-origins-of-russians-superiority-complex-vis-a-vis-ukrainians>

describes the Western states as predatory and condescending to Russia¹⁵; all of these and much more will certainly leave a scar in the long run. This could lead to further difficulties in maintaining diplomatic relations between Western states and Russia. In any case, Russian policy is better understood as a sort of “nationalistic crusade”¹⁶, rather than a prudent and reasonable realist strategy. It should be noted, however, that the fact that Russia itself does not behave as a *realist state* would be not an argument against viewing it and its actions using a *realist model* of political relations.

Conclusion

It seems that the U.S. is settling in its old role as the “global cop”, but with a few twists: this time, they will not allow ideological convictions to undermine their national interest; this time, they will *feed their power with glory and new victories*, to paraphrase Napoleon, which means that they will focus on securing small but clear military successes which they will then turn into leverage during negotiations. Crucially, they are not taking Western unity¹⁷ for granted. The Greenland situation is a symptom of this. However, the possibility of favorable U.S. – Europe relations is not entirely lost. European states should strive to be less dependent on U.S. defense guaranties and on the U.S. economy. This would align with Trump’s demands and it would ensure that Europe can thrive in a world in which the notion of “the West” is an unsure abstraction rather than cultural and historical grounds for a strong trans-Atlantic alliance.

¹⁵ <https://www.politico.eu/article/siege-stalingrad-battle-bucha-vladimir-putin-russia-war-against-west/>, according to Vladimir Putin, “Again and again, we [the Russians] have to repel the aggression of the collective West.”

¹⁶ Morgenthau, H. J. (1948). *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York, Knopf, p. 38

¹⁷ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1993-06-01/clash-civilizations>, Western unity was described by Samuel Huntington as being based on “individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state”.

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