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Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

The US's new defense strategy tells allies to handle their own security

The Pentagon released a priority-shifting National Defense Strategy that chastised U.S. allies to take control of their own security and reasserted the Trump administration's focus on dominance in the Western Hemisphere above a longtime goal of countering China.

The 34-page document, the first since 2022, was highly political for a military blueprint, criticizing partners from Europe to Asia for relying on previous U.S. administrations to subsidize their defense.

It called for "a sharp shift — in approach, focus, and tone." That translated to a blunt assessment that allies would take on more of the burden countering nations from Russia to North Korea.

"For too long, the U.S. Government neglected — even rejected — putting Americans and their concrete interests first," read the opening sentence.

It capped off a week of animosity between President Donald Trump's administration and traditional allies like Europe, with Trump threatening to impose tariffs on some European partners to press a bid to acquire Greenland before announcing a deal that lowered the temperature.

As allies confront what some see as a hostile attitude from the U.S., they will almost certainly be unhappy to see that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's department will provide "credible options to guarantee U.S. military and commercial access to key terrain," especially Greenland and the Panama Canal.

Following a tiff this week at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, Switzerland, with Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, the strategy at once urges cooperation with Canada and other neighbors while still issuing a stark warning.

"We will engage in good faith with our neighbors, from Canada to our partners in Central and South America, but we will ensure that they respect and do their part to defend our shared interests," the document says. "And where they do not, we will stand ready to take focused, decisive action that concretely advances U.S. interests."

Much like the White House's National Security Strategy that preceded it, the defense blueprint reinforces Trump's "America First" philosophy, which favors nonintervention overseas, questions decades of strategic relationships and prioritizes U.S. interests.

The National Defense Strategy last was published in 2022 under then-President Joe Biden and focused on China as America's "pacing challenge."

Western Hemisphere

The strategy simultaneously courts help from partners in America's backyard, while warning them that the U.S. will "actively and fearlessly defend America's interests throughout the Western Hemisphere."

It specifically points to access to the Panama Canal and Greenland.

It comes just days after Trump said he reached a "framework of a future deal" on Arctic security with NATO leader Mark Rutte that would offer the U.S. "total access" to Greenland, a territory of NATO ally Denmark.

Danish officials, who spoke Thursday on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive negotiations, say formal negotiations have yet to begin.

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Trump previously suggested that the U.S. should potentially consider retaking control of the Panama Canal and accused Panama of ceding influence to China. Asked this week if the U.S. reclaiming the canal was still on the table, Trump demurred.

"I don't want to tell you that," the president responded. "Sort of, I must say, sort of. That's sort of on the table."

The Pentagon also touted the operation that ousted Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro earlier this month, saying "all narco-terrorists should take note."

China and the greater Asia-Pacific region

The new policy document views China — which the Biden administration saw as a top adversary — as a settled force in the Indo-Pacific region that only needs to be deterred from dominating the U.S. or its allies.

The goal "is not to dominate China; nor is it to strangle or humiliate them," the document says. It later adds, "This does not require regime change or some other existential struggle."

"President Trump seeks a stable peace, fair trade, and respectful relations with China," it says, which follows efforts to climb down from a trade war sparked by the administration's sky-high tariffs. It says it will "open a wider range of military-to-military communications" with China's army.

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The strategy, meanwhile, makes no mention of or guarantee to Taiwan, the self-governing island that Beijing claims as its own and says it will take by force if necessary. The U.S. is obligated by its own laws to give military support to Taiwan.

By contrast, the Biden administration's 2022 strategy said the U.S. would "support Taiwan's asymmetric self-defense."

In another example of offloading regional security to allies, the document says, "South Korea is capable of taking primary responsibility for deterring North Korea with critical but more limited U.S. support."

Europe

While saying that "Russia will remain a persistent but manageable threat to NATO's eastern members for the foreseeable future," the defense strategy asserts that NATO allies are much more powerful and so are "strongly positioned to take primary responsibility for Europe's conventional defense."

It says the Pentagon will play a key role in NATO "even as we calibrate U.S. force posture and activities in the European theater" to focus on priorities closer to home.

The U.S. already has confirmed that it will reduce its troop presence on NATO's borders with Ukraine, with allies expressing concern that the Trump administration might drastically cut their numbers and leave a security vacuum as European countries confront an increasingly aggressive Russia.