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From the Editor

We are pleased to introduce the inaugural edition of the *Global Security Review (GSR) Quarterly*—a new platform designed to complement our weekly offerings by providing space for more expansive, in-depth analysis. While our standard articles are typically concise and focused, the Quarterly creates an opportunity for authors to explore complex topics with greater depth and breadth, experiment with format and structure, and venture into subject areas not traditionally covered in our journal. This flexibility enables more comprehensive storytelling, richer context, and innovative perspectives on deterrence and global security.

For our readers, the GSR Quarterly delivers fresh insights and a deeper dive into issues shaping the strategic environment today, while also allowing our editorial team to evaluate emerging areas of interest and potential new formats for future coverage. In each issue, we also highlight three standout articles from the past quarter that have generated significant readership and impact across our audience. We hope you enjoy this first edition and invite your feedback as we refine this new initiative—please share your thoughts with us at **GSR@thinkdeterrence.com**.

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He is the author of the book *Reversing the Tao: A Framework for Credible Space Deterrence* in 2016 which was selected as one of the top books of 2018 for space professionals by the National Security Space Institute. He writes frequently on defense and space warfighting policy issues in publications such as The Hill, Defense News, National Defense, The Space Review, and Global Security Review.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official polices of the Department of War or the U.S. Government.

Trump Administration Space Policy:
First-Term Foundations for Second-Term Strategic Action
By
Christopher Stone, Sr. Fellow

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Overview

The Trump administration's approach to space policy developed significantly between its first term (2017–2021) and the second administration's issuance of Executive Order (EO)14369 *Ensuring American Space Superiority* in December 2025. While the first term focused on institutional reform, regulatory liberalization, and the establishment of vital strategic spacepower institutions—most notably the United States Space Force—the second term's new executive order reflects a more mature and explicitly assertive direction that prioritizes U.S. leadership in space across exploration, security, economics, and technological innovation. The order shows that President Trump has the "national vision and willpower" to see it through to completion and ties American strength and prosperity to international leadership.[1] This is achieved through the execution of the following priorities:

- **Return to the Moon by 2028** and develop a **permanent lunar outpost by 2030** Both the first-term SPD-1 and the 2025 EO emphasize returning Americans to the Moon and building sustainable architecture for exploration; though the present EO sets tighter deadlines (Moon by 2028 with a base by 2030 vs. earlier goals tied to Artemis).[2]
- **Space deterrence and warfighting focus**: detect, characterize, and counter threats — including readiness against adversary placement of nuclear weapons in orbit — and develop the Golden Dome space-based, layered missile defense by 2028.[3]
- **Commercial space economy growth:** attract at least **$50 billion in private investment** by 2028 and develop commercial replacements for International Space Station (ISS) by 2030.[4]
- **Advance the development and deployment of space-based nuclear power:** deploy nuclear reactors on the Moon and in orbit (lunar reactors ready by 2030).[5]

This assertiveness of the second administration's EO reflects both the recognition of time lost during the first Trump and Biden Administration years, as well as the rapid shifts in the strategic environment, particularly the rise of China as a peer-level adversary that is rapidly developing and deploying "rapid and destructive" space forces to deny or destroy American critical space infrastructure.[6] Together, the two phases form a coherent arc in American space policy that increasingly recognizes space as the strategically vital form of national power rather than a sanctuary of competition, conflict, and warfighting.

Space as the Domain of National Power Projection, Not Support

National spacepower cannot be understood just as a mere support function for civil exploration, commercial interests, and terrestrial military campaigns.[7] In the middle of the third decade of the twenty-first century, space has become the vital domain of strategic competition whose control

underwrites military effectiveness, economic resilience, and geopolitical influence. The nation that commands the space operating environment controls the timing, tempo, and transparency of conflict on Earth, and communications between nations. As such it controls the of our country and continued leadership in the international order.[8]

Against this backdrop, Executive Order 14369 must be evaluated not as an isolated directive, but as the culmination of a longer policy trajectory that began during President Trump's first term. This essay contends that they represent a shift from institutional reconstruction to strategic assertion driven by changes in the threat environment and lessons learned from earlier reforms.

Trump's First Term: Re-Structuring for Real American Superiority in Space

When President Trump took office in 2017, U.S. space policy suffered from political stagnation and operational passivity.[9] Space remained rhetorically important but operationally marginalized, treated as a benign support domain rather than a critical warfighting and economically vital region.[10] The first step the Trump administration undertook was to correct the policy limitations as well as the institutional organizational structures that had constrained U.S. freedom of action, readiness, and ability to gain, much less maintain, space superiority.

This effort, which began via Executive Order 13803 in June 2017, directed the re-establishment of the National Space Council.[11] This Council, while existing in previous administrations, had not been in operation for decades. Many considered the revival to be a sign that spacepower was going to be given "a new sense of purpose."[12] The National Space Council, led by the Vice President, was directed to "…review United States Government space policy, including long-range goals, and develop a strategy for national space activities."[13] As the council and its sub-groups met over the course of the administration, it developed a series of Space Policy Directives (SPDs), each addressing a discrete structural or operational weakness. SPD-1 reoriented civil space policy toward a return to the Moon, reintroducing manned exploration beyond low Earth orbit as a national objective through the Artemis program. SPD-2 reduced regulatory barriers to commercial space activity, a move that recognized that industrial capacity would be essential to future economic competitiveness and military readiness. SPD-3 addressed space traffic management and debris, correctly reframing congestion as a secondary operational risk rather than the main threat to American space capabilities.[14]

Most consequentially, SPD-4 laid the groundwork for the establishment of the United States Space Force, correcting decades of fragmented military space governance. From the beginning of the Space Age in 1957, the primary military service for space operations was the United States Air Force. The vision and strategic plan was to move strategic warfare into space by Strategic Air Command and the Air Force as a whole in the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, this deterrence focus and warfighting strategy would have led the U.S. to have the space forces necessary for where we are today. Unfortunately, Secretary of Defense McNamara effectively put all of that to the knife in 1962-63. As a result, space operations for national security primary focused on support functions for such things as weather, intelligence gathering, and missile warning systems.[15]

This mentality continued through the late 1970s and early 1980s when Air Force Space Command was founded in Colorado. For the next forty years, Air Force Space Command served as the main DoD entity for organizing, training, and equipping the preponderance of military space capabilities. Unfortunately, the Air Force lost its strategic mentality to a fixation on tactical airpower such as fighter-bombers instead of strategic warfare. As a result, the Air Force would regularly take funds earmarked for enhancing spacepower capacity and reallocate them in execution as a "milk fund" for airpower requirements, such as refitting fighter engines.[16] In addition, training focused on air-centric thinking, and mostly did not allow the development of clear space deterrence and warfighting doctrine and career development opportunities, further reducing any move to a space warfare mindset.[17] As a result, many Congressmen in the early 2010s began to question this approach. Two of the most strident leaders in Congress for the development of the Space Force were Rep. Rogers (R-AL) and Rep. Cooper (D-TN). Both gave numerous speeches and pushed for a total service separation to ensure that spacepower would get its own advocacy through its own budget, its own professional development, and its own command structure.[18] By the time President Trump took office in 2017, this effort had become one of importance to him as well and he laid it out in the meeting of the Space Council in June 2018 when he directed the Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Dunford, to establish a separate military service, which became the United States Space Force.[19]

Unfortunately, due to what one commentator called "malicious compliance," the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and others within the Pentagon and National Security Council worked to answer the President's direction their own way rather than as specifically directed.[20] Instead of a separate service, the Chairman and the Office of Secretary of Defense recommended re-establishing U.S. Space Command as the warfighting combatant command for space, a Space Development Agency for addressing space acquisition issues, and a Space Operations Forces training model to address career development concerns put forth by both the Congress and the White House.[21] Given that the report to Congress in August 2018 was not what was expected or desired by the President, Vice President Pence gave a speech at the Pentagon stating that while these were useful ideas, we would have a Space Force as well.[22] So, in August 2019, U.S. Space Command was re-established in a new format. Instead of being a functional command like U.S. Cyber Command, supporting all other commands, the U.S. Space Command would be assigned its own "astrographic" area of responsibility, and its own combat theater of space of "100 km and up."[23]

Additionally, SPD-4 was originally designed to create a Department of the Space Force, a distinctive and organization coequal with the Departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force.[24] However, given the "malicious compliance" in the interagency process, it was decided that to get it across the finish line it was to deploy the service initially under the Department of the Air Force like the Marine Corps operates in the Department of the Navy.[25] The full separate military department for space would be addressed in a later fiscal year's National Defense Authorization Act. Given the 2020 election, this did not happen, and the Space Force while technically a separate military service, did not change their focus of operations from space support for the Joint Force to space deterrence and warfighting over the next four years. In fact, the Secretary of the Air Force under the Biden Administration told Space Force officers that they should accept

that they are to support terrestrial operations and stop dreaming of contributing to the defense of the nation in and for space with weapons of their own.[26] This drift in purpose continued while the

Chinese, Russians and other adversaries continued their rapid buildup of kinetic and non-kinetic space forces in a desire to destroy American economic and military power in space. Then the second Trump administration came into office in January of 2025.[27]

Subsequent directives on cybersecurity (SPD-5) and space nuclear power and propulsion (SPD-6) further acknowledged that space systems are both digitally vulnerable and energy/propulsively constrained. SPD-6 was a great advancement around space nuclear power and propulsion as it was almost taboo to mention the deployment of nuclear reactors into space, much less the launching of nuclear propulsion on manned spacecraft, until then. This is due to the growth in anti-nuclear sentiment in the latter part of the Cold War because of accidents such as the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl events. Many supposed that there were better ways to harness power for electricity that were not as hazardous.[28] SPD-6 particularly focused its efforts on advancements in nuclear technology and safety protocols for low enriched uranium (LEU), a nuclear fuel capable of producing sufficient power and propulsion while not being associated with or valuable for nuclear weapons should a nuclear spacecraft fall into the wrong hands.[29]

One of the most effective changes in SPD-6 was the authorization for the Department heads (Secretaries) to have decision authority for the prosecution and funding for a nuclear power and propulsion program in space. Previously, such decisions were entirely at the Presidential level, which only continued for any decisions on the use of highly enriched uranium (HEU) fuel. This facilitated the rapid development and testing of LEU powered spacecraft, for example, DARPA began a program for the launch of the first LEU powered engine system by 2023. However, this program was later canceled in the late months of the Biden Administration[30] even though the Chinese and Russians had already established LEU programs for deep space exploration and military purposes in the lunar vicinity.[31]

The unifying characteristic of these initiatives was their enabling nature. They created authorities, clarified responsibilities, and removed constraints. However, they deferred the question of how superiority would be achieved in practice to subordinates. This was not a failure of ambition so much as a recognition of the first term's internal and external political and bureaucratic conditions. The first term was known to be the victim of resistance and "malicious compliance," with lip service to execution of the SPDs while delaying actual implementation. Before the United States could protect and advance its national interests in space, it first had to admit that the threats to American critical space infrastructure existed and that the decades of policy restrictions were harming American national security and survival, not helping it.

Trump's Second Term: Executing the Foundations for American Space Superiority

Executive Order 14369 *Ensuring American Space Superiority*, if fully implemented as directed, will be a paradigm shift in American space policy and strategy. Firstly, the national space policy

came directly from the President himself, rather than being developed by a White House council such as the National Space Council or National Security Council. Secondly, rather than declaring

the same goals and principles that have been repeated ad nauseum for decades by prior administrations, including the first Trump administration, this policy directs rapid implementation of key activities during the remainder of the second Trump administration's term. Thirdly, it makes American exploratory, economic, and military presence out to cis-lunar space a unified grand strategy. This comes after decades of the interagency bureaucrats implementing policy delay tactics to show a lack of advancement for space superiority as a sign of goodwill, preventing China and Russia's perception of America as a threat. Fourthly, it not only calls for commercial and economic development of cis-lunar space, but it targets billions of investments towards this objective.

The following analysis reviews each of these areas. It highlights the implications for gaining and maintaining an American space superiority in the 21st century and beyond.

A President's Space Policy

In previous administrations, national space policies would be drafted by the interagency departments and agencies using a White House council model of coordination-based development and approvals. This was the case during the Trump first term, when the re-established National Space Council developed the space policy for presidential signature.[32] In the second term, Executive Order 14369 clearly sent the signal that not only is the administration's policy for space going forward, but it comes directly from the President himself, applies to the entire government, and gives directed timelines for implementation rather than waiting on the Space Council coordination process, a process that has taken longer in many cases than the development and approval of the policy itself!

An Executive *Order*, not a Policy Statement

The first Trump term led to the successful development of a traditional National Space Policy, National Strategy for Space, as well as several Space Policy Directives (SPDs). However, acts of active resistance and delay through "malicious compliance" left little room for attaching the objectives to budgets for execution in any realistic timetable. It led to the major achievement of the first term space policy, the establishment of the U.S. Space Force, even though it was a hollow shell of a military service and not what SPD-4 originally intended.[33] As a result, the military service and combatant command, U.S. Space Command, were incapable addressing important threats.[34] Because of this, the President chose to apply a top-down directive approach to policy in the second term. While the work accomplished in the first term Space Council (which this EO dissolves) was useful, the objective in the second term was to forgo the time consuming policy discussions of the past.[35] The message sent was clear: it is time for action and credible space deterrence and warfighting capabilities for space superiority are required before the second Trump administration ends.

A Unified Grand Strategy for American Space Pre-Eminence

The first term successes provided guidance. The President's team created a National Space Policy, a National Strategy for Space, and several SPDs for guidance and direction. However, many of these were viewed as suggestions and not directives.[36] For example, the National Strategy for Space was mostly classified and only the objectives of its lines of effort were made public.[37] Follow-on documents created by the Department of War (then still the Department of

Defense) reflect that the Defense Space Strategy did not fully develop an actionable and executable strategy to achieve space deterrence with warfighting forces that achieve and maintain space superiority. Instead, it continued with the path of arms control, environmental activism regarding orbital debris, and pursuing the resilience model of passive defense and providing support to terrestrial operations.[38] This approach is different in the sense that, not only is it the first policy document in over 15 years to not use the term resilience, it is the first space policy directive from the President to direct space superiority as the goal and defines it as a unified strategy across all three major sectors: civil exploration, economic/commercial expansion, and military supremacy including the deployment of space-based weapons systems for defense of the homeland and critical space infrastructure via the Golden Dome system.

In the civil exploration front, Executive Order 14369 directs that America not only lands on the moon by 2028 but also creates a permanent lunar base beginning around 2030. This is something that was hotly debated for years in the first term, but it never came to be. NASA and other organizations argued that the program that became Artemis could not be rushed.[39] However, given the elements of the program began during the George W. Bush administration's cancelled Constellation program, this EO clearly says that the time has come to start actually sending astronauts to the moon.[40] This is clearly the direction for implementation plans within 90 days in the EO that is needed to push this expensive project forward. In addition, the repeating of the direction from previous SPDs regarding nuclear power and propulsion highlights the administration's seriousness for this technology to not only be researched but actively deployed. The first term's attempt at demonstrating a nuclear thermal power and propulsion capability was through DARPA's DRACO project, which was cancelled in the last Biden Administration budget.[41] With a new directive, NASA is required to work with the Department of Energy and others to ensure that this technology is developed, demonstrated, and rapidly integrated into NASA exploratory strategy.[42] Given that China is pursuing integration of this technology for its exploration, economic and military purposes, the time is limited to stay in the lead with this capability for rapid space transportation and power through the inner solar system.[43]

From an economic standpoint, the President understands the vast potential of space for resources and commercial development. According to Morgan Stanley, the future space economy is expected to generate over $1.8 trillion in revenue for those that seize these resources and opportunities in cis-lunar space and beyond.[44] Rather than just call for greater partnerships in commercial space, this EO directs the investment of $50 billion into the federal budget to give the market a push. The implementation plan for this is also in short order with a plan required for 180 days.

From a military standpoint, this EO is a dramatic shift forward, remedying both the threats of space-based attack by intercontinental ballistic missiles or fractional orbital bombardment upon

the homeland, as well as addressing "countering" threats to American critical space infrastructure.

The highest profile of the national security space is the Golden Dome space-based missile defense system. Unlike the original EO directing the development and deployment of the system by 2028, the language in the second term is more tempered to be "demonstration" of the

weapons systems rather than full deployment.[45] Despite this apparent back-tracking, the integration of several existing efforts across the Space Development Agency, Missile Defense Agency, and Space Force (including the Proliferated Space Defense Architecture's missile warning, tracking, and communications layers) suggests the administration is not trying to build the entire system from scratch. Instead, it aims to leverage commercially available, mature capabilities that can be integrated into a broader architecture.[46] While this is possible, some experts think that such a system will not work, will cost too much, or will be destabilizing for international peace and security. These views appear to be carbon copies of the same arguments levied at President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative of the 1980s, which unlike Golden Dome, was only a research and development program and not a deployment effort.[47] However, as President Trump and his key advisor, Space Force General Guetlien, the technology is now available to make this a reality.[48]

Unfortunately, the EO uses ill-defined terms like "countering" when addressing threats posed by Chinese and Russian space forces which are inextricably linked to parts of national critical infrastructure. While this could mean that the Space Force and U.S. Space Command will be directed to develop and deploy real weapons capable of kinetic and non-kinetic operations and gain military space superiority, the open press statements are insufficient to draw a firm conclusion. This idea is further supported by the fact that the Space Force and U.S. Space Command was established without the capacity for military operations in, from, or to space beyond a handful of electromagnetic warfare jammers. So aside from the announced upgrades to these jammers via the Meadowlands effort, nothing has been publicly disclosed, demonstrated, or deployed.[49]

Why is this a concern? If space operations changes are being proposed to gain space superiority militarily, they require the active means to deny, degrade, or destroy adversary space warfighting and other infrastructure to ensure American freedom of action during conflict. As General Thomspon, the now retired former Vice Chief of the Space Force stated, "...we are attacked every day."[50] These attacks are low threshold and, in many cases, reversable upon key infrastructure like GPS, but they are attacks, nonetheless. As a nation we lack the ability to achieve military escalation dominance in space, especially as compared with China and Russia. Both are actively engaging us in orbit. Both are actively building infrastructure in cis-lunar space. Both have robust space forces which have demonstrated kinetic strike capabilities throughout all major earth orbits. We have not. Until we do, and presumably given the objectives for "space superiority" by the President that this is his objective, the United States will never achieve true space superiority when under constant threat of more equipped adversaries.[51]

While it appears the President understands this, until the Department of War creates the plan of military support for Executive Order 14369, this action will not be capable of achieving what it was ostensibly set out to do.

Finally, Executive Order 14369 must direct American presence in cislunar space across civil, economic, and military spheres. This has been an area of concern for over a decade by many commentators, strategists, and military leaders, but has been mostly ignored as a problem far into the future.[52] China has been building communications, navigation and other infrastructure in the lunar vicinity and between, and those can be used for exploration and military needs. The Biden

administration did not seem to push this concern forward in any great fashion as programs announced for such things as the creation of a lunar timing system, never moved beyond public articles.[53] This EO, however, shows something that has been argued by some for a while, real leadership in space requires that nation to be present in space. It requires capabilities and presence to shape the rules of international behavior in cis-lunar space. As former Executive Secretary of the National Space Council quoted Vice President Pence in a speech, "…we chose to lead in space because we know that the rules and values of space, like every great frontier, will be written by those who get there first…"[54] If we seek to ensure that it is freedom and liberty that reign in the cis-lunar economy, then, the argument goes, we must have presence and get there first. This EO from the President, appears to seek to do just that.

Conclusion

Executive Order 14369 marks a decisive repositioning of United States space policy toward an integrated framework that treats space as a critical domain of national power — blending exploration, commercial growth, defense imperatives, and technology leadership. Its ambitious timelines, security mandates, and institutional reforms reflect an administration intent on asserting U.S. dominance in the evolving space order.

Whether these policies yield sustained space superiority and address the requirements of strategic competition remains contingent on execution, interagency coordination, legislation, and diplomatic engagement with partners and adversaries alike. Regardless, it is a paradigm shift for American space policy for the 2020s and beyond.

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Kirk holds an MBA from Yale University and an M.S. in National Security Studies from the U.S. Naval War College. He has received numerous honors, including the Legion of Merit and the Forrestal Award, and continues to write, advise, and speak on nuclear deterrence, defense innovation, and emerging security challenges.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policies of the U.S. Government.

The Realist Awakening: Europe and the End of the Rules-Based Illusion

By
Kirk Fansher, Sr. Fellow

Published in NIDS Quarterly:

Introduction:

The liberal rules-based order was never more than realism dressed up for Washington cocktail parties and the salons of European capitals. Unfortunately, too many serious people came to believe in the illusion rather than reality. The rule-based order was not an alternative to power politics. Instead, it was a realist strategy designed to minimize friction under conditions of overwhelming American economic and military power.

For more than three decades after the Cold War, European leaders and, increasingly, European publics internalized the belief that the brutal mechanics of power had been tamed. Institutions, norms, and multilateral processes were treated, not as tools, but as substitutes for naked force. Security became a background assumption rather than a continuous obligation. Deterrence was something Europe possessed by inheritance, not something it actively sustained.

For Europe, "freeriding" became a liberal strategy for outsourcing security to subsidize rich social benefits, at little or no cost. The former colonial powers maintained the illusion of a past empire with global influence, strategic relevance, and access to the burgeoning economies of the global south. All was well. Realist goals aligned with global access to cheap labor, inputs to markets and the major economies. Everyone enjoyed cheap goods. It was illusion but it was a comfortable illusion people wanted to believe in without recognition that such illusions are only sustainable in times of plenty. At the margin, it collapses back into the sharp realist focus we see today.

The European liberal rules-based order did not collapse gracefully. When it finally cracked, as in Ukraine in 2022, it produced something close to strategic panic. European governments suddenly confronted the reality that the order they had treated as permanent was contingent, and that the enforcement mechanisms underpinning it were neither automatic nor cost-free. That panic has not vanished. It has been absorbed, managed, redistributed, and suppressed through rhetoric, moralization, and delay rather than resolved through clear strategic choice.

The liberal rule-based order worked, but not because norms displaced power. It worked because power enforced the norms. American military dominance and nuclear parity suppressed great-power rivalry, secured global trade routes, absorbed escalation risk, and allowed European politics to evolve as if coercion had been relegated to history. Liberalism functioned efficiently because realism and power were operating quietly underneath. As the underlying enforcement became selective, the structure above it began to unravel.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney captured the new reality in unusually blunt terms during remarks at the World Economic Forum in Davos, "A country that can't feed itself, fuel itself or defend itself, has few options. When the rules no longer protect you, you must protect yourself." The comment reflected a broader shift across Europe and North America. European governments increasingly speak about "strategic autonomy," industrial independence, and reducing reliance on the U.S.

The signs of tension are already visible across European policy circles. Officials discuss reducing purchases of American defense systems and building purely European alternatives. Commentators warn that the U.S. has become an unreliable partner. Energy debates frame American actions as destabilizing. Even routine disagreements now produce rhetoric that would have been unthinkable a decade ago. This reaction reflects more than frustration with a particular American administration. It reflects a deeper recognition that the strategic assumptions underlying Europe's post–Cold War security model are no longer stable.

The tension emerging across the Atlantic is not a temporary policy dispute but a structural divergence in interests. The rules-based order masked those differences for decades because the U.S. was willing to absorb the strategic risks required to sustain it. As that willingness becomes more selective, the divergence becomes visible. Future American administrations may attempt to smooth relations, but they cannot eliminate the underlying structural shift. At best they will place a carpet over a widening fissure in the floor of the transatlantic house and cover the crack rather than acknowledging that the foundation itself has moved.

The Strategic Subsidy

European security in the post-Cold War period functioned as a subsidized system. For much of the post-Cold War era, the liberal rule-based order functioned as a remarkably efficient system. It lowered friction in global trade, stabilized alliances, and integrated former adversaries into a shared economic framework. Western Europe rebuilt its economies, and global markets expanded dramatically. Between 1990 and 2019 global GDP more than tripled, driven by expanded trade and industrial integration.

NATO itself reflects this imbalance. Even today the U.S. accounts for roughly two-thirds of total NATO defense spending. For much of the post–Cold War period, many European members spent significantly less than the alliance's target of two percent of GDP on defense. The U.S. carried disproportionate responsibility across every critical domain: nuclear deterrence, conventional force projection, maritime security, intelligence, logistics, and escalation management.

Over time, what had begun as asymmetry hardened into expectation. Defense budgets declined. Strategic and heavy force structure atrophied. Naval capacity was reduced. The defense industrial base of Europe evaporated and was outsourced to the U.S. Political cultures adjusted based on the assumption that force was something managed elsewhere. The genuine cost of security was systematically underpriced because it was externalized.

Nowhere was this subsidy clearer than in the global commons. The security of maritime chokepoints, undersea infrastructure, and energy transit routes was treated as a guaranteed background condition rather than a strategic commitment. Insurance markets, shipping confidence, and energy pricing all implicitly assumed that the U.S. would continue to provide enforcement without explicit negotiation. The liberal rules-based order functioned as a market pricing mechanism that discounted security. This was not altruism. It was a bargain. Washington gained strategic influence and systemic stability, and Europe received security and prosperity at a discount. The system held if the U.S. benefitted disproportionately. But the U.S. leadership was a condition of subsidy not a product since the U.S. plainly did not trust Europe to not drive off the cliff yet again.

However, bargains built on asymmetric burden-sharing endure only so long as the party carrying the larger burden perceives the arrangement as a net beneficial agreement. As American strategic priorities evolve and its tolerance for open-ended exposure narrows, the subsidy becomes visible, and more importantly, politically unsustainable.

Panic as a Strategic Variable

Once the situation became apparent, the European response was immediate and visceral. The invasion of Ukraine further shattered the illusion that geography, norms, or economic integration alone could prevent large-scale war. European leaders vacillated between shock, moral outrage, and rhetorical resolve. For the first time in a generation, the possibility of sustained coercion on the continent returned to public consciousness.

That initial panic, however, was not followed by strategic consolidation. Instead, it fragmented. European politics shifted toward narrative management. They made affirmations of unity, declarations of resolve, and repeated invocations of values which substituted for the difficult risk decision making and sacrifice that was needed. Panic did not resolve and no strategy to build a lasting commitment to security was made.

Panic functions as a strategic indicator, not just an emotional reaction. How societies metabolize fear signals which options they view as politically feasible. Europe's panic is real and it was treated as something to be quieted rather than addressed. The result is a persistent dissonance between perceived danger and acceptable actions.

The Willingness Gap

The deepest constraint on Europe's strategic behavior is not material capability but political will. A recent Politico Europe poll reveals a consistent pattern, there is a limited willingness to bear direct personal or national costs for defense. Only a minority of Europeans express readiness to fight for their own country. Nearly two times that number indicate willingness to support in non-combat roles. A substantial share would neither resist nor remain, choosing to leave instead.

Support for defending "Europe" or assisting fellow European states remains relatively high. However, when costs of economic disruption, energy price increases, or escalation risks are specified, support declines sharply. The enthusiasm for collective defense proves conditional on sacrifice remaining hypothetical. This willingness gap shapes every downstream policy choice. It explains chronic underinvestment in defense, reluctance to secure the global commons, and discomfort with strategies that impose visible domestic costs. Escalation is acceptable when distant; it becomes intolerable when proximate. The political danger is not that European publics fail to perceive risk, but that they perceive it clearly enough to fear its implications and prefer avoidance over reckoning. In the context of deterrence, they view it as a technical architecture rather than a social contract requiring consent and sacrifice.

Ukraine and Diverging European-U.S. Incentives

The war in Ukraine exposed the structural divergence between European and American incentives. For Europe, prolonged conflict weakens Russia, ties down its military capacity, and reduces the likelihood of future coercion against the continent. From this perspective, escalation or attrition carries a strategic benefit. For the U.S., the payoff matrix is different. Prolonging the conflict increases the risk of nuclear escalation with a peer adversary while offering limited strategic value. Managing escalation, rather than maximizing pressure, becomes the rational approach. This dynamic long predates any single administration and reflects enduring nuclear realities. The result is consistent tension. Europe favors pressure, the U.S. favors control. The divergence is structural, not moral or political.

The Middle East, Iran, and Forced Alignment

In the Middle East, the incentive structure inverts. Preventing Iranian nuclear breakout remains a core American interest tied to nonproliferation credibility and regional stability. For Europe, the dominant concern is economic disruption. Energy markets, shipping insurance, and trade confidence respond immediately to instability in the Gulf.

Europe would prefer strategic neutrality as economic exposure makes neutrality impossible. Despite limited appetite and capacity to assert influence in regions historically linked with colonialism, Europe continues to depend on American enforcement. This alignment is driven primarily by necessity rather than ideological commitment.

Iran's recent use and signaling of intermediate-range ballistic missiles, as demonstrated near Diego Garcia, should have been a clear wake up call for European capitals. It indicates a longstanding Iranian strategy of inflicting pain on civilian infrastructure to coerce political outcomes. The signal is clear that those costs could be imposed on Europe as well. European responses have been to minimize the potential threat, treating it as exaggerated or unsustainable. This reflects political avoidance rather than analytical judgment, where Iraq demonstrated the capacity to threaten Europe. Now the threat has become limited, not because it lacks logic or because Europe changed its stance, but

because American pressure has degraded Iran's capacity to sustain escalation if they acted. Iran can disrupt episodically; it cannot endure prolonged enforcement pressure. Unlike Ukraine, it lacks strategic and economic depth.

Nuclear Deterrence and European Fragmentation

European discussions of a "European nuclear deterrent" reveal fragmentation rather than cohesion. French willingness to disperse elements of its nuclear posture beyond national territory is often framed as reassurance. It instead reflects the classic deterrence logic of survival through dispersal and redistribution of risk. By externalizing portions of its deterrent, France reduces the concentration of retaliatory damage on its own territory while increasing exposure for host nations. This is not a nuclear umbrella shading Europe from harm; it is nuclear entanglement that binds other states into nuclear deterrence without resolving command authority, doctrine, or public consent.

Rather than demonstrating unity, the discussions expose unresolved competition among European powers and divergent tolerance for risk. Moreover, the effectiveness of any collective deterrence posture relies on a level of cooperation that remains unsettled, as member states have yet to reconcile their strategic priorities and decision-making processes. This fragmentation is further complicated by the fact that current proposals do not adequately account for the obligations and frameworks established through existing agreements with the U.S., leaving critical questions about command authority, operational integration, and alliance commitments unanswered.

Conclusion

Europe is not experiencing a clean return to realism. It is living with the residue of an unresolved panic. The liberal rule-based order was successful because it optimized power under favorable conditions and it reshaped public expectations around permanent security without sacrifice. But the foundation to that order was always that the U.S. both bore the lion's share of costs and benefits.

The world order is changing, and the security conditions are eroding. As they do, Europe finds itself unable to remain neutral, unwilling to project power, and politically constrained from what genuine sovereignty requires. The danger is not abandonment of liberal ideals, but continued invocation of their language while avoiding the responsibilities that sustained them.

The liberal rules-based order did not abolish realism. It merely disguised and postponed it. The disguise failed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Sharpe is a senior national security communications and doctrine professional with more than two decades of experience bridging strategy, doctrine, and operations across the U.S. Air Force and professional military education enterprise. He is widely recognized for translating complex defense and deterrence concepts into clear, actionable narratives for leaders, warfighters, and policymakers.

He currently serves as an Air Force Doctrine Outreach Analyst at the Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, where he advises senior leaders on doctrine, wargaming, and lessons learned, and instructs Information Warfare professionals on integrating communication as a commander's operational capability. He is a key contributor to the Air Force Doctrine 2035 initiative, helping align future doctrine with emerging technologies including artificial intelligence, robotics, quantum sciences, and biotechnology.

Previously, Greg was Deputy Director for Digital Communications and Strategic Engagement at Air University, where he led strategic communication initiatives, directed institutional digital transformation, and expanded national-level visibility through conferences, outreach, and digital platforms. Earlier, he managed the Air University Research Information Management System (AURIMS), developing the Air Force's first secure, web-enabled research management system supporting PME institutions worldwide.

Throughout his career, Greg has focused on strengthening strategic narratives, integrating emerging technologies into education and outreach, and mentoring future leaders to think, communicate, and operate effectively in contested and competitive environments.

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Ghosts in the Supply Chain: AI Veiled in the New Statecraft's Invisible Edge

By
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Introduction

"Statecraft" sounds like an old word pulled from a dusty shelf, but it carries a modern weight that is anything but academic. It is the art and practice of how leaders use the instruments of national power to shape outcomes at home and abroad. Artificial intelligence (AI) now threads through every one of these instruments in ways that are powerful, opaque, and potentially destabilizing. AI systems help states see more, decide faster, persuade more precisely, and punish more quietly, which only heightens the stakes of how contemporary powers, especially China, practice economic and political statecraft today. Those same AI capabilities quietly support access to dual use technologies that can flow into defense networks and sustain overseas presence. Using the increased scale and speed of AI, a handful of trusted advisers- who once shaped a ruler's view of reality- can arm modern governments with models that process millions of signals in real time and quietly tip the balance toward escalation, passivity, or manipulation.

The long story of statecraft did not begin with the word itself. Long before anyone said "statecraft," rulers and councils managed surpluses, deployed envoys, cut deals, and raised armies. This built the habits of governance and influence that later thinkers would try to systematize in theory. Ancient bureaucracies and courts depended on scribes and counselors to collect and interpret information, advise rulers, and coordinate complex systems of rule. In a sense, those roles anticipated functions that AI now perform at machine speed; from digesting open-source data, to triaging diplomatic cables and predicting social unrest.

When the term "statecraft" appears in seventeenth-century English, it emerges in an environment already anxious about secrecy, intrigue, and reasons of state. Early modern debates over whether rulers could morally justify deception for the sake of security echo our current debates over AI assisted surveillance, predictive policing, and information control. Contemporary studies of "algorithmic statecraft" in China describe vast systems that draw on big data, facial recognition, and machine learning to manage internal security, allocate resources, and enforce social norms, in effect turning AI into a central nervous system for governance. The same tools that promise efficient administration also enable a level of persistent monitoring and preemptive intervention that earlier generations could barely imagine, with applications extending to scenarios that involve securing supply lines and infrastructure projects abroad. Commercial AI and hardware often create the pathways for those tools to support operational planning and logistics in remote areas.

Niccolò Machiavelli never wrote about neural networks, but his legacy looms over today's discussion of AI enabled power. In "The Prince" he urges rulers to be willing to deceive and coerce when necessary to secure the state, and he strips away the comforting idea that politics naturally aligns with conventional morality. Many states now use AI to scale precisely the kind

of manipulative practices that critics associate with Machiavellian politics. Generative models can flood information spaces with plausible narratives, deepfakes, and tailored propaganda, while microtargeting tools identify vulnerabilities in specific demographics. Analysts describe this shift as a movement from traditional information warfare to "algorithmic siege," where platforms and feeds become terrain that can be encircled, saturated, and slowly bent toward a desired perception of reality. The craft that Machiavelli observed in the intrigues of princes is being automated and weaponized in the timelines of citizens, resembling the ways used to maintain access to key materials and facilities.

Applied Statescraft

Economic statecraft is a crucial case. On paper, it appears as the use of trade, investment, finance, sanctions, and supply chain control to advance national objectives instead of resorting to kinetic force. In practice, AI allows states to saturate this space. It sorts vast datasets on trade flows, financial transactions, and corporate ownership to reveal hidden dependencies and chokepoints. It models how a tariff, export control, or port investment might affect global networks. It identifies which firms, politicians, or social groups are most exposed to economic pressure and therefore most likely to lobby for policy concessions. In parallel, AI not only empowers states, it is also finding ways to weaponize supply chains, developing coercive economic toolkits that increasingly depend on **finding choke points** (critical inputs, logistics nodes, dominant suppliers, corporate networks) that control and use export controls on critical minerals as coercive tools. It gives smaller actors the ability to orchestrate influence campaigns, cyberattacks, and targeted harassment at scales once reserved for major intelligence services, further complicating the statecraft landscape. Where economic ties provide cover for technology transfers, those actors can gain tools that support their reach.

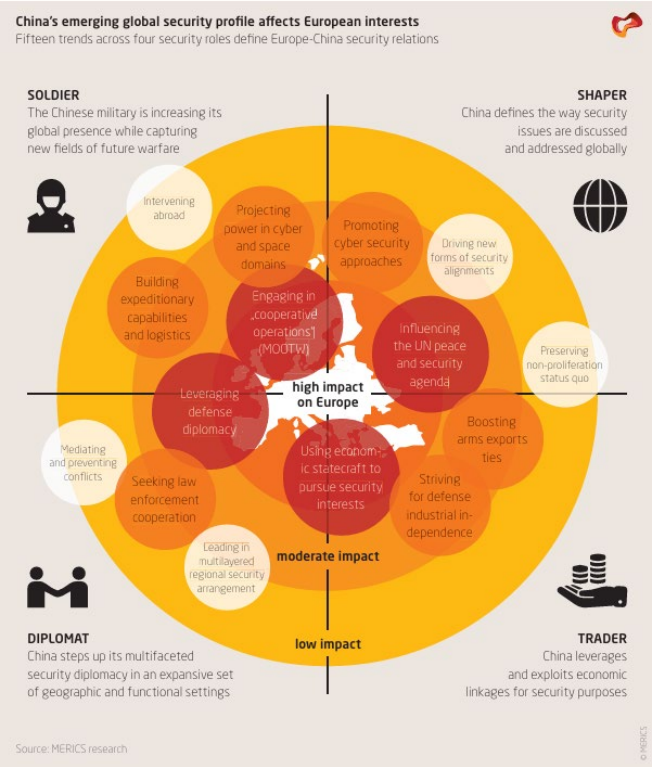


Figure 1-Image Courtesy of MERICS research

On the global scale, China has openly embedded AI into their techno-economic strategy across its industrial base and smart economy, creating feedback loops in which algorithmic tools both drive growth and sharpen the instruments of leverage that economic statecraft relies on, while occasionally supporting dual use hardware that can handle field operations or data relay in challenging environments. China's economic statecraft is not confined to the pursuit of profit or development. It also aims at political influence, strategic reach, and long-term advantage. AI

intensifies each of these aims. Where loans and infrastructure projects go, influence often follows, and AI powered risk scoring and sentiment analyses can help Chinese institutions decide where a dollar or a data center will produce the greatest diplomatic and narrative payoff. Tools that monitor social media and local media ecosystems can flag which foreign elites are receptive, which groups are skeptical, and which stories gai traction, allowing Chinese actors to adjust messaging and inducements with unusual precision. That level of insight does not guarantee success, but it changes the character of economic engagement, especially where projects create nodes that can process signals or host equipment for broader operational needs.

The strategic and military implications of AI powered statesmanship are equally significant. Ports, logistics hubs, fiber optic cables, and satellite ground stations funded or operated by Chinese firms already raised questions about access, surveillance, and contingency use. AI amplifies those concerns by enabling sophisticated pattern analysis, predictive maintenance, and traffic monitoring across infrastructure that sits at the intersection of commercial and strategic interests. Military planners around the world are also adopting AI for wargaming, targeting, and operational planning, compressing decision cycles in ways that can make economic disruptions, cyber operations, and gray zone activities more tightly synchronized with diplomatic and military signals. Economic channels sometimes quietly channel access to technologies that enhance those planning tools and sustain presence in distant locations.

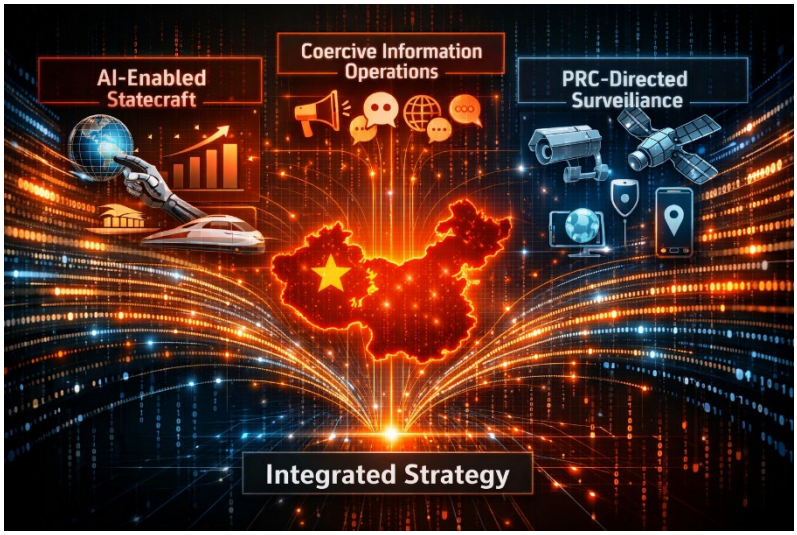
Information operations sit at the heart of this new statecraft. Governments and non-state actors use AI to generate and distribute tailored messages to mimic authentic voices in multiple languages and to probe the fault lines of adversary societies. Research on next-generation information warfare warns that generative AI is lowering the cost and raising the speed of disinformation campaigns, turning every major platform into a potential battleground where narratives about legitimacy, competence, and grievance are contested by bots and humans together. Adversaries do not need to create a single compelling narrative. They can simply drown audiences in conflicting micro-narratives, encouraging cynicism and paralysis.

AI is also affecting diplomatic relations and relationship strategies. AI systems help foreign ministries analyze video of international debates, summarize large volumes of reporting, and simulate negotiation outcomes. Experimental agents have demonstrated the ability to negotiate in complex games and to propose strategies that secure short-term advantages, although often with

a preference for deceptive tactics that raise ethical concerns. As tools like these integrate into diplomatic workflows, adversaries can use them to explore escalation ladders, evaluate different messaging strategies, and identify points where an opponent is likely to concede or overreact. This may improve the efficiency of bargaining, but it may also increase the temptations of manipulation and the risk that biased or brittle models push leaders toward miscalculation.

Risks And Rewards

The concerns that follow are not abstract. Studies of AI decision support in foreign policy have already found that certain models exhibit escalation-prone biases in crisis scenarios, particularly when trained on historical datasets that underrepresent restraint or informal de-escalation. If such systems are used uncritically in high-pressure or time sensitive environments, they could nudge advisors and leaders toward harder lines without anyone fully recognizing the source of that shift.



These developments should not lead us to reject statecraft as such, but they should push us to ask harder questions about what kind of AI-enabled statecraft we are willing to tolerate or practice. Norms are one starting point. What boundaries should apply to AI assisted economic coercion, information operations, and surveillance? At what point does a coordinated set of financial and cyber measures cross from legitimate pressure into an undeclared war on a society's basic functioning? Without shared language, purpose, and restraint, the logic of technological competition may propel rivals toward increasingly aggressive uses of AI that are difficult to roll back.

Transparency in the use of AI is yet another challenge. Domestic publics, and often partner states, rarely see the full extent of AI usage in surveillance, targeting, or influence operations, nor do they even know the conditions and data that is driving the results. Governments may be tempted to hide behind the technical opacity of models to avoid accountability for missteps. Yet democratic resilience depends on at least some candid discussion of the vulnerabilities that come with digital dependence and of the safeguards in place to prevent abuse. Silent integration of AI into statecraft will not remain invisible forever. When abuses surface, trust will be hard to rebuild.

Resilience and redundancy must evolve to reduce potentially dangerous outcomes. If AI-powered systems sit at the core of critical infrastructure, financial networks, and command and

control, then they also become targets for adversaries. States need to not only invest in hardening systems, but in preserving manual or low-tech fallback options that can sustain essential functions when algorithms fail or are compromised. The same is true in the information domain. States that rely entirely on automated filtering of information and intrusion detection will be highly vulnerable if those systems are bypassed or turned inward.

Finally, ethics and human judgment remain central. AI can model scenarios and propose options, but it cannot bear responsibility for the human costs of decisions. Policymakers will need to decide when and how to keep humans firmly "in the loop" for actions that carry serious moral weight, including economic measures that may harm vulnerable populations, information operations that may deepen polarization, and military actions that risk unwarranted escalation. The temptation to offload complex tradeoffs onto opaque systems is real, especially under time pressure, yet doing so could hollow out the very qualities of prudence and accountability that differentiated wise statecraft from mere manipulation seen in previous eras.

Conclusion

Statecraft began as an attempt to describe the craft of governing in a dangerous world. AI does not change the fundamental fact that people make choices about how to wield power. It does, however, change the tools in their hands, the speed of their decisions, and the reach of their influence. That combination is already visible in how adversaries conduct economic, informational, and diplomatic campaigns, and it will only expand as AI systems become more capable and more embedded. Readers and practitioners who seriously engage with AI will find few easy answers, but they will find an urgent agenda for discussion, regulation, and creative adaptation.

Confabulation makes the global situation worse, humans misunderstand how AI arrives at decisions, yet rely on it for coercive, nation-state statecraft. This invites a lethal mix of speed, authority, and error. Confident but false outputs can be mistaken for intelligence, driving sanctions, tariffs, blacklists, and influence campaigns on shaky or fabricated "evidence." At scale, errors still occur. AI misidentifies networks, targets, and intentions, triggering wrongful economic harm, diplomatic backlash, and escalation cycles based on events that might never have occurred. Worse, AI can launder coercion with a veneer of objectivity and provide plausible deniability for abuse. The result is amplified manipulation, weakened accountability, and collapsing trust across institutions.

Caveat emptor, "Let the buyer beware."


GLOBAL
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Techno-Economic power at the heart of the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy

By Christophe Bosquillon

The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) dropped on December 4th. The Secretary of War said: "Out with utopian idealism, in with hard-nosed realism." The NSS could even further be translated as "Out with neoconservative/neoliberal ideological mythologies, in with fiscally responsible, economy-driven geostrategic deterrence." The NSS bottom line is that America should remain an 800-pound gorilla but share global influence with the only other two major powers it recognizes, Russia and China.

The Western Hemisphere is the de facto core position for undisputed U.S. power, integrity, and uncompromising sovereignty. While the U.S. commitment to Europe remains, European nation-states must step up to the plate and take charge of funding and leadership of their own defense. The segment on "civilisational erasure" is directly aligned with the position already made explicit by Vice President JD Vance in early 2025 at the Paris artificial intelligence conference in France and the Munich Security Conference in Germany.

One of the most meaningful merits of the NSS is its call to reposition economic security, industrial renaissance, and technological leadership at the heart of the U.S. strategy to deter and prevail in the event of military conflict. The NSS refrains from mentioning "major power competition," opting instead for an acknowledgement of spheres of influence. The NSS does not antagonizes China, instead framing it as an economic and technological competitor, rather than an ideological one. Sustaining American reshoring, reindustrialization, industrial base funding, technological edge, manufacturing supply chains, and access to critical materials, is what underwrites how the U.S. deals with China, deterrence postures notwithstanding. A clear focus on economic competition allows the NSS to remain as vague as possible on the potential for military confrontations in the Indo-Pacific.

Economy, Industry, Technology

In the 2025 NSS, the terms "economy/economic" are used 66 times and "industry/industrial" 19 times, including under "industrial base," "industrial production," and "industrial supply chains." As for "technology/technological," they appear 17 times. The core meaning of a dozen such mentions is captured as follows:

U.S. military power and diplomatic influence rest on a strong, resilient domestic economy. National security depends on rebuilding America's industrial base, restoring economic self-reliance, and securing critical supply chains. Economic and technological competitiveness over the long term is essential to preventing conflict and sustaining global leadership. Further, the United States will actively protect its workers and firms from unfair economic practices.

American power requires an industrial sector able to meet both civilian and wartime production needs. Reindustrialization is a top national economic priority, aimed at strengthening the middle class and regaining control over production and supply chains. The U.S. will reshore manufacturing, attract investment, and expand domestic capacity, particularly in critical and emerging technologies. Hence a credible military depends on a robust and resilient defense industrial base.

Preserving merit, innovation, and technological leadership is essential to maintaining America's historic advantages. Strengthening the resilience of the U.S. technology ecosystem, especially in areas such as AI, is a national priority and a foundation of global leadership. Thus, long-term success in technological competition is central to deterrence and conflict prevention.

Economic Security First

The 2025 NSS references industries primarily through a national-security lens, rather than civilian market categorization, including defense (industrial base, munitions production, weapons systems manufacturing, military supply chains), manufacturing (re-shored industrial production, domestic manufacturing capacity, wartime and peacetime production), energy (oil, gas, coal, nuclear) and its infrastructure and exports, strategic supply chains (critical materials, components and parts manufacturing, logistics and production networks), infrastructure, both physical and digital to be built at industrial-scale, and strategic technologies.

The 2025 NSS strategic technologies are artificial intelligence, explicitly cited as a comparative U.S. advantage; other critical and emerging technologies such as dual-use and strategic technologies tied to national power; defense and military technologie integrated with industrial and innovation advantages; intelligence and surveillance technologies such as monitoring supply chains, vulnerabilities, and threats; cyber technology including espionage, theft, and protection of intellectual property; industrial and manufacturing technologies aiming at re-shoring, reindustrialization, and advanced manufacturing; energy technologies directly linked to economic and national security; and sensitive technologies protected via aligned export controls.

The 2025 NSS treats economic power, industrial superiority, and technological edge as inseparable pillars of national security. Technology is framed less as a civilian growth driver and more as a strategic asset, a competitive weapon, and a deterrence multiplier. Civilian industry is subordinated to national resilience, mobilization capacity, and deterrence, reinforcing the 2025 NSS's broader fusion of economic security, industrial policy, and military strategy. This constitutes an optimal response to the Chinese "civilian-military fusion" and "unrestricted warfare" model.

Space

While a mention of "space" appears only once on page 21 of the NSS, the second Trump administration published on December 18th an Executive Order *"Ensuring American Space Superiority"* prioritizing lunar basing and economic development by 2030 with a clear focus on Artemis, cislunar security as a theatre, and space nuclear power on a schedule. To secure U.S. assets and interests from Earth orbit through cislunar space to the Moon, integrating commercial capabilities into the defense complex, reforming acquisition, and modernizing the nation's military space architecture become paramount. Space traffic management and space situational awareness services are no longer solely provided by the U.S. government for free.

Repositioning the U.S. as an unrivalled economic-industrial-technological leader provides valuable opportunities to the Western Hemisphere and Indo-Pacific and Europe-Middle-East-Africa regions: "The goal is for our partner nations to build up their domestic economies, while an economically stronger and more sophisticated Western Hemisphere becomes an

increasingly attractive market for American commerce and investment." After 35 years of the West divorcing itself from Reality, we now face a technology-savvy tripolar world. The NSS, complemented by the Executive Order on Ensuring American Space Superiority, merely reflects a long overdue readjustment to 21st-century geopolitics. These are fundamentally the space, nuclear, and disruptive industries, focused in ways that achieve techno-strategic power.

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GLOBAL
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Iran's Missile-Drone Campaign and Its Implications for the United States' Deterrence

By
Tahir Mahmood Azad

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The ongoing conflict involving Iran, the United States, and Israel has produced one of the most significant case studies in the evolution of contemporary warfare. Iran, a state that lacks a competitive air force and possesses limited naval power, has demonstrated that ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and unmanned aerial systems can offset some conventional disadvantages and impose serious costs on technologically superior adversaries. This development is not confined to the battlefield. It represents a doctrinal shift with lasting implications for American deterrence strategy, allied defense planning, and the long-term viability of current U.S. force structures. Understanding what Iran has and has not achieved is essential for making sound policy going forward.

The Cost-Exchange Problem

At the operational level, Iran's most consequential contribution has been exposing a structural vulnerability in layered air defense: the cost-exchange dilemma. Systems such as Patriot, THAAD, and Iron Dome were engineered to intercept high-value ballistic and cruise missile threats. When deployed against coordinated waves of low-cost drones and short-range missiles, these systems are forced to expend interceptors valued at hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars per shot against threats that cost a fraction of that amount. The arithmetic is unsustainable at scale. As analysts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies have noted, saturation attacks can exhaust defensive inventories faster than replenishment is possible, creating windows of vulnerability that adversaries are quick to exploit. For the United States, this is not merely a technical problem, it is a strategic one that requires urgent attention in both procurement and doctrine.

The development of the Golden Dome missile defense architecture and expanded investment in directed energy and electronic warfare systems reflect growing official awareness that current interception models are not cost-competitive. These are necessary steps. However, technology alone cannot resolve a dilemma that is fundamentally about the economics of offense versus defense. Adversaries will adapt their tactics faster than procurement cycles can respond unless the U.S. also changes the strategic logic driving their calculations.

Attrition Without Decision: The Limits of the Iranian Model

The Iranian approach has imposed genuine costs on its adversaries, but it has not produced decisive military outcomes. This distinction is critical. Iran's missile and drone campaigns have disrupted logistics, strained defensive inventories, and created operational uncertainty. They have not, however, defeated U.S. or Israeli military power, seized or held territory, or forced a negotiated settlement on Iranian terms. The model is one of strategic attrition, not strategic victory. Survivability and persistence are not equivalent to effectiveness, and the broader narrative of a drone revolution rendering conventional military power obsolete requires significant qualification.

The claim that air superiority is no longer a necessary condition for strategic effectiveness also warrants scrutiny. Air superiority remains essential for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; for close air support of ground operations; and for denying adversaries freedom of movement. What Iran's campaign demonstrates is that a state without air superiority can still impose costs and delay adversary operations—not that air power has been rendered irrelevant. The bar for what air superiority can guarantee has been raised. Its strategic value, however, has not disappeared. Policymakers and analysts should resist the temptation to draw sweeping conclusions from a conflict that remains ongoing and whose full operational record is still emerging.

Implications for American Deterrence

The proliferation of precision strike capabilities across state and non-state actors undermines the assumption that technological overmatch alone is sufficient to deter conflict. When adversaries can field asymmetric capabilities that challenge U.S. and allied defenses at an acceptable cost to themselves, deterrence by denial becomes increasingly difficult to guarantee. The U.S. must prioritize cost-effective interception technologies, particularly directed energy weapons, that can neutralize mass drone and missile attacks without depleting high-value interceptor stocks. This is a resource allocation problem as much as it is an engineering one, and it demands serious engagement at the budgetary and strategic planning levels.

The Iranian model is also exportable, and this may prove to be its most consequential long-term dimension. States with limited defense budgets that are aligned with China or Russia can observe the operational lessons from this conflict and apply them in their own regional contexts. The proliferation of domestically produced or externally transferred missile and drone capabilities across the Middle East, South Asia, and the Indo-Pacific represents a compounding deterrence challenge. American extended deterrence commitments to allies in these regions will become harder to sustain if the cost-exchange problem is not structurally resolved. As Defense News reported, the proliferation of drone technology is already forcing militaries worldwide to reconsider their approach to air and missile defense.

There is also a crisis stability dimension that deserves serious attention. Rapid, sustained missile and drone strikes compress decision-making timelines and increase pressure for early, and potentially disproportionate, responses. In a multipolar environment where multiple actors possess similar strike capabilities, the risk of miscalculation is elevated. The U.S. should pursue updated arms control frameworks and diplomatic mechanisms to manage the proliferation of these systems alongside its technical and procurement investments. Deterrence cannot be reduced to hardware alone.

Conclusion

Iran's missile and drone campaign has not rewritten the principles of warfare, but it has exposed critical assumptions underpinning American deterrence in ways that cannot be ignored. Distributed, low-cost, high-impact systems are now accessible to a wider range of actors and the gap between offensive capability and defensive cost is widening. The United States requires a

deterrence posture that integrates cost-effective defense, credible offensive options, active non-proliferation diplomacy, and sustained alliance management. Meeting this challenge demands strategic adaptation across doctrine, procurement, and diplomacy, not simply an incremental increase in interceptor production.

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Is The Air Campaign Against Iran an Illegal Use of Force?

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Whenever the United States resorts to military force, the same question echoes through Washington and beyond: Did President Trump act within the law? Recent controversies surrounding the War Powers Resolution—especially the requirement to notify Congress—have only intensified that debate. This article steps aside from that familiar battleground. Instead, it asks a more fundamental constitutional question: would an air campaign against Iran be lawful under the United States Constitution? A careful reading suggests that the answer may well be yes.

There are two sections in Article I of the Constitution that address the authority to declare war. Clause 11 of Section 8 grants Congress the power to declare war, grant Letters of Marque and Reprisal, and make rules concerning capture on land and water. It is not the only provision that discusses war-making authority.

Clause 3 of Section 10, which is rarely mentioned in war powers discussions, deprives the states of the authority to maintain a standing army or navy, or to engage in war. It is the federal government's responsibility to provide for the nation's common defense, with two exceptions. First, Congress may permit states to possess these powers. Second, states may go to war if they are "actually invaded, or in such imminent danger as will not admit of delay."

War Powers Act of 1973

Using general legislative authority, as well as power granted to it from Article I, Section 8, Congress passed the War Powers Act in 1973. The Act came after frustration over the Korean War and the bombing campaign over Cambodia during the Vietnam War.

The Act creates several limitations on the President's abilities to make war and requires: 1) a declaration of war, 2) specific statutory authorization, or 3) a national emergency created by an attack upon the United States, its territories or possessions, or its armed forces.

"In every possible instance," the President is required to consult with Congress prior to beginning hostilities and do so within 48 hours. Congressional approval is needed if hostilities are to continue beyond 60 days.

From a prescriptivist perspective, there are compelling arguments that certain provisions of the Act may be unconstitutional. While some argue that Congress cannot delegate its authority to make war, others argue that the Act infringes on the President's duties as Commander in Chief. Article I, Section 10, creates exceptional circumstances for the exercise of war-making powers. Moreover, there is a strong textual argument that those powers expressly granted to the states inherently apply to the President.

Principles of Presidential War Powers

Using the two clauses of the Constitution referenced above, we can extract two principles regarding war-making authority: Consent of Congress and Imminent Danger.

1. Consent of Congress

Congress can consent in three ways. It can issue a formal declaration of war. It can also pass legislation to create conditions for the use of force. And it can give the Commander in Chief limited flexibility, as they did with the War Powers Act.

Alternatively, Congress can signal passive approval by not responding to the Presidential action at all. This last approach is controversial, but common sense and Supreme Court precedent suggest it is lawful. Moreover, Congress is the only body that can legally correct an unauthorized or undesired war. They can pass laws to restrict war-making authority, end a war, or use their impeachment power. When Congress chooses not to use these options, it is effectively granting passive consent.

2. Imminent Danger Exception

As stated in the preamble to the Constitution, the purpose of creating a constitution is to provide for the common defense of the people, among other goals. While Congress has the Article I power to declare war or legislate how the President can wage war, responsibilities are commingled. The President is the Commander in Chief per Article II, Section 2. One of the implied duties of heading the armed forces is directing them in a defensive attack or addressing imminent danger, which refers to an immediate threat that poses a risk of harm without prompt intervention. This is not a tangential power of the President, but a core constitutional power as well.

It would be ludicrous to suggest that the initial response to the War of 1812 was unauthorized because Congress could not meet to deliberate on a declaration. While it is clearly the primary duty of the federal government to repel invasion, it is also in the purview of the states to act when “actually invaded” or placed in “imminent danger.” The Founding Fathers clearly recognized the need for flexibility in responding to threats, especially in an era when communication delays were the norm. If the states are given such power in exceptional circumstances, certainly the Commander in Chief would have these powers.

What is peculiar is that the flexibility afforded to states is not restricted to times of invasion. An invasion is already an imminent danger. Neither is the exception in Section 10, Clause 3 restricted to actions on the sea for events such as intercepting a flotilla attempting to invade. It is easy to believe the Founders contemplated threats from their immediate borders with France, Britain, and Spain.

If a state had a border along a river, and an enemy nation started concentrating forces on the other bank of the river, one could argue the existence of imminent danger, especially in historic times where standing armies were statements in and of themselves.

How This Applies to Iran

There is clearly some lawful justification for offensive use of force when Congress does not provide express consent. Just War Theory and the preemption doctrine can be discussed all day long until we are blue in the face, without concluding whether the current use of force is theoretically justified. The answer is truly a matter of prudence and congressional will.

Using threats of imminent danger as justification *seems* to be a stretch in this scenario, particularly because many in positions of authority have hinted the imminence originates with Israel's decision to carry out strikes and the retaliation that would bring upon American forces within the region.

One can argue that the intent of the imminent danger exception in the Constitution is limited to public defense. The War Powers Act considers imminent danger to military forces. Say that the military came across evidence of a nation trying to repeat a USS Cole-style bombing. Retaliating against that nation or striking first to reduce their capability would be the prudent thing to do, and it would be a lawful use of force under the Constitution alone, regardless of what acts of Congress say.

It is also important to consider the specific moment used to assess whether the actions are lawful. At the start of a conflict, one might not actually be in immediate danger or have given consent. Nevertheless, arguing imminent danger becomes easier in the chaos of war, especially after the first shot is fired.

It is unknown what the actual intelligence is behind the scenes, nor is it known the veracity of public comments by members of the Administration and Congress. Some say it is about nuclear weapon production, preempting retaliation that would stem from Israel's strikes against Iran, retaliation for the alleged killings of thousands of Iranian civilians, or regime change. Others who are just as authoritative contradict these claims.

While there may be classified intelligence to the contrary, this is a rare instance in which the justification for the strikes has not been communicated to the public. Normally, the public is aware of escalating tensions and seeing the President or other officials give warnings or make demands before we see strikes. On the evening of March 3, 2026, many members of Congress took to social media to discuss their briefing on the conflict. Representatives Seth Magaziner and Stephen Lynch, Senator Richard Blumenthal, among others, indicated that the administration failed to articulate any justification, while most republicans stated support for the strikes.

Just as there is a fog of war, there is a fog of politics. Commentary is often on partisan lines; it is an election year, and members often vote against public statements, and to the chagrin of public opinion. It is also common for members to offer support privately and behind the scenes while publicly posturing against matters. What matters is what Congress does as a body. Congress has not yet revoked the President's war-making ability. Until they do so, they are at least providing passive consent for the President to use force against Iran. While some may find the prudence of

this conflict distasteful, until Congress votes otherwise, the war and that the President's actions are lawful per the Constitution itself.

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