We Own It, So We Can Break It

The Trump National Security Strategy 2025 as Skeleton Key

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Standing next to Volodymyr Zelensky days before the Nicolás Maduro extraction, Donald Trump asserted, "we're protected by a thing called the Atlantic Ocean." His statement sounded at once naïve and antiquarian in a globalized world of cyberattacks and US worldwide presence. But it is part of the hemispheric charge moving his National Security Strategy 2025 away from the China-centric anxieties voiced by his administration-in-waiting in Project 2025. The energy of that charge was on full display in the press conference following the Maduro extraction, Trump's asserting that he can do what he wants in his own backyard. Following the precision of the military execution, many have recited Colin Powell's famous Pottery Barn rule – "You break it, you own it" – but Trump morphed this to: "We own it, so we can break it." In addition to the hemispheric turn, the NSS provides keys to other elements of the administration's foreign policy, including relations with China, Russia, and Europe; recovery of dusty spheres-of-influence and balance-of-power talk; and the focus on "Western civilization" that became a through-line in Marco Rubio's Munich speech.

Trump's NSS insists that previous National Security Strategies have been "laundry lists of wishes or desired end states." Moving from that encyclopedic approach, the NSS states: "Not every country, region, issue, or cause – however worthy – can be the focus of American strategy." There may be times to act in distant parts of the globe, as evidenced by the missile strikes in Nigeria and increasing threats to Iran, but "leaping from that necessity to sustained attention to the periphery is a mistake." Hence, the NSS is shorter with fewer priorities. Hardly restrains Trump from ordering strikes against Iran, as made clear in the Maduro press conference, the US can strike anytime anywhere. Nevertheless, reducing strategic priorities mirrors Pete Hegseth's plans to reorganize the military's command to deemphasize certain areas of the world.

The NSS derides the nation's recent past to excavate its early history – typically a mythological past – for the administration's purposes. Regarding critical supply chains, the NSS turns to Hamilton: "As Alexander Hamilton argued in our republic's earliest days, the United States must never be dependent on any outside power for core components – from raw materials to parts to finished products – necessary to the nation's defense or economy." Evidently, tapping Hamilton's *Report on the Subject of Manufactures*, a tariff-preoccupied administration may also have been tempted to reference Hamilton's proposal for a 15% duty on fire arms. If it is odd to bring an eighteenth-century text into the context of Trump's desire to access critical minerals across the globe, we should read Hamilton, as often suggested, as a mercantilist – reading Hamilton's interest in Colbert, stage manager of Louis XIV's economy, into Trump's economics.

Trump's hemispheric turn

In its historical vein, the NSS announces the "'Trump Corollary' to the Monroe Doctrine [as] a common-sense and potent restoration of American power and priorities." Someone had done the requisite homework by turning not just to the Monroe Doctrine but also to the "Roosevelt Corollary" announced by Teddy Roosevelt in 1904. In the popular mind, the Monroe Doctrine represents US hemispheric hegemony, not identifying it as initially a compromise and ironically used by Grover Cleveland for a strong but still limited role in Latin America. Roosevelt created his corollary as fully interventionist. He wanted – fitting Hegseth's

cult of masculinity – an "essentially moral and essentially manly" version of the doctrine. It's also worth remembering that Roosevelt authored *The Winning of the West* and presided over atrocities in the Philippines. True to the Monroe Doctrine, with or without the corollary, the NSS insists on eliminating the influence of foreign powers in our hemisphere, calling for "a Hemisphere that remains free of hostile foreign incursion or ownership of key assets, and that supports critical supply chains; and we want to ensure our continued access to key strategic locations."

Serving as a prelude to Trump's obvious pride over a "Donroe Doctrine," the NSS articulates the turn to hemispheric thinking, or as articulated by Hegseth's National Defense Strategy 2026, a promise to "ensure that the Monroe Doctrine is upheld in our time." In the NSS regional coverage, the Western hemisphere comes first, preceding Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. The US, it explains, is blessed with an "enviable geography" but it can also make free use of the entire hemisphere. That goes far beyond the "re-hemisphering" of Project 2025 by bringing key industries closer to home for supply-chain purposes. Instead, a captive hemisphere is fully available to US economic interests. With the speed boats blown out of the water in the Caribbean as well as the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Gerald Ford and Coast Guard assets positioned in the Caribbean in line with Hegseth's DSS call for a "more suitable Coast Guard and Navy presence to control sea lanes." Indeed, Trump's announcement of an impractical "Golden Fleet" of Trump Class battleships, vulnerable to airborne attacks, reminds us of Teddy Roosevelt's "Great White Fleet" circumnavigating the world.

Clearly, Trump's moves in Latin America from economic support to benefit Argentina's Trumpian Javier Milei to his efforts to influence the election in Honduras show a desire for a Latin America in his image. The NSS is explicit: "We will reward and encourage the region's governments, political parties, and movements broadly aligned with our principles and strategy." This follows the history of the US in Latin America. Covert and overt activities in Latin America and the Caribbean are almost endless, including constant efforts to overthrow Latin American leaders, such as Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1947, Salvador Allende in Chile up to his death in 1973, and fighting the Sandinistas in Nicaragua – as well as instances of US forces training members of death squads in torture technique. Since the nineteenth century, US businesses were also involved in the oppression of local populations, including Ford's equipping Argentine's death squads with Ford Falcons.

With Trump's retraction of the US global footprint and new-found hemispheric focus, including the fever pitch over Greenland, we have returned to a past of spheres of influence, signaling to China and Russia the return to a multipolar world. We have, it seems, stepped into the world of Nazi theorist Carl Schmitt's *Grossraum*. There are no worries, as the Biden NSS 2022 expresses, about "powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy." Instead, the Trump NSS revives notions of "balance of power," and prescribes "work[ing] with allies and partners to maintain global and regional balances of power to prevent the emergence of dominant adversaries."

China's downgrade

China's loss of priority is striking, having appeared as the main threat in Project 2025, well beyond those posed by Russia, Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela. Project 2025 called for charting "a new path forward that recognizes Communist China as the defining threat to U.S. interests in the 21st century." Here, the NSS is a little coy. Before the section on the Asian region, China is an unnamed presence. For example, there's talk about "keeping the Indo-Pacific free and open" and regarding the Western Hemisphere, China is the prime unmentioned culprit in warnings about "Non-Hemispheric competitors who have made inroads into our Hemisphere." Clearly, the administration is circumspect since the tariff blowup.

China is, instead, viewed principally as an economic competitor. Regarding Taiwan, economics comes to the fore with its dominance of semiconductor manufacturing. In the same sentence, the NSS points to Taiwan's semiconductor production along with an acknowledgment that Taiwan provides "direct access to the Second Island Chain and splits Northeast and

Southeast Asia into two distinct theaters." The NSS also commits to build out the First Island Chain defenses. References to the two island chains assume foreign policy knowledge about their reflecting decades-old containment strategies.

Europe's civilizational challenge

In the European section, the war in Ukraine appears minimally, pressing for Europe's takeover of costs. Alongside misguided European policy elites' approach to the war, course correction is needed for Europe's departure from its historical roots. The document opposes any notion of "NATO as a perpetually expanding alliance" but also warns that "certain NATO members will become majority non-European." A challenge to the basis of NATO, "it is an open question whether they will view their place in the world, or their alliance with the United States, in the same way as those who signed the NATO charter."

Indeed, the focus on Europe is largely cultural, calling for "restoring Europe's civilizational self-confidence." The NSS is overtly racial, talking of the pattern of "civilizational erasure." In his January 21st Davos speech, Trump easily rolled into his observation that "certain places in Europe are not even recognizable, frankly, anymore, they're not recognizable." In a version of nation-building, the administration, the NSS asserts it will "work with aligned countries that want to restore their former greatness," desiring "unapologetic celebrations of European nations' individual character and history." As in the Western Hemisphere, the administration will pick favorites: "America encourages its political allies in Europe to promote this revival of spirit, and the growing influence of patriotic European parties indeed gives cause for great optimism." Trump's administration has demonstrated no embarrassment aligning with far right-wing parties in Europe and using, as the NSS does, replacement-theory talk about "cratering birthrates."

Values enunciated

Matching a call for Europeans to be unapologetic on culture, the NSS announces: "we will be unapologetic about our country's past and present." Advocating the Americanness of the nation, despite talk of economic spirit, most important is culture, wanting "the restoration and reinvigoration of American spiritual and cultural health." Following the domestic preoccupations of Project 2025, the goal of a golden-age cannot be reached "without growing numbers of strong, traditional families that raise healthy children."

Democratic values are nowhere. Trump's first term already abandoned human rights messaging. Similarly, the new NSS avoids "human rights." Dealing with other countries, the US should "seek good relations and peaceful commercial relations with the nations of the world without imposing on them democratic or other social change that differs widely from their traditions and histories." For the Middle East, the nation should drop "misguided experiment with hectoring these nations – especially the Gulf monarchies – into abandoning their traditions and historic forms of government." One shouldn't disparage Trump's friends in the Middle East, who can bestow a new Air Force One or fund Jared Kushner's investment funds. This is of a piece with the decision to pause enforcement of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act – eliminating prohibitions on US companies from making side payments to foreign governmental officials.

Making the world safe for US business is critical. The Western Hemisphere should become "an increasingly attractive market for American commerce and investment." Africa is essentially an afterthought where the US has too long "focused on providing, and later on spreading, liberal ideology." After listing African struggles that Trump could resolve as part of his Nobellust, the NSS asserts that the "United States should transition from an aid-focused relationship with Africa to a trade- and investment-focused relationship, favoring partnerships with capable, reliable states committed to opening their markets to U.S. goods and services." Prior administrations committed to fostering US economic fortunes in foreign policy. The multi-administration push towards globalization as part of the liberal international order undoubtedly brought vastly increased wealth disparity around the globe. In addition, prior administrations repeatedly sacrificed professed human rights goals – or serially

committed or abetted human rights violations – to obtain other goals, whether economic or geopolitical. But the Trump NSS clears the table of human rights and international aid priorities to focus on private wealth.

This is in line with Trump's talk of rare earth minerals in Greenland and oil in Venezuela. This didn't aid Marco Rubio's attempt to shoehorn the Maduro extraction into an exception from US compliance with international law as a law-enforcement arrest. Despite large numbers of aircraft, Rubio had stage-managed the extraction to follow a controversial 1989 memo drafted by Bill Barr opining there was no need to follow UN Charter Article 2(4) or customary international law when arresting individuals abroad. For many in the administration, the exact rationale is unimportant. Similarly, the changing rationales raised as Trump and Hegseth post boats blown out of the water finally matter very little. A read of the NSS with its strong hemispheric move provides some clarity to events despite ever-changing public justifications.

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