ORION FORUM

Why China May Be Emboldened by America's 2025 National Security Strategy

JANUARY 7, 2026

China is rapidly increasing its economic and military strength and asserting itself more aggressively on the world stage. Until President Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, China was careful to downplay its ambition and growing international power. Now, the country is a near-peer competitor of the United States military in the Asia-Pacific region and can compete with the United States economically almost anywhere in the world. In some areas, like renewable energy and electric vehicles, China is outperforming the United States.

China desires to dominate the parts of Asia it sees as vital to its national interests as well as be the largest influence in the parts of Asia it doesn't seek to control. That ambition is constrained by American power and the strong system of alliances that America maintains in the region. Nothing in the 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) indicates that the United States is ready to accept China's view of the future, and it's highly unlikely that the Trump Administration intended the document as anything other than a declaration of American strength. There are parts of the document, however, that may inadvertently encourage Chinese boldness by causing its leaders to favorably assess their ability to beat the United States in a regional competition for influence or in a military confrontation. Since the NSS is only the first of several documents that will chart the course of American military, economic, intelligence and foreign policy, the United States has an opportunity to send a well-defined message to the Chinese by using these documents to clarify its positions.

Continuity and Commitment

In many ways the NSS is a significant departure from earlier American approaches to grand strategy. It is not, however, a wholesale rejection of everything that's come before. In the section titled *What Do We Want Overall,* the NSS is clear that the United States will maintain the world's most powerful armed forces, sending a strong message to the Chinese that America intends to defeat them militarily if needed. Discussion in the same section about establishing control of American borders and combatting the entry of illegal drugs into the U.S. is a clear indication to the Chinese that the Trump administration is serious about addressing complex problems in decisive ways. The Chinese are likely to see this as a demonstration of American resolve, increasing the credibility of U.S. deterrence. It would be difficult for the Chinese to conclude that the Trump administration will shy away from action.

In the section titled *Deterring Military Threats,* the NSS is clear that America believes in maintaining the status quo regarding Taiwan. That policy statement was made real in December 2025 when the U.S. agreed to sell $11 billion of defense equipment to Taiwan. Language in the NSS, coupled with the continued sale of American arms, will encourage China to question its ability to attack Taiwan without causing an American response. The U.S. government's policy of strategic ambiguity around Taiwan, which deters China without locking the U.S into a specific course of action, remains intact.

The *Deterring Military Threats* section pushes America's allies in Asia to invest significantly more resources in defense. Rather than abandon allies to face China alone, the NSS remains committed to their importance and encourages them to become stronger. The *Asia* section talks explicitly about deepening ties with India, including as part of the "quad" alongside Australia, Japan and the United States. The *Asia* section is clear that the U.S. will work with allies and partners to prevent a single power from dominating the region. China will understand this as a continued American commitment to countering its influence and strategic goals in the region. Far from abandoning Asia and walking away from allies, the NSS assures the Chinese in plain language that America intends to remain engaged and present.

These declarations of American resolve and commitment are important reminders to China that it doesn't have a free hand in Asia. Other parts of the NSS, however, may inadvertently undermine the intent of the document and make American resolve less clear.

American Pullback

The first page of the NSS rejects the idea that the United States seeks to be the dominant power everywhere in the world. This is a change from earlier American thinking that believed there were advantages to maintaining preeminence everywhere on Earth. Without exhaustively defining which countries or regions the United States is comfortable not dominating, China may decide to search for the answer on its own. It could do this through increased interference in the internal affairs of other nations, by the employment of coercive tactics like blockades and quarantines, or by direct military action. During the Cold War the Soviet Union knew that the United States would oppose its actions everywhere. The 2025 NSS seems to have traded that certainty for ambiguity over which parts of the world, and under what circumstances, America would feel compelled to engage.

Chinese Expansion Seems Congruent With "What America Wants"

In the section titled *What Should the United States Want,* the NSS identifies twelve things America desires. These range from maintaining the most powerful military and the world's strongest economy to encouraging a cultural and spiritual revival at home. While none of the twelve goals are attainable if China dominates the world, all of them are attainable even if China significantly increases its influence over world affairs, including by seizing Taiwan. Because none of the twelve goals address anything like supporting like-minded nations, facilitating the establishment and maintenance of democracy, or resemble in any way John F. Kennedy's assurance that America would support any friend and oppose any foe, China may conclude that many of its interests are congruent with American aims, and pursue these interests with increased vigor.

Of the five issues addressed in the *What does America want from the world* section of the NSS, only a brief mention of America's interest in a "free and open" Indo-Pacific might indicate to the Chinese that its goals aren't congruent with our interests. Even then, the "free and open" phrase is ambiguous enough that China may believe it can significantly increase its economic and military domination of the region so long as it gives regional access on acceptable terms to American companies. Nothing in this section defines a "free and open" Indo-Pacific as one made up of many fully sovereign states, let alone democratic states, with the power to deny

China the ability to set their individual policies and agendas. China might calculate from the NSS that the US would accept a Chinese sphere of influence in Asia if the existence of that sphere didn't impede America's access to markets. The likelihood that China draws this conclusion is bolstered by language in *The Strategy* section that accepts the exercise of outsize influence by large and wealthy nations as a "timeless truth" of international relations. China is large and wealthy and since it now knows the United States expects it to possess "outsize influence," it may be encouraged to probe the meaning of this phrase through increasingly aggressive actions.

China's Omission from "Protection of Core Rights and Liberties"

The few mentions of human and political rights in the NSS are concentrated in the section *Protection of Core Rights and Liberties*. This section is devoid of the types of concerns traditionally raised by the U.S. government regarding China and instead focuses on domestic government overreach and the behavior of countries "that share, or say they share [American principles]". This may encourage China to conclude that American attention on human and political rights has shifted toward Europe and to America's democratic allies and away from authoritarian regimes. China may feel emboldened to ratchet up its domestic political oppression and bolster dictatorial regimes around the world since nowhere does the NSS express concern about Chinese abuses or the abuses perpetrated by countries under Chinese influence.

Doubt About American Resolve When Allies Are Not Properly "Burden Sharing"

In *The Burden Sharing and Burden Shifting* section, the NSS is clear that America is ready to help those nations who take on a bigger responsibility for their own security and align their export controls with American interests. This leaves room for the Chinese to assume that countries that fail to meet American standards for defense spending, or who continue to trade in ways that are misaligned with American economic desires, may be left to fend for themselves in the event of a political or military conflict with China. Whereas America's commitment to allies was once viewed as sacrosanct, it may now appear to the Chinese to be conditional, causing them to push the boundaries of their influence especially when they assess the United States is unhappy with a particular country's trade policies or its level of

expenditures on defense.

American Acceptance of China's Dominance of Green Technologies

In the *Energy Dominance* section, the NSS rejects what it calls "climate change" and "net zero" ideologies in favor of what must be assumed to be a focus on fossil fuel production and export. The implied dismissal of alternate energy, especially solar and wind, may encourage China to invest more heavily in this sector because it sees a chance to dominate a growing world market without having to compete with American innovation. Even if the U.S. rejects the development of domestic solar and wind power, other parts of the world continue to implement the technologies. China may assess its dominance of the sector as another way to expand its global influence by creating dependencies on its economy that are useful politically. What Middle Eastern countries were previously able to accomplish by dominating oil production China may seek to recreate with green technologies.

The Weight of American Debt

The NSS is explicit about the need to maintain American economic strength, especially its strength in financial markets. The NSS fails to mention, however, the seriousness of America's debt problem and the threat historically high levels of debt pose to the financial vitality of the United States. China may conclude that America remains uncommitted to addressing its large imbalance between spending and revenue, a conclusion that would offer another data point for China as it assesses its own long-term prospects against those of the United States. If China views America as a declining power, its willingness to confront the United States at some point in the future may increase, and drive expanding defense preparedness today. An expanding Chinese military creates momentum for action that may at some point be difficult for the United States to contain.

Focusing Closer to Home

The NSS focuses American attention on the Western Hemisphere in a way that hasn't existed for decades or more. Because the document is so clear about laying out the limitations of American power, the focus on the Western Hemisphere may encourage the Chinese to believe that the U.S. will invest fewer of its limited resources to counter their actions in Asia. The

reinvigoration of the Monroe Doctrine in the NSS, and its expansion into economics with the Trump Corollary, indicates the Western Hemisphere exists within America's sphere of influence. China may conclude, especially when it reads the Western Hemisphere portion of the document alongside other parts of the document that acknowledge large countries are entitled to outsize global influence, that America would accept a similar Chinese sphere of influence in Asia. If so, the borders of that sphere aren't determined by the NSS, but China may be encouraged to begin looking for these boundaries and speaking more explicitly about the areas in Asia it seeks to control.

Prioritizing State Sovereignty and Self-Interest

China may interpret the heavy focus in the NSS on state-sovereignty and self-interest as advantageous to its approach to international relations. China has traditionally been more willing than the United States to look the other way on human rights abuses, environmental degradation, and bribery of government officials and local elites. An international system that allows countries to mostly do what they want may be interpreted favorably by the Chinese. If every country is expected to act in its own interest, and that interest is often decided in undemocratic ways that don't broadly benefit societies, China may decide that it's approach to international affairs has been validated and redouble its efforts to win favor with government officials and other elites at the expense of populations in general. This could increase China's international influence in key regions, especially in the short-term before the effects of their policies can lead to generalized instability and resistance to Chinese activities. China may conclude from the NSS that America intends to adopt a similar playbook for international affairs while recognizing that American public opinion and a divided Congress make it difficult for the United States to ever act as decisively or be as ruthless as China on the world stage. America's pledge in the NSS to accept non-democratic forms of government as legitimate rather than transitory may also encourage China to bolster its support for authoritarian regimes.

The Two-Sided Nature of Leverage

The prominent mention of using "leverage" to achieve American objectives, an idea expressed six times in the document, may give the Chinese room to improve their global relationships.

Since the U.S. is explicitly saying that it intends to use its size and power to get what it wants from smaller countries, China could present itself as the more reliable and more productive partner.

The Diminishing Importance of the American Market

The United States remains a critical export destination for Chinese goods and access to its market is important to the Chinese economy. Access is not as important, however, as it once was. In the *Leading from a Position of Strength* section, the NSS points out that exports to the United States now account for 2% of China's GDP, down from 4% in 2017. In the same section the NSS acknowledges that China exports four times more to low-income countries than it does to the United States. Until America is prepared to replace these Chinese goods, or convince countries to purchase them elsewhere, its ability to influence China's economic well-being will be significant but not decisive.

An Opening to Weaken America's Alliances

China will note that the NSS is explicit in saying the U.S. does not have the ability to dominate the world, and, in the Asia section of the document, note the importance America places on working with allies. Understanding the significance of U.S. alliances, China may see an opportunity to leverage the generally unsettled nature of America's international relationships and its widespread employment of tariffs to undermine the strength of these alliances. Nothing in the NSS suggests the United States plans to change course in how it engages with allies or uses tariffs, which China may conclude is an opportunity to drive wedges between America and its allies in the year ahead.

Insufficient Power to Defend the First Island Chain

In the section *Deterring Military Threats*, the NSS talks about building an American military capable of "denying aggression" anywhere in the first island chain. It does not explicitly state that the United States already possesses a military capable of achieving that end. China may conclude that the slow pace of American military procurement, especially its deficiencies in shipbuilding, exacerbated by the realignment of military power to the Western Hemisphere called for by the NSS, means it has time to act in Asia before the United States is ready to

respond.

Focusing on Commercial Freedom of Navigation

In the section *Deterring Military Threats,* the NSS discusses the importance of Taiwan and control of the South China Sea largely in terms of international shipping, noting that American cargo might be subjected to "tolls" if the area were dominated by a foreign power. China may conclude this American concern can be reconciled to its own territorial ambitions simply by assuring the United States in the form of a trade agreement that American shipping will be free to transit the South China Sea. Because the NSS is mostly silent on other reasons why the United States would want to maintain an independent Taiwan and influence over the South China Sea, China may conclude it can achieve its ends and still provide the United States what it wants regionally.

A Major Shift in Addressing Allies and Russia

In the section *Promoting European Greatness,* the NSS criticizes America's allies in Europe but does not condemn Russia for its invasion and continued aggression in Ukraine. America's desire for peace in Europe is not tied to any overarching ideological goal. China may interpret America's drive for peace only as a means to achieve stability and open the region for American investment and trade. The peace sought by the document is untethered from traditional American concerns like human rights and political freedom, which may encourage China to believe it can give the United States what it wants and still achieve its ends in Asia. If America is satisfied with a European peace that leaves Russia in a strong position vis-à-vis its neighbors, China may conclude that if Asia is stable and trade is possible, America will accept Chinese military aggression against its neighbors, or at least quickly forgive that aggression after the cessation of hostilities.

Conclusion

The 2025 NSS is one of several documents that will chart the course of America's national security policy in the year ahead. Its prioritization of a strong U.S. military is important, but parts of the document may embolden the Chinese to act in ways the United States does not intend. These parts can be clarified for Beijing's benefit by government statements or by the

policy documents set to be released in the months ahead.

**image credit:* VOA.

Orion Policy Institute (OPI) is an independent, non-profit, tax-exempt think tank focusing on a broad range of issues at the local, national, and global levels. OPI does not take institutional policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions represented herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of OPI.