

What should we want?

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The publication of the National Security Strategy (NSS) of the United States of America in the first week of December '25 has generated a significant volume of reactions and content. Analysts and commentators have put out a wide range of interpretations on the positions stated in the Strategy and its medium to long term espoused or implied impact and effects. The document has caused both a flood of analysis and commentary within the security circles and an uproar across the political spectrum. The wording and language of the Strategy certainly stand out in terms of clarity and in terms of a somewhat paradoxical combination of strong language and familiar tone. Throughout the text one has the sense of cohesion around the figure of the charismatic leader, showing unity and resolve to the outside world. The striking element, in terms of clarity, conciseness and rationality is the fundamental question:

“What Should the United States Want?”

This question can be placed at the core of the Strategy and defines all subsequent standpoints. One might add that the essence of this question is the founding block for every nation state. European nations should not shy away from asking the same key question.

Europe and Eurocentrism

Europe has nurtured and relied upon the stance shaped by the last decades of peace loving, economic interdependence, rooted in the belief that interdependencies and globalisation maintain peace. But as we have seen, in a world that promotes interdependency as a means for upholding peace, compromise can creep in and become an eroding mechanism for core values.

Europe is now in a place of asking how much and how fast can she do for the regional defence, how fast can she step in and fill up the gap left by an eventual US reorientation towards the Pacific. In doing so it remains anchored in a fundamentally reactive mode. And in terms of security, this reliance can quickly be affected by domino effects. Europe must transition away from the mentality and position of filling in the gaps left by a US withdrawal from the region



as a focal point of attention. Europe can no longer ask “What can we do?” but must move fast from “What can we want?” to “What should we want?” and “What *must* we want?”.

And should the US not change course? Would Europe do nothing in terms of own defence capacities? Not as fast? Not to maximum capacity? The answer to the Question *What Should we want?* – as it is expressed in the NSS – does not come as reaction to what other actors do first, but boils down first and foremost to the interests of one’s own state. This remains the reflection of the old belief that there are no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, only permanent interests. The changes in the geopolitical landscape from the last years attest to this. And it is from this stand point that answer must be given to the fundamental question:

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Using a focused definition of national interest – as the US NSS proposes - shapes future actions and choices, just as putting a certain geographic region at the centre of a map shifts the vision one gets over the world. The NSS overtly declares: [we are] “unapologetic about our country’s past and present”. In this, a revisit of the long criticized Eurocentrism – would sharpen European focus and interest. The US NSS starts with naming and detailing the perceived threats to its interests, both internally and externally, as well as geographic areas of increasing and decreasing interest. In doing so it places its interest at the centre of the world map, and defines and re-defines areas of interest and recalibrates those areas’ weight depending on its own view of the world, placing oneself at the centre.

In Europe, we have grown accustomed in purposefully making the pieces of the European puzzle fit together in a multidimensional construction. The European project itself, since its very beginning, required constant political and economic effort to coagulate and maintain and has recently seen threats to its stability both from outside its borders as well as from within. The Eurocentric view of the world, long criticized as a manifestation of imperialism, has de facto been replaced by an integrational supranational construction, internally requiring constant negotiation and alignment, at times facing proposals of “a two speed” or “multiple speed” Europe, while externally engaging in trade, negotiation and multilateral diplomacy. While focusing on this coagulation, shifting global power structures have changed the world power balance. With several states having achieved the status of near peer adversaries in the military



field, and/or the capabilities that balance each other out in economic or natural resources, the international context is marked by a higher level of potential global conflict. In this context, having a clear vision of one's own position in global affairs and the will and capabilities to obtain and maintain that position is essential. It is thus not only a matter of capabilities, but also one of intent and choice. This is where the key question of the US NSS – *What should we want?* signals proactive or first mover position on the world stage, defining first the will to which one can best put one's capabilities to use. Faced with the same question – What should we want? - can Europe answer the question in a single voice?

Military capabilities

Answering this question in one voice in the defence and security fields is that more challenging for Europe, seen how defence remains bound to national mandates and contributions to supranational structures remain voluntary. This particular challenge is reflected in the speed of negotiations regarding raising national expenditure for defence to 5% within NATO, as well as by differences in the contributions of nation states made towards the defence of Ukraine. The creation of a military Schengen space that would enable smoother movement of troops and equipment across Europe would contribute to streamlining these collective capabilities. Yet, the need for such an initiative underlines the challenges at hand.

Power projection remains essential. I have made the case before that deterrence and power projection require determination and unapologetically assumption of ones' position on the world stage (Popa. 2025). One should not be apologetic about one's own forces and capabilities. The US NSS has a clear stance on this, stating one should not be apologetic about lethality of its forces and capabilities. Yes, deterrence must be visible in order to be effective. Yet, the focus here is on will and intent, not capabilities:

“We *want* to recruit, train, equip, and field the world's most powerful, lethal, and technologically advanced military to protect our interests, deter wars, and—if necessary—win them quickly and decisively, with the lowest possible casualties to our forces.” (US White House, 2025: 3, emphasis added).

In Europe, France and the United Kingdom display will and capabilities for extending their defence capabilities towards the wider region, with repeated public messaging on military capabilities, developments and readiness used as deterrence. While France chooses to



purposefully not disclose her full nuclear capabilities as part of her deterrence strategy, the United Kingdom, through recent publications on Defence Capabilities and – equally if not more so – Defence Strategy – also signals deterrence and will for engaging in the security of its region and proximity – Europe. Not for nothing has the UK recently been characterised as Russia’s new main adversary.

As a final remark, the following fragment from Book 1 – Milestones to Disaster – from Churchill’s account on the Second World War - stands out in relation to its relevance for today’s talks about the security in Europe, about timing, signalling resolve and deterrence and what Europe is ready to do in regards to declared commitments of support for Ukraine and for ensuring security on its Eastern flank:

“Moreover, how could we protect Poland and make good of our guarantee? [...] Here is a line of milestones to disaster. Here is a catalogue of surrenders, at first when all was easy and later when things were harder, to the ever-growing German power. [...] Here was decision at last, taken at the worst possible moment and on the least satisfactory ground, which must surely lead to the slaughter of tens of millions of people. Here was the righteous cause deliberately and with a refinement of inverted artistry committed to mortal battle after its assets and advantages had been so improvidently squandered.

Still, if you will not fight for the right when you can easily win without bloodshed, if you will not fight when your victory will be sure and not too costly, you may come to the moment when you will have to fight with all the odds against you and only a precarious chance of survival. There may even be a worst case. You may have to fight when there is no hope of victory, because it is better to perish than to leave as slaves.”

Churchill, 2022: 144-145.



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About the author.

Diana Popa has over 17 years of experience in research and academia and has authored numerous reports and scientific articles. Recent research and analysis focus on resilience as part of defence programmes, emerging disruptive technologies, in particular Artificial Intelligence in high risk areas, including defence.

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