



PRESIDENT TRUMP'S NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE US-PHILIPPINES ALLIANCE

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President Donald Trump has unveiled his [National Security Strategy \(NSS\)](#). The NSS underscores the need for a “strong America” in preserving [a rules-based international order](#). It identifies security threats including politico-economic and military challenges posed by China and Russia, nuclear provocations from Iran and North Korea, terror attacks from ISIS and Al Qaeda, and disruptions posed by transnational criminal organizations. In addressing these security concerns, the NSS highlights the importance of cooperating with allies and partners.

Consistent with Trump's “America First” foreign policy, the NSS reiterates the principles of economic reciprocity and burden-sharing in confronting common threats as elements of cooperation. While the NSS outlines Trump's vision for asserting America's continuing role in regional security affairs, it may also portend a diminishing level of US security commitment to its allies and partners. It is therefore essential to analyze what the NSS may imply for America's oldest ally in the Pacific.

Trump's strategy and America's superpower status

The NSS can be seen as a policy reasserting America's superpower status in an evolving global security environment. To remain a superpower, the US must continue to exercise distinct capabilities, which according to [Barry Buzan and Ole Waever](#) include: 1) maintaining an economy that can support the exercise of a first-class military capability with global reach; and 2) influencing other states to accept this superpower status in both rhetoric and behavior. As

evidenced by the NSS, Trump intends to address challenges to the US status as the sole superpower and the capabilities mentioned above figure prominently in the vital national interests identified in the NSS. To wit: 1) protect the American people, the homeland, and the American way of life; 2) promote American prosperity; 3) preserve peace through strength; and 4) advance American influence. As a superpower, the US must also be actively involved in the [securitization](#) process of most if not all regions. Serving this purpose, Trump's NSS includes ample discussions on implementing US strategy in different regions, including the “Indo-Pacific.”

Indo-Pacific and the US-Philippines alliance

The US-Philippines alliance will be significantly influenced by Washington's security interests and priorities in the Indo-Pacific. Three regional security issues identified in the NSS may shape security engagements between the allies: 1) China's assertiveness, 2) North Korea's nuclear provocations, and 3) the rise of terrorism and radical extremism. Mindful of the concern over China's intention to displace the US from the Indo-Pacific, the NSS argues that China's artificial islands and military facilities in the South China Sea (SCS) “endanger the free flow of trade, threaten the sovereignty of other nations, and undermine regional stability.” Highlighting North Korea's nuclear provocations as a global threat, the NSS underscores that Pyongyang is “rapidly accelerating its cyber, nuclear, and ballistic missile programs.” Meanwhile, the NSS warns that “jihadist terrorists [from the Middle East] are likely to return to their home countries” to plot and launch attacks against the US and its allies.

Trump's NSS identifies the following priority actions: 1) promoting regional cooperation to maintain free and open seaways and support the peaceful

resolution of disputes; 2) cooperating with allies and partners to achieve complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean peninsula; and 3) improving law enforcement, defense, and intelligence cooperation with Southeast Asian partners to address the growing terrorist threat. As can be gleaned from these priorities, the focus of the NSS on concerted efforts presupposes a US security commitment to allies and partners. As a result, while Trump's NSS reiterates transactional principles of economic reciprocity and burden-sharing in confronting common threats, the possibility of a diminishing US security commitment to the Philippines seems unlikely.

This can be explained by the apparent complementarity of NSS priority actions and the current thrusts of the US-Philippines alliance. The Joint Statement of President Trump and President Duterte at the [US-Philippines Bilateral Meeting 2017](#) and the Joint Press Statement of US and Philippine Senior Defense and Foreign Affairs Officials at the [Bilateral Strategic Dialogue 2017](#), state that the allies remain committed to: 1) promoting collaboration in maritime security and upholding the freedom of navigation and overflight as well as the exercise of self-restraint; 2) calling upon North Korea to comply with UN Security Council Resolutions and working together for Pyongyang's complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization; and 3) enhancing counterterrorism cooperation through additional exercises and increased information sharing.

New opportunities

Trump's NSS also offers opportunities to enhance the alliance. First, it promotes increased quadrilateral cooperation between and among the US, Japan, Australia, and India. It must be underscored that the Philippines also has defense and security ties with [Japan](#), [Australia](#), and [India](#). Indeed, linking US allies and partners may provide a strategic advantage for the US-Philippines alliance in addressing future traditional and nontraditional security concerns such as a more assertive China in the South China Sea or a major terrorist attack similar to the Marawi Siege. Second, the NSS calls upon allies to "modernize, acquire necessary capabilities, improve readiness, expand the size of their forces, and affirm the political will to win." At the same time, the Strategy seeks to incentivize companies to invest in developing countries. Together with the future establishment of the [Philippine Government Arsenal Industrial](#)

[Defense Estate](#), these actions could strengthen the alliance through joint initiatives in the defense industry.

Continuing relevance of the US-Philippines alliance

As the United States attempts to reassert its superpower status through its new strategy, its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific remain a critical component. As I have argued [elsewhere](#), the system of US alliances and security partnerships underpins its capacity to penetrate the [East Asian Regional Security Complex](#), which if left unchecked may alter the global balance of power. Highlighting the geostrategic role of the Philippines in this system, President Trump noted that the Philippines is a "[prime piece of real estate from a military standpoint](#)." Auspiciously for the US-Philippines alliance, more than an enduring military alignment cemented by the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty and other related agreements, the complementarity and opportunities offered by President Trump's National Security Strategy may re-energize security engagements between the two countries.

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