

**НАЦИОНАЛНА СИГУРНОСТ
NATIONAL SECURITY**

**REALISM FIRST? REALIST AND LIBERAL LOGICS IN THE 2025
U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY**

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Abstract: *The United States National Security Strategy (NSS), published in November 2025, outlines the US assessment of the international security environment and its strategic priorities. This article analyzes how realist and liberal theories are reflected in the document. Using qualitative document analysis, the NSS is viewed as a political text carrying assumptions about power, sovereignty, cooperation and norms. Realism and liberalism are applied across four analytical categories: (1) threat perception, (2) the role of the state and sovereignty, (3) cooperation and institutions and (4) norms and values. The findings indicate that these theoretical logics are used hierarchically rather than symmetrically. Realist assumptions about power, strategic competition and national interest are the foundation of the NSS, while liberal elements such as cooperation, institutions and norms are employed instrumentally. Overall, the strategy reflects a realist orientation with selectively applied liberal elements.*

Keywords: *US National Security Strategy; Strategic Competition; Realism and Liberalism; Alliances and Institutions; Security Policy Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Published in November 2025, the United States National Security Strategy (NSS) provides an authoritative assessment of the international security environment from the US perspective. It determines the strategic priorities and directs the US security policy as its core doctrinal document. The NSS has two functions: on the one hand, it performs an internal coordinating role as a guideline and on the other hand, it has an external signaling function. It communicates threat perceptions and strategic intentions, makes normative claims to domestic institutions and shapes expectations about US behavior in the international system, which is especially interesting for allies and potential adversaries (NSS 2025, pp. 3–4).

The 2025 NSS is developed in the context of intensified geopolitical rivalries, expanding economic and technological competition and increased levels of skepticism towards international institutions and arrangements. Responding to these developments, the strategy places strong emphasis on national resilience, state power and strategic autonomy. Nonetheless, it simultaneously reaffirms US commitments to alliances, partnerships and international norms (NSS 2025, p. 5 and 17). This dual approach shows the field of tension in the current US security discourse between the poles of competition and cooperation, as well as between sovereignty and interdependence.

National security strategies in general can be understood as states' condensed responses to perceived systemic pressures and tensions. These responses form their strategic principles. Instead of being neutral descriptions of reality, national security strategies construct narratives and often implicitly showcase underlying theoretical and practical assumptions about international politics. Therefore, the NSS provides an insightful empirical basis to examine how different theoretical logics in the field of International Relations are used and combined in an official strategy paper.

Hence, this article examines how realist and liberal theories are used in the November 2025 NSS and which of these ultimately represents its strategic core. This paper does not treat realism and liberalism as incompatible theoretical frameworks, but utilizes them as heuristic lenses to identify dominant patterns in threat perception, sovereignty, normative framing and cooperation. The focus on a single strategy document ensures a concentrated and policy-relevant assessment of the theoretical orientation of the 2025 NSS, without engaging in lengthy theoretical discussions or extended comparisons.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article makes use of a qualitative document analysis to examine the 2025 NSS. This is an appropriate method for the study of strategic policy texts, as these documents are intentionally used by states to communicate priorities, legitimize policy choices and influence interpretations and perceptions of the international security environment.

Accordingly, this analysis approaches the NSS as a purposeful political document that contains underlying assumptions about international order, power relations, threat perception and cooperation. Hence, it uses an interpretive approach which focuses on reoccurring themes, argumentative structures, patterns of justification and implicit hierarchies of ideas and not quantitative coding techniques. This approach makes it possible to identify dominant theoretical logics within the NSS, while deliberately avoiding strong empirical claims.

The analytical framework consists of the two main traditions of International Relations theory: realism and liberalism (Gold and McGlinchey 2017, pp. 46–49). Realism emphasizes that states' priorities are power, survival and security in an anarchic system (Savu 2021, pp. 22–24). International politics is viewed as a competition between self-interested states (Donnelly 2005, pp. 30–32). Therefore, the more relative power a state has, the higher its hierarchy in the international order: enforcing demands or ensuring national security becomes easier (Jensen 2023, pp. 18–19). By contrast, liberalism's core assumption is that state behavior is shaped and controlled through interdependence (Saaïda 2024, pp. 4–5). It is seen as a result of shared norms and values, economic ties and international cooperation via supranational institutions (Burchill 2005, pp. 57–61 and 64). This interdependence increases the cost of aggression and therefore stabilizes state relations: the higher the level of integration and cooperation, the higher the security in the international order (Navari 2023, pp. 37, 42 and 48).

On this basis, four analytical categories are developed and used to structure the analysis of the NSS: (1) threat perception and strategic competition, (2) the role of the state, sovereignty and national interest, (3) cooperation and international institutions and (4) norms and values. These categories aim to summarize realist and liberal theories. The NSS and its relevant passages were analyzed considering how these categories are framed, discussed and prioritized within the overall strategic narrative. The analysis primarily relies on close reading and interpretation of the context. It does not test hypotheses or assess policy outcomes.

RESULTS

The qualitative analysis of the 2025 NSS reveals a clear and consistent pattern in how elements of realism and liberalism are combined. They are integrated in a clearly prioritized way and do not compete with each other on the same level. This hierarchy is not presented explicitly in the NSS, yet it becomes apparent when the document's language, priorities, and justifications are read in relation to one another rather than in isolation. Across all four defined analytical categories, realist assumptions are the foundation and give strategic direction in the document. This is most notable in assumptions related to power, competition, sovereignty and national interest (NSS 2025, p. 3–4, 23–24). Liberal concepts like cooperation, institutions and norms are present and often emphasized, but used in a way to support the competitive logic of the strategy: liberal ideas are incorporated, yet they do not shape the realist argument (NSS 2025, p. 5). Overall, the NSS appears to integrate theoretical approaches in a structured and deliberate way, instead of reflecting a contradictory mix of ideas. The following paragraphs dig deeper into the four defined analytical categories.

(1) Threat perception and strategic competition

The NSS describes the international security environment primarily as one that is defined by intensified strategic competition. Rival states are viewed as the main sources of insecurity. The strategy emphasizes the competition in the fields of military, technology and economy (NSS 2025, pp. 20, 23, 26). Global politics is presented as being shaped by fights over influence and relative advantage, not by cooperative problem-solving (NSS 2025, pp. 24, 27). Trans-national challenges, like cyber threats, emerging technologies, and supply chain vulnerabilities, are interpreted through

a state-centered perspective and are linked to larger patterns of geopolitical rivalries (NSS 2025, pp. 13–14). This framing reflects a realist view of international politics as a competitive arena, which is driven by power relations, deterrence, and strategic positioning.

(2) The role of the state, sovereignty and national interest

A second central finding is the strong emphasis on the state and national sovereignty in the NSS. It identifies the United States as the primary and ultimate guarantor of its national security (NSS 2025, pp. 3, 6–7). Protecting the US population, territory, and national interests is presented as the core responsibility of the government (NSS 2025, pp. 8–11). Therefore, national interest is the foundation and guideline of the US strategic decision-making. Although cooperation with partners is encouraged, international commitments are viewed as conditional and instrumental. They are not viewed as binding constraints (NSS 2025, pp. 10, 17). As a consequence, unilateral action from the US is justified when their national interests are at stake.

(3) Cooperation and international institutions

Alliances, partnerships and international institutions play a prominent role in the NSS. Long-standing alliances like NATO are reaffirmed as key elements of US security policy, but often with demand for adjustments (NSS 2025, pp. 6, 10, 12). Cooperation with allies needs to benefit the US, for example through military deterrence, balanced trade and increased collective resilience (NSS 2025, pp. 17–19). Therefore, cooperation is mostly interpreted as instrumental instead of having inherent value. Institutions are viewed as vehicles for states to increase their political influence: the focus is deterrence, burden-sharing and an increased US influence. Institutions are not regarded as independent authorities that are able to restrict state behavior (NSS 2025, pp. 12, 22). Cooperation appears as a tool for ensuring national power within a competitive international environment, rather than alternative to competition itself.

(4) Norms and values

Norms and values like democracy, human or civil rights, and a rules-based international order are mentioned and indeed emphasized throughout the NSS. These values are presented as central to US identity and foreign policy. Nonetheless, the US is not interested in “exporting” democratic values to states with different viewpoints. In this way, norms and values are mainly a strategic asset to attract foreign investments or to further the US interests. They are not constraints that can override considerations of power and national interest (NSS 2025, pp. 9, 12, 16, 26–27, 29).

Summary of findings

Across all analytical categories there is a pattern in the NSS: a consistent emphasis on autonomy, strength, relative power and security. Liberal elements are not treated as independent sources of authority: they appear selectively, primarily when they reinforce deterrence, credibility, or influence. This indicates that the core of the 2025 NSS is realist, liberal concepts are used to strengthen the realist approach. As a result, there is no competition between theoretical approaches, but a clear hierarchy: realism first, liberalism second. Table 1 summarizes the core findings of the analysis and illustrates the hierarchical integration of realist and liberal logics across the four analytical categories.

Table 1. Realist and Liberal Logics in the 2025 NSS

Analytical category	Dominant logic	Empirical findings
(1) Threat perception and strategic competition	Realism	Security environment framed as state-based strategic rivalry
(2) The role of the state, sovereignty and national interest	Realism	National interest prioritized, fundamental political unit defined as the nation-state
(3) Cooperation and international institutions	Instrumental liberalism	Alliances as force multipliers, not constraints
(4) Norms and values	Muted liberal rhetoric, realist function	Values framed as strategic assets in competition

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the 2025 NSS indicates that realist and liberal logics are not treated equally. Instead, the document shows a clear hierarchy in which liberal concepts are integrated into a predominantly realist framework. Although concepts like cooperation, institutions and norms are discussed and featured in the strategy, they are embedded in realist assumptions about power, competition, and national interest. This shows an understanding of realism and liberalism not as competing theories, but as complementary heuristic perspectives.

From a realist point of view, the NSS is closely aligned with main assumptions about the anarchic international system and the important role of the state as the main security actor. Realism views international politics as an area in which states try to ensure their survival and relative advantage under uncertain or insecure conditions. The NSS emphasizes this logic highlighting great-power competition, deterrence and autonomy. Even when addressing non-traditional challenges like migration, the concept of power and security are predominant. This reinforces the realist orientation of the strategy.

At the same time, the NSS uses elements commonly in liberal theory. Liberalism highlights the potential of cooperation, views institutions as system stabilizers and treats norms and interdependence as deterrents to conflict. In the NSS, alliances, partnerships and supranational institutions are presented as important to the US security. However, their function is instrumental: institutions are valued for their capability to enhance deterrence, share burdens and multiply influence of the US. This reflects the realist standpoint that institutions are a tool for advancing national interests and do not possess the ability to constrain state behavior or have autonomous authority.

The treatment of norms and values shows the hierarchical relationship: democracy, human or civil rights and a rules-based international order are mentioned, yet they are framed as potential strategic advantages and a source of legitimacy. Norms are not meant to be binding constraints, but tools to increase influence. Therefore, norms are not viewed as superior values that can transform state behavior: they are instruments to legitimize strategic priorities.

Overall, the NSS shows that liberal language can be integrated into a fundamentally realist strategy without changing the realist framework. This could be interpreted as strategic pragmatism, as this strategy is not a scientific paper on distinguishing theories in International Relations. The observable hierarchy in the NSS emphasizes the continued relevance of realism for explaining state behavior, but also the importance of liberal elements. This holds even from a mainly realist point of view.

CONCLUSION

This article examines the 2025 NSS through the analytical frameworks of realism and liberalism. Using a qualitative document analysis, it shows that the strategic core of the NSS is predominantly influenced by realist assumptions: power, geopolitical rivalry, sovereignty and the importance of national interest and security are main considerations. Although liberal elements like cooperation, international institutions and norms are articulated, they are primarily used as

tools to support the realist orientation of the strategy.

The findings show that the NSS employs a hierarchical integration of these two theoretical logics rather than a balanced synthesis. Realism is the framework within which strategic priorities are formulated, while liberal concepts are incorporated when it suits the realist logic: Alliances and institutions are viewed as power multipliers and norms and values are stated as sources of influence within an explicitly competitive international environment. International commitments of the US are reaffirmed, but only if they are practical for the US interests.

The article contributes to policy-oriented security studies in two ways. First, it offers an early, theory-driven assessment of the 2025 NSS without relying on lengthy theoretical comparisons or extensive empirical evidence. Second, it shows how classical International Relations theories can be employed for the analysis of current security strategies within a limited scope. Further research could explore how these strategic logics are translated into policy practice or how the 2025 NSS compares with earlier strategies to showcase changes or continuations.

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РЕАЛИЗМЪТ НА ПЪРВО МЯСТО? РЕАЛИСТИЧНА И ЛИБЕРАЛНА ЛОГИКА В СТРАТЕГИЯТА ЗА НАЦИОНАЛНА СИГУРНОСТ НА САЩ ЗА 2025 Г.

Резюме: Стратегията за национална сигурност (ЧНС) на Съединените щати, публикувана през ноември 2025 г., очертава оценката на САЩ за международната среда за сигурност и нейните стратегически приоритети. Тази статия анализира как реалистичните и либералните теории

са отразени в документа. Използвайки качествен анализ на документа, СНС се разглежда като политически текст, съдържащ предположения за властта, суверенитета, сътрудничеството и нормите. Реализмът и либерализмът се прилагат в четири аналитични категории: (1) възприемане на заплахите, (2) ролята на държавата и суверенитета, (3) сътрудничество и институции и (4) норми и ценности. Резултатите показват, че тези теоретични логики се използват по-скоро йерархично, отколкото симетрично. Реалистичните предположения за властта, стратегическата конкуренция и националния интерес са в основата на СНС, докато либералните елементи, като сътрудничество, институции и норми, се използват инструментално. Като цяло стратегията отразява реалистична ориентация с избирателно прилагани либерални елементи.

Ключови думи: Стратегия за национална сигурност на САЩ; стратегическа конкуренция; реализъм и либерализъм; алианси и институции; анализ на политиката за сигурност

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