

Reading the US National Security Strategy with Strategic Maturity

Why treating Washington's new doctrine as a baseline—not an insult—can make Europe more geopolitically mature.

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Executive summary

The new United States National Security Strategy (NSS) has triggered strong reactions across Europe. It portrays Europe as demographically fragile, overregulated, weakened by migration and “civilisational” drift, and calls on Europeans to assume more responsibility for their own security while the US reprioritises its own hemisphere. This is abrasive, and in places inaccurate. But for serious European policymakers, the NSS should be read first of all as a clarified US baseline: a condensed selfportrait of how Washington currently understands its interests, priorities and limits.

Treating the NSS purely as an insult is emotionally understandable but strategically selfdefeating. Europe cannot change Washington’s selfdefinition by reacting to the language. What it can do is to (1) understand that definition clearly, (2) use the shock to clarify Europe’s own strategic baseline, and (3) engage the US from a position of greater coherence and responsibility. In a world of polycrisis and accelerating technological change, that is what geopolitics between adults—rather than clients—looks like.

This article argues for three moves. First, Europe should read the NSS as the US putting its cards on the table, not as a verdict on Europe’s worth. Second, Europe should draw on its own existing strategies to restate, in concise form, what it already stands for: security and resilience; shared prosperity and social cohesion; human dignity and democracy; and planetary responsibility. Third, Europe should recognise the catalytic challenges of the NSS: it forces Europeans to decide what they stand for, where they want to be dependent or autonomous, which behaviours from partners they will accept, and what kind of influence they want to have in the world.

If the European Union and its member states use this moment well, the NSS shock can mark the end of a long phase of strategic dependence and ambiguity. It can become the starting point for a more balanced transatlantic partnership and for a wider “great rebalancing” of the global system—one in which each major bloc acts from a clearer sense of selfinterest while accepting that their ultimate interests converge on a world that is liveable and humane for all. The window for action is limited: swift, coherent response signals strategic seriousness; hesitation confirms dependency.

1. Introduction: from shock to strategic reading

The publication of the new US National Security Strategy (NSS) has landed in a Europe already strained by war on its borders, energy and inflation shocks, increasing fiscal constraints, migration pressures and internal political fragmentation. Its language on Europe's "civilisational" trajectory, migration and alleged decline has understandably triggered strong emotional reactions, disbelief and defensiveness in European capitals.

It is tempting to respond with moral outrage or wounded pride. Yet such reactions would only reinforce the perception that the EU is in denial about the negative consequences of the path it is taking—at least as seen from this administration's vantage point. For policymakers, this would also be a missed opportunity. The NSS is first and foremost an official statement of how Washington now sees the world, its own role, and its allies and adversaries: whom it will aim to influence and by which means, what it will accept and where its red lines lie.

Europe does not have to agree with this view to recognise its importance. A strategically mature response begins by treating the document as a clarified US baseline, then using that clarity to define Europe's own.

The purpose of this article is not to defend, endorse, or refute the NSS, but to analyse it factually and to show how Europe can transform this moment of discomfort into a catalyst for greater internal strategic coherence and selfreliance, as well as for a more mature transatlantic exchange. Such an exchange should be grounded in transparent mutual baselines: each actor clearly articulating its own strategic identity, acknowledging the other's, and subsequently identifying areas of sensitivity, cooperation, influence, and potential convergence.

The aim is not merely to enhance transactional cooperation in accordance with the implicit worldview that underpins the NSS and shapes Washington's preferred modality of greatpower interaction. By adopting a posture of strategic and intellectual maturity—marked by humility, reflexivity, and respect but no fear—Europe can assume a convening role in initiating a muchneeded deeper global dialogue on how to address the systemic, interrelated crises of the emerging polycrisis. These are challenges the NSSworldview neither fully confronts nor is equipped to resolve, yet they remain decisive for the future stability of global civilisation.

This transformation demands not only new paradigms, worldviews, and institutional frameworks, but above all a renewed ethos of interaction—one that respects each actor's identity, culture, aspirations and interests while engaging them as responsible contributors to a shared planetary future and as partners in fostering healthier, more accountable forms of development within their respective stages of societal evolution. Paradoxically, such an approach would also create the conditions for the United States to evolve its own strategic outlook—not by pressure or persuasion, but through the gradual pull of a more balanced, integrative, and futureoriented model of engagement as global citizens with a shared destiny and responsibility for the future of humanity.

2. What the NSS is – and what it says about Europe

The NSS formalises a strategic shift that has been emerging in US politics for some time. It marks a deliberate break with the interventionist policies of the past, concluding that efforts to remake the

world in America's image—through ideological projects or moral universalism—have been neither desirable nor effective. It argues that assuming responsibility for solving global problems has often proven counterproductive, both for the United States and for others, and that promoting inclusivity or liberal values without sensitivity to context has at times produced distortions such as weakening social cohesion, spreading ideologically driven monocultural mindsets under the banner of diversity, and destabilising societies through unmanaged migration.

In response, the document recentres “America First” as a reestablishment of ground rules for engagement. It emphasises sovereignty, the importance of cultural identity, border security, economic and technological resilience, and renewed attention to the Western Hemisphere, while grounding foreign policy in the principle of “peace through strength” and a more transactional approach to alliances and institutions.

Within this framework, Europe is portrayed in unvarnished terms. Washington depicts parts of the continent as suffering from demographic decline, internal fragmentation, and growing disconnection between political elites and public sentiment—particularly concerning issues such as migration, social transformation, and the war in Ukraine. It presents Europe as strong in rhetoric, moral posturing and regulatory activism but limited in strategic resolve and delivery on security, competitiveness or innovation. It suggests that Europe's approach remains overly ideological and insufficiently pragmatic, and that European leaders too often neglect the material aspirations of their citizens, who primarily seek stability and prosperity.

The NSS also conveys frustration with what it perceives as Europe's continued dependence on US security guarantees while simultaneously resisting or criticising American strategic choices.

The tone of these assessments is sharp, echoing more populist and transactional language, yet it reflects genuine strategic concerns: the stability and competitiveness of Europe, its capacity for selfdefence, and its coherence as a global actor. The underlying message is that a stronger, more selfreliant, and less moralising Europe is in America's interest because such a partner could help stabilise the broader international order and open pathways for pragmatic cooperation—including rebuilding Ukraine and redefining relations with Russia.

What the NSS overlooks, however, are Europe's distinctive strengths: its longterm commitment to human dignity and social justice, its normative power grounded in legal and democratic standards, its capacity to build consensus across diverse societies, and its proven ability to transform competition into rulesbased cooperation.

Whether one agrees with Washington's analysis or not, the key point remains that this document codifies the United States' selfperception—its current story about who it is, what it aspires to, what it can accept and fears, and what it is prepared to do. Europe can reject that story, but it cannot afford to ignore it.

3. Europe's first reactions – and why they are not enough

Initial European reactions have largely focused on tone. Leaders and commentators have pushed back against the language of “civilisational decline” and migration, reiterated the value of the transatlantic bond, and highlighted Europe's substantial contributions in Ukraine and beyond. Many

have tended to dismiss the NSS as a temporary aberration linked to the current US administration—something to be waited out until Washington eventually returns to a familiar postCold War consensus—rather than recognising it as the consolidation of a deeper strategic shift.

These responses are understandable, yet they remain reactive. They do little to alter the underlying dynamic in which Washington sets the conceptual vocabulary while Europe replies with either endorsement or indignation. Such exchanges reinforce rather than rebalance the relationship. They also risk confirming one of the NSS's implicit claims: that Europe excels at signalling but falters when it comes to hard strategic choices and sustained implementation.

If Europe's answer to the NSS stops at expressions of shock, reassurance, or moral distancing, it will have missed a rare opportunity to redefine itself in a rapidly changing international order. A more constructive stance begins by acknowledging that the United States, like any major power, has the right to articulate its own strategic baseline—and that Europe must now have the maturity and confidence to articulate its own.

4. Treating the NSS as a baseline, not a verdict

A more constructive way to read the NSS is to view it as a baseline rather than a verdict. Each major bloc—the United States, the European Union, China, Russia, and others—can be seen as a conscious and intelligent agent: a collective actor shaped by its history, culture, identity, and institutions, with its own mode of perception, reasoning, and selfinterest within the global system. Each of these agents naturally seeks to advance what it perceives as its legitimate interests, formed through its experiences, fears, and capabilities. Yet actors that take their own longterm survival seriously also understand that sustainable peace and prosperity can only emerge when the pursuit of selfinterest contributes to the greater good. Because the major challenges of our age are global in nature, this logic demands the inclusion of all actors and provides the foundation for genuine dialogue and cooperation.

The NSS can thus be read as the United States stating, in effect: “Here is how we currently define our interests, threats, and priorities; here is how we see our allies and rivals; here are our boundaries and areas of flexibility.” The key question for Europe is not, “How dare they say this about us?” but rather, “What does this reveal about how Washington intends to act, and how should we respond from our own centre of agency?” This also entails understanding the deeper layers beneath the US position—its sensitivities, historical traumas, red lines, blind spots, and opportunities for joint evolution.

This calls for two essential moves. First, Europe must grasp the American baseline lucidly—without wishful thinking, defensiveness, or caricature. Second, it must articulate its own baseline with equal clarity, drawing on existing strategic frameworks but making the choices it has too often postponed. Only on that basis can a mature transatlantic dialogue emerge—one capable of managing differences and advancing cooperation on shared global challenges.

5. What Europe already stands for: four clear pillars

Europe does not start from a blank page. The EU Global Strategy, the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, and other key documents already articulate a distinctive European combination of

interests and principles. Viewed together—and through a developmental lens—four core pillars emerge.

First, security and resilience. The Global Strategy commits the Union to promote peace and guarantee the security of its citizens and territory, while the Strategic Compass outlines tangible steps to strengthen defence, counter hybrid and cyber threats, and enhance crisis response. The NSS views Europe as weak in this domain, signalling that the era in which Europe could outsource hard security has ended. The war in Ukraine confirms this conclusion. Europe's task now is to consolidate credible defensive capacities—particularly in asymmetric and hybrid warfare—capable of deterring aggression by increasing both the costs and uncertainties for potential aggressors.

Second, shared prosperity and social cohesion. Europe's social market model—anchored in welfare systems, public services, and a commitment to social balance—remains central to its identity and soft power. EU strategies link internal prosperity to an open, rulesbased global economy and to the Sustainable Development Goals. The NSS, however, sees this model under strain: a shrinking middle class, widening inequality, and fraying social cohesion threaten Europe's stability from within. These ambitions remain laudable but require renewal. A sustainable model of inclusivity must balance rights with responsibilities, fostering both individual agency and social solidarity. Moreover, such cohesion increasingly depends on global cooperation, which in turn requires Europe to view inclusivity through a more integrative lens—one that recognises interdependence as the foundation of longterm prosperity.

Third, human dignity, democracy, and the rule of law. EU external action consistently places human rights and democratic governance at its core. The NSS criticises the way these values and standards are promoted abroad as a form of ideological overreach that can complicate trade and political relationships with other states. At the same time, inconsistency in upholding its own standards undermines Europe's moral credibility and feeds perceptions of hypocrisy or neocolonialism. Yet these ideals remain fundamental to Europe's identity and legitimacy. To sustain them, Europe must move from declarative advocacy to credible example—from exporting values to embodying them in balanced partnerships that respect cultural context, uphold fairness, and integrate ethics with pragmatism. In a world of polycrisis, such credibility is not only a moral asset but a strategic one.

Fourth, planetary responsibility and longterm stewardship. The EU's commitment to climate neutrality, biodiversity, and the global commons reflects an understanding that environmental sustainability is a strategic imperative, not merely a moral preference. The NSS portrays these ambitions as burdensome or ideologically driven, arguing that they risk diverting attention from immediate economic and security realities. Yet precisely because planetary stability underpins all other dimensions of security and prosperity, Europe must continue this course—while making it more pragmatic, innovationdriven, and globally inclusive. To succeed, environmental leadership must evolve from regulatory moralism to partnershipbased transformation, aligning ecological responsibility with competitiveness and technological progress.

Taken together, these pillars demonstrate that Europe already has a coherent strategic foundation. The challenge is not to redefine its purpose, but to operationalise it—by translating established principles into priorities, building the necessary capabilities, and synchronising policy across institutions and member states. Only by aligning what it stands for with how it acts can Europe

strengthen its credibility, resilience, and influence in a world defined by interdependence and competition.

6. What the NSS forces Europe to clarify

The NSS does more than signal Washington's intentions; it confronts Europe with a series of uncomfortable but catalytic challenges. It pushes Europeans to clarify what they stand for, where they must assume primary responsibility, what behaviour they can accept from partners and rivals, and what kind of influence they wish to exercise in a more contested world.

First, what does Europe really stand for? The sharp tone of the NSS obliges Europe to distinguish between a small set of core, nonnegotiable commitments and a broader range of policy preferences that can be adapted to context. The four pillars already identified—security and resilience, shared prosperity and social cohesion, human dignity and the rule of law, and planetary responsibility—are capable of commanding wide support if articulated with clarity and realism. Other parts of the European agenda may need to be reframed or stripped of ideological overtones so that they better reflect citizens' concerns and are easier for partners at different stages of development to engage with.

Second, where must Europe stand on its own feet? By signalling that the United States will no longer automatically underwrite European security or neighbourhood stability, the NSS accelerates an existing European debate and raises the stakes. Strategic autonomy in defence, energy, digital infrastructure, and critical supply chains becomes a basic condition for meaningful agency, not an optional aspiration. This does not imply distancing from the US; rather, it means Europe developing the capabilities and habits of a conscious and intelligent strategic actor—able to take decisions, carry risks, and contribute to collective goods from a position of responsibility rather than dependency.

Third, what behaviour is acceptable from partners and rivals? A serious European response requires spelling out, in sober terms, which shifts in US posture are acceptable—for example, a greater focus on the Western Hemisphere—and which would cross fundamental lines, such as attempts to weaken EU institutions, fragment the single market, or instrumentalise Europe in domestic US politics. The same standard must apply to Russia, China, and other powers: Europe needs clearly communicated red lines on coercion, interference, and violations of basic norms, and it must equip itself with the tools, coalitions, and political will to respond when those lines are crossed.

Fourth, what sort of influence does Europe want—and to what end? Europe must decide whether it primarily sees itself as a supportive pillar of US power, as a balancing pole among several centres, as a rulemaker for an interdependent world, or as a calibrated combination of these roles. Its comparative strengths in law, regulation, institutionbuilding, and complex multilateral bargaining position it well to shape emerging rulesets in finance, technology, climate, and AI governance, especially if it can connect these to a renewed ethos of interaction that respects different identities and developmental stages while orienting all actors towards shared planetary responsibilities.

Seen in this way, both Europe and the United States can emerge as conscious and intelligent collective agents, shaped by distinct histories, cultures, aspirations, institutions, and inherited traumas. Such agency is dynamic: it involves continuous reflection on how one's actions affect others, examination of underlying assumptions, values, and belief systems, and awareness of how emotional

and political reactions may be conditioned by historical experience. This reflective capacity is what makes strategic actors responsible, allowing them to distinguish between reflexive responses and deliberate policy choices.

None of this negates the fact that there remain more areas of alignment than divergence between Europe and the US: a mutual interest in a rulesbased order, in deterring aggression, in an open and secure global economy, a belief in democracy as the best form of government, and in addressing systemic risks such as climate change, technological disruption, and global financial instability. The same logic applies to economic cooperation: while disagreements over trade policy, industrial subsidies, or regulatory approaches are inevitable, the underlying interest in stable, mutually beneficial economic relations and open markets remains strong. The point of clarifying Europe's own baseline is therefore not to rupture the transatlantic relationship, but to place it on a more equal and constructive footing—one that can turn shared interests into concrete initiatives and channel differences into disciplined, problemsolving dialogue rather than recurring friction.

7. Why Europe must engage and transcend

All major blocs are, in a sense, selfinterested agents that will try to protect and advance their own position. Yet in a world of interlocking crises—climate change, ecological stress, financial fragility, extremism, pandemics, mass migration, and now transformative AI—each bloc's longterm survival depends on a global system that is sustainable and humane for everyone. No actor can insulate itself indefinitely from systemic breakdowns.

If Europe and the United States can pioneer mature strategic engagement—or catalyse it with other major powers—they could establish a more resilient model of diplomacy for the transition of the current international system. In a context where today's global crises increasingly reflect the structural limits of prevailing models, systems, and institutions, such engagement and transcendence become indispensable. It enables major actors to move beyond transactional or ideological postures, adopt pragmatic and responsibilitybased modes of cooperation, and strengthen their capacity for coordinated adaptation in an increasingly complex global environment. This is not merely about managing risk but about pursuing legitimate selfinterest in ways that avoid imposing longterm costs on partners, the planet, or future prosperity.

From this perspective, engagement and transcendence are not moral aspirations but matters of enlightened selfinterest. Europe and the US can and will disagree on culture, regulation, and specific regional policies. They can still recognise that their deeper interests converge on preventing largescale war, managing AI and other technologies safely, stabilising the climateeconomy nexus, and avoiding financial collapse. The dialogue between the NSS and a clarified European baseline can become one concrete arena in which this wider "great rebalancing" begins: starting from honest differences, then working towards shared frameworks where no one can win alone. Yet the window for constructive engagement is timesensitive. The longer Europe delays clarifying its position, the more it risks being defined by others' narratives and locked into reactive patterns that diminish its influence. Swift, coherent action signals seriousness and opens space for genuine partnership; hesitation confirms dependency.

8. Practical steps for European policymakers

Europe's engagement with Washington's NSS requires what might be termed "agile diplomacy"—a structured, iterative form of engagement that treats both sides as learning systems rather than fixed positions. This approach establishes an alignment holder to cultivate shared vision between parties, a team that translates strategic consensus into measurable steps, and a process facilitator who guides two distinct reflection cycles: one focused on process efficiency and working methods, the other on the evolving nature of the actors themselves and their modes of interaction.

By institutionalising these dual reassessment cycles and explicit ground rules, agile diplomacy allows Europe to engage with the USA not as a fixed doctrine demanding acceptance or rejection, but as one input in ongoing strategic dialogue. This transforms reactive positioning into proactive coevolution, enabling Europe to move beyond simply responding to American strategy toward actively shaping the transatlantic relationship's trajectory. The same approach can, and should, be applied in Europe's engagement with other major powers.

This approach differs from conventional diplomacy in five key respects. First, it moves from positional bargaining to developmental engagement, treating major actors as dynamic and reflective agents whose capacity for cooperation can be cultivated. Second, it reframes selfinterest from shortterm optimisation to systemic rationality, recognising that strategies generating longterm harm ultimately undermine national advantage. Third, it shifts focus from managing crises to transforming the structural conditions that reproduce instability, prioritising reform of economic, institutional, and normative architectures. Fourth, it elevates epistemic alignment to a strategic objective, fostering shared situational awareness, common reference points, and convergent risk assessments as prerequisites for durable coordination. Fifth, it recognises that disagreement is inevitable; rather than allowing differences to stall progress, actors can consciously "park" areas of divergence and focus on concrete issues where cooperation is possible, generating momentum and trust even amid unresolved disputes.

Several practical steps could operationalise this framework:

1. **Prepare a concise European strategic baseline.** Mandate the preparation of a short document that mirrors, in broad structure, the NSS: a statement of what Europe is, what it wants, what means it will use and how it sees key regions. This document should be rooted in existing strategies but forced to make clearer choices and articulate explicit red lines.
2. **Anchor this baseline in democratic debate.** The European Parliament and national parliaments should debate and refine the baseline, including the uncomfortable tradeoffs, so that it has political legitimacy and is not merely a technocratic exercise. While detailed public consultation mechanisms lie beyond this article's scope, the principle remains essential: strategic maturity requires that policymakers maintain loyalty to core values and engage respectfully with diverse stakeholders, even when making difficult decisions that cannot be fully democratised.
3. **Establish a permanent EU-US Strategic Dialogue Secretariat.** This body would embody the agile diplomacy framework, serving as the institutional home for the alignment holder, working teams, and process facilitators. It would coordinate regular strategy forums that take the US NSS and European baseline as starting points and work through them systematically, identifying areas of alignment, nonnegotiable differences, and domains where joint work is essential (AI governance, climate finance, financial stability, global health, critical infrastructure).

4. **Develop agile diplomacy methodology and capacity.** Europe must invest in training diplomats, strategists, and institutional actors in the principles and practices of agile diplomacy. This includes establishing centres of excellence for developmental engagement, creating toolkits for dualcycle reflection processes, and building communities of practice that can share lessons learned and refine methods over time. Without dedicated capacitybuilding, the framework risks remaining conceptual rather than operational.
5. **Reactivate Europe's multiparty negotiation strengths.** Use Europe's role in this structured dialogue to draw on its experience in complex multilateral bargaining. The same habits and capacities can be applied in parallel engagements with China, India, Africa, ASEAN and others on their own baselines and contributions to shared systemic challenges.
6. **Invest in institutional and analytical infrastructure.** Expand strategic foresight units, strengthen interinstitutional coordination mechanisms, and build deeper expertise on the domestic politics, strategic cultures, and decisionmaking processes of key partners. Europe cannot engage as an intelligent agent without the institutional infrastructure to support continuous learning, adaptation, and strategic communication.

9. What success would look like

By 2030, a strategically mature Europe would be immediately recognisable. The EU and its member states would speak with one voice on core security matters, not because diversity has been suppressed but because genuine strategic consensus has been built through democratic debate. Europe would maintain robust defensive capabilities—conventional and asymmetric—sufficient to deter aggression independently, while remaining a valued NATO partner by choice rather than necessity.

In economic relations, Europe would no longer oscillate between defensive protectionism and naive openness. Instead, it would pursue strategic interdependence: cultivating partnerships with the US, China, India, and others on clear terms, maintaining critical autonomy in key technologies and supply chains while remaining committed to open, rulesbased trade where mutual benefit exists. New economic frameworks for sustainable finance, digital commerce, and technology transfer would bear Europe's institutional imprint, reflecting its commitment to balancing market efficiency with social and environmental responsibility.

Diplomatically, Europe would be the convener of choice for addressing systemic challenges. When AI governance frameworks need negotiation, when climate finance requires restructuring, when new security architectures must be designed for an era of hybrid threats and cyber conflict, major powers would look to Brussels not out of deference but because Europe has proven itself an honest broker with technical expertise, institutional capacity, and genuine commitment to inclusive solutions. Europe would facilitate the difficult conversations about reforming global institutions—from the UN Security Council to international financial institutions—that reflect contemporary power realities while preserving multilateral cooperation.

The transatlantic relationship would be healthier precisely because it is more balanced. Disagreements on regulation, China policy, or Middle East strategy would no longer threaten the partnership's foundations because both sides would engage from positions of clarity about their own interests and respect for the other's agency. The US would value a stronger Europe as a partner

capable of sharing burdens and contributing ideas, not as a dependent requiring constant reassurance.

From a security perspective, Europe would not seek to be feared for its offensive power. Its credibility would rest instead on deterrence through resilience, defensive depth, and asymmetric capacity to impose costs in the event of aggression, combined with the strategic value of cooperation. For external powers, the rational calculation should not be whether to confront Europe, but whether they can afford to exclude themselves from longterm cooperation with a partner capable of contributing to a more stable and predictable global order. When tensions arise, the default mode of European statecraft should not be escalation, but intensive, structured diplomatic engagement—grounded in a deep understanding of the other side’s sensitivities, constraints, and strategic culture—aimed at deescalation, accommodation where possible, and the preservation of longterm stability.

Most importantly, European citizens would see their governments as capable stewards of their security and prosperity—not perfect, but credible, coherent, and able to navigate complexity without either naive idealism or cynical resignation.

This vision is achievable. It requires no revolutionary transformation of Europe’s identity, only the operationalisation of capacities it already possesses and the political will to make choices that have been deferred for too long. The question is whether European leaders will seize this moment or let it pass.

10. The risks of not acting

The consequences of inaction should not be underestimated. If Europe fails to use this moment to clarify its own baseline and strengthen its strategic agency, several adverse outcomes become increasingly probable.

First, Europe risks becoming a passive object rather than an active subject in global affairs. This could mean Europe’s digital infrastructure being governed by Chinese standards and American platforms, with no viable European alternative. It could mean critical supply chains determined by others’ industrial policies, and security architectures redesigned without European input. Without a clear sense of identity and purpose, Europe will continue to be shaped by others’ strategies rather than shaping outcomes according to its own interests and values. The transatlantic relationship would revert to patterns of dependency and reactive accommodation, punctuated by episodes of friction that neither side can resolve constructively.

Second, internal European cohesion will continue to fray. Without a compelling shared strategic narrative, member states will increasingly pursue divergent paths, seeking bilateral arrangements with Washington, Beijing, or Moscow that undermine collective European agency. There are already previews of this dynamic: individual member states breaking EU unity on China policy, or pursuing separate energy deals that weaken collective bargaining power. The erosion of unity weakens Europe’s negotiating position with all partners and makes it more vulnerable to external pressure and fragmentation.

Third, Europe will miss its window to shape the emerging global order. The current moment of transition—marked by technological disruption, climate urgency, and the renegotiation of international

institutions—offers unique leverage for actors with vision and credibility. If Europe remains reactive and divided, it will forfeit the opportunity to inscribe its values and interests into the architectures that will govern the coming decades. Standards for AI governance, frameworks for climate finance, rules for digital commerce, norms for technology transfer—all these are being negotiated now. Absence means irrelevance.

Fourth, the global system itself becomes more brittle. Without Europe stepping up as a responsible pole capable of convening dialogue on systemic challenges, the international order risks fracturing into antagonistic blocs, transactional relationships, and zerosum competition. The polycrisis demands coordinated responses; Europe's absence or weakness makes coordinated failure more likely.

The stakes are existential—not in the sense of immediate catastrophe, but in terms of Europe's longterm relevance, resilience, and capacity to shape a world that reflects its deepest commitments.

11. Conclusion: an invitation to strategic adulthood

The new US National Security Strategy is in many ways uncomfortable reading for Europeans. It contains real misjudgements and is couched in language that can feel offensive. But it also represents a moment of clarity: one major bloc has set out, in blunt terms, its current story about itself and the world.

Europe now has a choice. It can respond as an offended junior partner, clinging to a fading status quo and hoping that Washington will again see Europe through more flattering eyes. Or it can take this moment as a catalyst to clarify its own pillars and red lines, to reduce dangerous dependencies, to rediscover its strength in multiparty diplomacy, and to engage others—starting with the US—as a coresponsible actor in a fragile, interdependent system.

Reading the NSS with strategic maturity means choosing the second path. It means treating the document not as the final word but as the opening move in a more honest and balanced conversation. It means recognising that Europe's most profound contribution to the world is not to mirror American power or to moralise from a position of weakness, but to model a form of agency that is reflective, developmental, and oriented toward the long term.

In a world of polycrisis, no actor—however powerful—can secure its interests alone. The question is not whether Europe will be affected by the forces reshaping the global order, but whether it will be an architect of that order or merely a subject of it.

If Europe can use the NSS shock to become more coherent internally, more capable strategically, and more mature in its external engagements, it will not only strengthen the transatlantic relationship but also demonstrate that responsible agency remains possible in an age of fragmentation. The work begins now: in European capitals, in Brussels, in national parliaments and the European Parliament, and in the countless institutions where Europe's future posture will be forged.

The invitation this moment extends is clear: define yourself before others define you. Build the capabilities your principles require. Engage from strength, not dependency. And in doing so, help build a global system resilient enough for the challenges ahead.

Strategic adulthood is not granted; it is earned through choices and action. The NSS has clarified the American baseline. How Europe now clarifies and acts on its own will define not only the transatlantic relationship but Europe's place in the world for decades to come.

*Reading the NSS with Strategic Maturity*¹²

