

FORECASTING THE ADJUSTMENT OF THE UNITED STATES' FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY TO 2050 AND IMPLICATIONS FOR VIETNAM'S STRATEGIC RESPONSE

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ABSTRACT

The release by the United States of its National Security Strategy in December 2025 and of its National Defense Strategy in January 2026 has made it imperative to reassess the trajectory along which this great power is adjusting its foreign policy strategy. In what directions will U.S. foreign policy strategy be adjusted up to 2050, what factors determine the amplitude of that adjustment, and how should Vietnam prepare its strategic response? Using the method of policy document analysis, the method of trend analysis applied to structural variables and the scenario method, the study identifies four structural constraints that determine the strategic latitude of the United States through the middle of the twenty-first century, namely the fiscal constraint, the demographic constraint, the shift in the center of gravity of the global economy and the relative narrowing of military superiority. There are three scenarios for the adjustment of U.S. foreign policy strategy to 2050, yet the value of forecasting lies not in determining which scenario will occur, but in identifying the cross-scenario constants – those features that will be present in every variant of adjustment. The article identifies six such constants and concludes that Vietnam's sustainable strategic response is not to predict the right scenario, but to build a self-reliant capacity strong enough to adapt to every scenario, on the foundation of steadfastly upholding the foreign policy line of independence, self-reliance, multilateralization and diversification determined by the 14th National Congress of the Party.

Keyword: U.S. foreign policy strategy; strategic forecasting; Vietnam's strategic response.

1. INTRODUCTION

On December 4, 2025, the United States released its new National Security Strategy, and less than two months later, on January 23, 2026, the U.S. Department of Defense released the accompanying National Defense Strategy. These two documents contain adjustments that the international research community assesses to be the most profound since the end of the Cold War. The 2025 National Security Strategy declares that “the days of America holding up the entire world order like Atlas are over” [16]. The National Defense Strategy released in January 2026 ranks the mission of “defending the American homeland” as the first priority, ahead of the mission of “deterring China in the Indo-Pacific” [5]. These adjustments raise questions about the long-term trajectory of U.S. foreign policy strategy and about the consequences for the security and development environment of the region.

Existing studies of U.S. foreign policy strategy have mainly followed two directions. The first analyzes the policy content of each administration; its

strength is that it stays close to practice, but its limitation is the difficulty of separating cyclical adjustment from structural adjustment. The second debates grand strategy at the theoretical level; it offers depth of generalization but is little connected to quantitative forecasting data. This article therefore addresses three questions: in what directions will U.S. foreign policy strategy be adjusted up to 2050, what factors determine the amplitude of that adjustment, and how should Vietnam prepare its strategic response in order to safeguard national interests to the highest degree?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Barry R. Posen, in the work “Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy”, argues that the strategy of “liberal hegemony” pursued by the United States after the Cold War is costly, counterproductive and unsustainable; the author advocates a strategy of “restraint” with a narrowed scope of commitments, focused on core interests [18]. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, in the work “America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century”, hold that the cost

of maintaining the alliance system is far lower than the cost of retrenchment, and that this system is itself the source of American preeminence [6].

On forecasting methodology, the report “Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World” surveys four groups of structural forces – demographics and human development, environment, economics and technology – and then constructs five scenarios for 2040, namely “Renaissance of Democracies”, “A World Adrift”, “Competitive Coexistence”, “Separate Silos” and “Tragedy and Mobilization” [17]. The methodological value of the report lies in its logic of proceeding from structural forces to scenarios.

Among Vietnamese researchers, the article “Major-power strategic competition and Vietnam’s strategic response” by Phạm Quốc Thành offers a noteworthy assessment of the power structure: the world order tends toward a structure of “two superpowers and multiple great powers” rather than one that is entirely “unipolar” or “bipolar”; the author warns that intensifying competition creates pressure that leaves small countries “obliged to take sides”, and proposes a set of responses based on a policy of flexible balancing together with the strengthening of ASEAN’s role [23].

The article “The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy: The return of realism and the image of a new type of international police” by Bùi Gia Kỳ holds that the new strategy sets the requirement that “America must be consolidated from within before reaching outward” and shifts to a mechanism of “conditional protection” toward allies, while also arguing that Vietnam, the Philippines and Singapore have become an important “strategic corridor” in the calculations of the United States [15].

The work “The comprehensive power of the United States seen from recent conflicts: Some forecasts to 2030 with a vision to 2045 and a number of policy recommendations for Vietnam” by Hoàng Hải forecasts that by 2030 the United States will “continue to maintain its position as the world’s foremost military superpower”, while the relative gap with China “will continue to narrow”, and that by 2045 the configuration “will shift toward a more pronounced multipolarization”; the work sets out three scenarios regarding the

power of the United States together with recommendations for Vietnam [12].

The existing works have provided a theoretical framework on grand strategy choice, a methodology for scenario building and initial analyses of the new U.S. documents. However, no work has simultaneously linked quantitative forecasting data on structural constraints with the construction of scenarios for U.S. foreign policy strategic behavior to 2050, and no work has clearly distinguished between the elements that vary across scenarios and those that remain invariant across them – which constitutes the most important practical basis for formulating a strategic response.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The article employs the approach of structural realism combined with foreign policy analysis, on the methodological foundation of dialectical materialism and historical materialism. Four specific methods are used: the method of policy document analysis, applied to the 2025 National Security Strategy, the 2026 National Defense Strategy and related documents; the method of trend analysis, applied to four groups of structural variables – fiscal, demographic, economic and military – on the basis of long-term forecasting datasets published by competent agencies and reputable research organizations; the scenario method, applied according to the logic of proceeding from structural forces to variants of development, together with a system of identifying indicators that permits verification in practice; and the historical-logical method, used to compare the current round of adjustment with previous rounds, thereby distinguishing cyclical elements from structural ones.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. The content of the strategic adjustment as reflected in the body of documents of 2025–2026

The U.S. National Security Strategy released on December 4, 2025, contains four clearly identifiable groups of adjustments.

The first is an adjustment in the conception of the country’s international role. The document declares that “the days of America holding up the entire world order like Atlas are over” [16]. The document rejects the concept of “global

domination” and replaces it with the objective of maintaining “global and regional balances of power”; it also affirms that “the outsized influence of larger, wealthier and stronger states” is “an immutable truth of international relations” [24].

The second is an adjustment in alliance relations. The document criticizes the American elite of the past for having “allowed allies and partners to shift the burden of their defense costs onto the American people”, and at the same time requires allies to spend “a great deal more” of their gross domestic product on their own defense and to put an end to “free-riding trade imbalances” [7]. Writing for the Brookings Institution, Patricia M. Kim argues that the document reflects a logic of “burden-shifting” rather than “burden-sharing”, with “very little acknowledgment of the core bargain that has sustained U.S. alliances to date” [24].

The third is an adjustment in the order of regional priorities. The document places the Western Hemisphere in the position of highest priority and declares that U.S. foreign policy will no longer be “dominated” by the Middle East [16]. With respect to the Indo-Pacific, the document affirms that the alliances and partnerships of the United States in this region “will be the foundation of security and prosperity for a long time to come” [7]; however, according to the analysis of the Brookings Institution, this region “does not appear as a focal point until nearly halfway through the document” [24].

The fourth is an adjustment in strategic instruments, with the elevation of economic and technological instruments. The document emphasizes the objective of reindustrialization, directs all U.S. ambassadors to act in the interests of American businesses, and sets the task of ensuring that American technology, “particularly artificial intelligence, quantum computing and biotechnology”, maintains the most advanced position in the world [7].

The National Defense Strategy released on January 23, 2026, gives concrete form to the above orientations through four priorities arranged in order: “defending the American homeland”; “detering China in the Indo-Pacific through strength, not through confrontation”; “strengthening burden-sharing with allies and partners”; and “vigorously revitalizing the U.S. defense industrial base” [5]. The document defines

the mission of “defending the interests of the United States throughout the Western Hemisphere” and of ensuring access to “key locations, particularly the Panama Canal, the Gulf of Mexico and Greenland”; it also calls for building “a robust denial defense posture along the first island chain”. On the division of responsibilities, the document states clearly that the Republic of Korea “is fully capable of assuming primary responsibility for deterring North Korea with essential but more limited support from the United States”, and that allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization must assume “primary responsibility for the conventional defense of Europe” [5].

These adjustments follow on from signals that had already appeared in mid-2025. At the Shangri-La Dialogue on May 31, 2025, the U.S. Secretary of Defense affirmed: “We ask – and indeed, we insist – that our allies and partners do their part on defense” [26]. In 2025, the United States raised its defense spending requirement for regional allies from 3.5% to 5% of gross domestic product [14]. On June 16, 2026, the U.S. Department of Defense renamed the Indo-Pacific Command back to the Pacific Command [20].

4.2. Four structural variables governing the strategic latitude of the United States through the middle of the twenty-first century

The first variable is the fiscal constraint. According to The Long-Term Budget Outlook: 2025 to 2055, published by the U.S. Congressional Budget Office on March 27, 2025, federal debt held by the public “reaches its highest level ever in 2029” as a percentage of gross domestic product, and thereafter “continues to rise, reaching 156% of gross domestic product in 2055”; the budget deficit is projected to reach “7.3% of gross domestic product in 2055” [8].

The second variable is the demographic constraint. The Demographic Outlook: 2026 to 2056, published by the same agency in January 2026, projects that a declining fertility rate will cause “annual deaths to exceed annual births beginning in 2030”; in the absence of immigration, “the population would begin to shrink from 2030”, and beyond that point immigration becomes “an increasingly important source of population growth”. The ratio of people aged 25 to 64 to each person aged 65 and over is projected to fall from 2.7 to 2.2 by 2056; the rate of population growth

declines from an average of 0.3% per year over the coming decade to 0.1% per year in the period 2037–2056 [9].

The third variable is the shift in the center of gravity of the global economy. According to the report *The World in 2050: The Long View* published by PwC in February 2017, by 2050 the United States is projected to rank third in the world in terms of gross domestic product measured at purchasing power parity, behind China and India, with its share of global gross domestic product falling to “around 12% by 2050”; the E7 emerging economies are projected to account for “almost 50% of world gross domestic product”, while the share of the G7 advanced economies “declines to just over 20%” [19].

The fourth variable is that military superiority remains overwhelming while the relative level of effort is changing. According to the report *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2025* published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute in April 2026, total world military expenditure in 2025 reached USD 2,887 billion, an increase of 2.9% in real terms. Of this, the United States spent USD 954 billion, accounting for 33% of total global military expenditure, equivalent to 3.1% of its gross domestic product; China spent approximately USD 336 billion, accounting for about 12% of total global expenditure, equivalent to 1.7% of its gross domestic product [21].

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. The logic of the current adjustment: from liberal hegemony to a selective great power

The first question to be answered is this: is the current adjustment cyclical or structural? This question is of decisive significance for forecasting work, because a cyclical adjustment will reverse when the administration changes, whereas a structural adjustment will continue regardless of who holds leadership office. Three grounds make it possible to affirm that the current adjustment is primarily structural.

The first is the consistency between the content of the adjustment and material constraints. The data presented in section 4.2 show that the resource latitude of the United States is narrowing in accordance with regularities that do not depend on political will. When public debt moves toward 156% of gross domestic product by 2055 [8], interest payments will crowd out discretionary

expenditures, of which the defense budget is the largest item. When the share of the United States in global gross domestic product falls to around 12% by 2050 [19], its capacity to supply international public goods from its own resources declines correspondingly. The demand that the burden be transferred to allies is therefore not an arbitrary choice but a necessary consequence of the relationship between commitments and resources.

The second is the continuity of the trend across administrations. The demand that allies increase defense spending has appeared over many previous terms of office; what has changed in the present period is the intensity and the openness of that demand, not the demand itself. The assessment of an expert at the Brookings Institution that future strategies will still retain the themes of “burden-shifting, criticism of global institutions and a narrower definition of American interests” [24] reflects precisely this structural characteristic.

The third is that the change takes place at the level of conception and not merely at the level of policy. The fact that an official document rejects the concept of “global domination” and acknowledges “regional balances of power” as legitimate [24] marks a shift in the frame of reference. In the history of U.S. foreign policy, changes at the level of conception have generally proved far more durable than adjustments in instruments. In the same vein, Emily Harding of the Center for Strategic and International Studies holds that the document marks “a shift in both thinking and substance”, in which the reaffirmation of U.S. primacy in the Western Hemisphere bears the outlines of “a new Monroe Doctrine” [13].

From the three grounds above, the logic of the current adjustment may be summarized as a shift from the model of “liberal hegemony” – which Barry R. Posen criticized as early as 2014 as costly and unsustainable [18] – to a model that may be termed the “selective great power”. In this model, the United States does not withdraw from the international system, but tiers its commitments according to the degree to which they are essential to national interests, retaining the commitments at the core tier and transferring most of the costs at the peripheral tiers. It should be noted that this is not a strategy of “restraint” in the sense proposed by Posen: as the scholar Andrew Yeo observes, notwithstanding the language of

moderation, the new strategy remains “no less expansive than liberal internationalism, only less liberal and somewhat harder-edged” [24]. The scope of ambition does not narrow; what changes is the manner in which the costs of pursuing that ambition are distributed.

5.2. Three scenarios for the adjustment of U.S. foreign policy strategy to 2050

The first scenario: the “selective great power” – continuation and institutionalization of the current trend. In this scenario, the United States maintains overall military superiority but concentrates resources on the Western Hemisphere and on a number of key nodes in the Indo-Pacific, transfers most conventional defense responsibilities to regional allies, and shifts the center of competition toward economic, technological and financial instruments. The conditions for its emergence are that fiscal constraints evolve in line with the baseline projection, that no major strategic shock occurs, and that the U.S.–China balance continues to shift gradually. This is the scenario with the highest probability, because it is consistent both with the inertia of current policy and with the logic of material constraints. Identifying indicators include: the share of the defense budget in gross domestic product remaining at around 3%; an increase in the number of base access agreements while the number of troops permanently stationed abroad declines; and a continued rise in the frequency with which the instruments of tariffs, technology export controls and financial sanctions are used.

The second scenario: “retrenchment” – contraction toward the Western Hemisphere. In this scenario, fiscal and demographic pressures exceed the threshold of political tolerance, compelling the United States to make substantive cuts in its extra-regional commitments and to rely chiefly on nuclear deterrence, technological superiority and control of key maritime routes. The conditions for its emergence are one or more of the following factors: a public debt crisis or a serious financial crisis; internal political polarization reaching a level that paralyzes the capacity to sustain long-term commitments; or a strategic defeat that erodes the will to engage. Identifying indicators include: the withdrawal or significant reduction of forces permanently stationed in Northeast Asia; the renegotiation of treaty commitments or leaving them open-ended; a defense budget falling

below 2.5% of gross domestic product; and a narrowing of geographic scope in both the designations and the structures of the regional combatant commands. The renaming of the Indo-Pacific Command back to the Pacific Command in 2026 [20], although explained as a purely nominal change, still needs to be monitored as an early indicator in this direction.

The third scenario: “conditional re-engagement”. In this scenario, a strategic shock – which may be a major crisis in the Taiwan Strait, the East Sea or another region – reverses the burden-shifting trend and compels the United States to reinvest heavily in its alliance system. The fundamental difference from the earlier period, however, is that this re-engagement will take place on a transactional basis: new commitments will be tied to specific conditions concerning cost-sharing, base access, coordination of technology export controls and supply chain orientation. Identifying indicators include: the defense budget rising above 4% of gross domestic product; the establishment of new defense commitments of a binding character; and the emergence of integrated economic–security coordination mechanisms.

The three scenarios above are not entirely mutually exclusive in temporal terms. In practice, the trajectory is most likely to be a combination: the first scenario predominates in the period up to around 2035, after which it branches into the second or the third depending on the evolution of the fiscal variables and of the regional security environment.

5.3. Six cross-scenario constants and their forecasting significance

First, U.S.–China strategic competition continues to be the axis governing the international environment through the middle of the twenty-first century. In all three scenarios, China is identified as the principal competitor; what changes is only the intensity and the modality of the competition. The assessment of a trend toward the formation of a structure of “two superpowers and multiple great powers” put forward by Phạm Quốc Thành [23] retains its full value as a point of reference.

Second, economic and technological instruments increasingly replace military instruments in strategic competition. This trend arises from the fiscal constraints themselves: as the marginal cost

of military power rises, actors turn to instruments that are less costly but no less coercive in effect, including tariffs, technology export controls, technical standards and supply chain orientation. The fact that the 2025 National Security Strategy sets the task of securing superiority in artificial intelligence, quantum computing and biotechnology [7] shows that the center of competition is shifting in this direction.

Third, demands for burden-sharing will only increase, not decrease. This is a direct consequence of the fiscal and demographic constraints. Even in the re-engagement scenario, re-engagement is accompanied by conditions regarding costs.

Fourth, transactionalism in external relations is being institutionalized. The linkage between security interests and economic and trade interests becomes a permanent feature. The analysis of Chatham House that tariffs together with new conditions “have sown distrust and uncertainty into alliances spanning decades” [14] describes precisely this phenomenon.

Fifth, Southeast Asia retains a stable geostrategic value but does not become a top priority. In all three scenarios, this region is important as a vital maritime route, a link in supply chains and a buffer space, yet its place in the order of priorities always falls behind the Western Hemisphere and Northeast Asia. As a consequence, the degree of attention and the resources that the United States devotes to the region will fluctuate with its domestic political cycles.

Sixth, the unpredictability of U.S. policy becomes a structural characteristic rather than a transient phenomenon. Because of internal political polarization and because commitments are increasingly less institutionalized in the form of binding treaties, the amplitude of policy fluctuation between terms of office will be greater and harder to predict. For partners, this means that the reliability of U.S. commitments needs to be assessed at each given point in time and cannot be assumed to be stable.

5.4. Impacts on Vietnam

Vietnam will continue to occupy a position at the intersection of the interests of major powers, with its geostrategic value maintained. This is both an advantage – because it creates latitude for the policy of multilateralization and diversification –

and a challenge, because the pressure to align will grow as competition becomes more intense. In that context, the guiding principle of not choosing sides but choosing what is right, choosing fairness, justice and national interests carries important significance as a matter of principle: it shifts the center of gravity of external choices from the axis of relations among major powers to the axis of legal principle and national interest, thereby preserving the initiative.

The greatest risk for Vietnam in the coming period comes not from the military dimension but from the economic and technological dimension. The course of the reciprocal tariffs in 2025 [1] is evidence of the mechanism of impact: an internal policy adjustment by a major partner can immediately be transformed into macroeconomic risk for a highly open economy. The degree of vulnerability here is directly proportional to the degree of concentration of export markets and inversely proportional to endogenous technological capacity.

Every foreign policy strategy built on the assumption that the policy of a major partner will remain stable carries latent risk. This reinforces the soundness of the orientation that Vietnam is pursuing: building an independent and self-reliant economy on the basis of promoting internal strength in combination with external resources. Internal strength, under conditions of growing uncertainty, is precisely the only variable that Vietnam controls entirely.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

First, steadfastly uphold and creatively apply the foundational principles of the foreign policy line. Under conditions of growing uncertainty, the value of a principle lies precisely in its stability: clear principles enable partners to predict Vietnam’s behavior, thereby reducing the pressure to take sides. The “four no’s” defense policy [11] and the guiding principle of “not choosing sides but choosing what is right” need to be conveyed consistently in external communication so as to become a stable expectation in the perceptions of partners. The idea of a school of Vietnamese external relations and diplomacy imbued with the distinctive identity of the “Vietnamese bamboo”, characterized by firm roots, a sturdy trunk and flexible branches [25], is a methodological generalization for combining adherence to principle with flexibility.

Second, shift the center of gravity from a policy of balancing to a strategy of intertwining interests and enhancing internal strength. A policy of balancing among major powers is effective when the balance of forces is relatively stable; when that balance changes rapidly, its effectiveness declines. A more sustainable direction is to make the interests of many major partners bound up with the stability and development of Vietnam, through its position in value chains, connectivity infrastructure and development cooperation. At the same time, it is necessary to enhance internal strength in building an independent and self-reliant economy, because this is the variable that lies within Vietnam's control.

Third, identify technological self-reliance as the pillar of strategic autonomy. Competition among major powers will increasingly take place in the technological domain, where the instruments of export control and technical standards possess high coercive force. Vietnam's need to accelerate the mastery of strategic technologies and to raise investment in research and development to 2% of gross domestic product [3] should be seen not only as a task of economic development but also as a task of national security.

Fourth, diversify markets and supply chains so as to reduce the degree of vulnerability to economic instruments. Effectively exploiting the new-generation free trade agreements already signed, expanding markets into regions with high growth potential and raising the domestic value-added content of export products are directions that need to be promoted [4]. The objective is not to reduce relations with any partner, but to reduce the degree of dependence on a single market.

Fifth, build a systematic strategic forecasting capacity. It is necessary to establish a mechanism for regularly monitoring the indicators by which the scenarios may be identified (including the share of the defense budget in the gross domestic product of the United States, changes in force posture in Northeast Asia, the frequency with which the instruments of tariffs and technology control are used, together with changes in the structure of the regional combatant commands) in order to provide timely advice to the Party and the State. At the same time, response options corresponding to each scenario need to be prepared in advance, instead of responding only once events have occurred. Consolidating the central role and the unity of ASEAN, in keeping

with the spirit that "ASEAN is always a strategic priority" [22], needs to be identified as a component of this response capacity, because a united ASEAN considerably increases the negotiating weight of each member country.

7. CONCLUSION

First, the current adjustment of U.S. foreign policy strategy is structural and not cyclical. The three grounds for this conclusion are the consistency between the content of the adjustment and the material constraints that have been quantified, the continuity of the trend across administrations, and the fact that the change takes place at the level of conception and not merely at the level of instruments. The logic of this round of adjustment is a shift from the model of liberal hegemony to the model of a selective great power, in which the scope of ambition does not narrow but the manner of distributing costs changes fundamentally.

Second, by 2050 U.S. foreign policy strategy may develop along three scenarios – the selective great power, retrenchment, and conditional re-engagement – of which the first has the highest probability in the period up to around 2035. What Vietnam needs to attend to, however, lies not in ranking the probabilities of the scenarios, but in identifying the six constants present throughout all three: U.S.–China competition remains the governing axis; economic and technological instruments increasingly replace military instruments; demands for burden-sharing only increase; transactionalism in external relations is institutionalized; Southeast Asia retains a stable geostrategic value but is not a top priority; and the unpredictability of U.S. policy becomes a structural characteristic.

Third, from those constants a principle of strategic response may be drawn: Vietnam's sustainable response is not to predict correctly which scenario will occur, but to build a self-reliant capacity strong enough to adapt effectively to every scenario. Vietnam's foreign policy line of independence, self-reliance, self-strengthening, multilateralization and diversification [10], combined with the policy of building an independent and self-reliant economy and of achieving breakthroughs in science, technology, innovation and digital transformation, constitutes precisely the system of solutions that meets this requirement. In an international environment in

which the reliability of external commitments is increasingly difficult to predict, internal strength is the firmest foundation for ensuring and protecting national interests to the highest degree and for successfully realizing the goal of making Vietnam a developed, high-income country by 2045.

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