

A Tale of Two Documents: Takeaways for India



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In November 2025, two major nuclear powers, China and USA, released strategy documents within weeks of each other. Though not on the same subject, they provided insights into strategic issues as they envision them. They also make for a study in contrasts. While the Chinese document is old school, classic diplomatic writing, the document by the United States of America reflects the personality and style of the current leadership.

China was first off the mark with its White Paper entitled, *China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Non-proliferation in the New Era*. This was the second iteration of a Paper on the same subject released in 2005. The new document provides fresh insights into Chinese thinking on nuclear issues. Later the same month, the USA released its broad-based *National Security Strategy (NSS) 2025*, the first official document on the subject by the current administration. As is the tradition in the USA, each president brings out his own set of official documents on national security, defence strategy, and nuclear posture.

Different Styles, Divergent Priorities

The recent Chinese and American documents vary widely in language, tenor, and messaging. China's White Paper adopts a diplomatic tone though liberally extolling the 'constructive role' that Beijing plays in shaping global security. The US NSS, on the other hand, is unapologetic about its 'America First' approach. It does not couch its objectives in diplomatese, nor does it pretend to pursue global peace and stability. In fact, there is an expressed unwillingness to share global burdens that do not directly align with American national interests.

Also divergent from the US NSS of 2022, which had identified Russia and China as near-peer threats of equal weightage, the 2025 version plays down Russia's threat potential. China is listed as the primary challenger to be addressed by reshaping the economic relationship on the basis of "reciprocity and fairness to restore American economic independence" and by building deterrence to prevent any large-scale military conflict by "maintaining American economic and technological pre-eminence." In meeting these objectives, the US exhorts its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific too, to step up through increased defence spending and preparedness.

China's White Paper, meanwhile, does not mention the USA by name. Instead, it uses the code word "a certain country" that seeks "absolute strategic superiority by constantly expanding its armaments, strengthening combat readiness, and provoking bloc confrontation." China decries such policies for their impact on regional peace and security, erosion of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation regimes, and exacerbation of security risks of emerging technologies.

Both also frame their relationship with friends, partners and allies quite differently. Washington adopts a transactional approach of 'burden sharing and burden shifting', asking the allies and partners to take more responsibility for their own security. As the Strategy states, "the days of the United States propping up the entire world order like Atlas are over." China, meanwhile, emphasises joint handling of issues by "building a community with a shared future for humanity." It envisions international relations characterised by "mutual respect, fairness, justice, and win-win cooperation." The irony is that while China uses lofty terms that are seldom evident in its relationships, the USA has discarded even lip service to such ideals. On the economic front, for example, the USA has weaponised trade by emphasising tariffs and reshoring, while China seeks to secure resources through elite capture and debt diplomacy.

The Nuclear Dimensions

As regards nuclear weapons, the US explicitly states that it seeks "the world's most robust, credible, and modern nuclear deterrent, plus next-generation missile defences—including a Golden Dome for the American homeland—to protect the American people, American assets overseas, and American allies." China criticises such pursuit as stubborn maintenance of a "massive nuclear weapons stockpile while further reinforcing its nuclear deterrence and war-fighting capabilities." BMD is particularly opposed for "reshaping the traditional strategic offense-defence dynamic, posing new challenge to global strategic stability." As things stand, both are engaged in a nuclear arms

race – expanding arsenals, building new delivery systems, developing missile defences and refusing to engage in strategic stability dialogues.

Both also seek dominance in emerging technologies. The USA blatantly declares, “We want to ensure that US technology and US standards—particularly in AI, biotech, and quantum computing—drive the world forward.” China, meanwhile, couches its desire to lead the regulation of these fields within the framework of global governance and equity through UN-mandated mechanisms. Given its position and influence in the Global South, it leverages numerical support within multilateral institutions by prioritising these debates in such forums.

China’s White Paper is explicitly on arms control and non-proliferation, but it does not offer any new ideas for advancing these fronts. It describes nuclear weapons as a ‘sword of Damocles’, recounts the grim state of affairs and laments the risks. The bulk of the paper, however, extols China’s ‘constructive role in international arms control’ by listing its membership of multilateral treaties. It applauds China’s commitment to the principle of nuclear restraint by stating that it has “never used nuclear weapons to threaten other countries nor deployed nuclear weapons outside its territories, and has never provided a nuclear umbrella for other countries.” However, it neither mentions nor explains the rapidly expanding Chinese nuclear arsenal. The US NSS, meanwhile, makes no mention of arms control or non-proliferation, which have slid low down in the US priority for now.

Both documents indulge in strategic storytelling, as is the wont of such articulations. They create narratives for global consumption. While the USA shows little regard for the existing order and is in retreat from its traditionally global role, China positions itself as a guardian of stability by invoking the vision of a multipolar world an “equal and orderly” international order where it can institutionalise its influence over old and new domains.

Takeaways for India

As the two major powers reimagine their competitive relationship and work out a *modus vivendi*, it is clear that India should build its relationships with both of them independently of the other. The USA and China are both important for India for different reasons. Its relations with one must not be contingent on the other. In fact, India’s pursuit of strategic autonomy is of utmost importance in a world where the major powers will only be looking out for themselves. India must continue to team

up with nations wherever its interests align and not hesitate to stand apart on divergent issues. A flexible response, rather than the fixity of relationships, seems to be the order of the day.

Given the centrality of the Indo-Pacific to India's security, New Delhi must keep its focus on building the necessary relationships in the region, irrespective of the level of US participation. China will try to use all kinds of proxy tools to create digressions for India and disrupt its rise as a contender. India will have to be prudent to choose its fights wisely and concentrate on building its comprehensive national power. That would be the biggest deterrent.

India must also not hold back on leveraging its economic strength of demographics, skilled workforce, manufacturing potential, and markets. Simultaneously, it must enhance its soft power by showcasing the stabilising effects of its philosophy of strategic restraint in military operations and nuclear build-up. No-First-Use (NFU) should be India's too to leverage in multilateral fora. In fact, none of the other nuclear-armed states has shown as much restraint and responsibility as India in building its nuclear arsenal and in the use of conventional force in nuclear shadow in the face of complex security challenges.

One way to let the world know the Indian side of the story could be to bring out one's own strategy document of sorts. Irrespective of whether it is called a White Paper or a National Security Strategy, the document could provide the Indian version of how the country perceives the global landscape, where it plans to go, and how it intends to navigate its way towards the goals. The document would be a high-order articulation of the principles/guidelines that reflect the nation's vision on *all elements* of national security. Such an articulation could serve as a compass for different ministries to find their fix while keeping a common goal in sight.

Over the decades, various governments have drafted such vision documents and toyed with the idea of putting them in the public domain. But there has been a hesitation to do so. Of course, not having such a publicly articulated document does not mean the country lacks a coherent strategy. On the other hand, having a publicly shared strategy document could make it more inclusive for fellow citizens, and also provide clarity to the rest of the world on India's vision and priorities. A clear national security strategy that has been well deliberated across all strands of comprehensive national power could better enable India to harness resources in service of its expressed aspiration of being a consequential power in a world as fractious as the present one.

The new year may be a good time to start a debate on the pros and cons of a publicly articulated Indian NSS given that India has changed, and so has the world.

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