



DECONSTRUCTING 'PROJECT 2025'

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

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Mandate for Leadership

The Conservative Promise

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Foreword by Kevin Roberts, PhD
Edited by Paul Dans and Steven Groves

The 'Project 2025' is an initiative by the Heritage Foundation (a conservative U.S. think-tank) to create a comprehensive policy blueprint for Donald Trump for his second term in the Oval Office. Authored by former Trump Administration officials and the Heritage Foundation, the 900-page document proposes to set the trajectory for the incoming Administration's agenda with a major overhauling of the government structures and policies. It talks about firming border security, banning public sector unions, emphasizing traditional family units as the centre-piece of American life, reducing the size and influence of federal agencies, and individual rights to be free to 'live and flourish.' The mandate project dates back to 1980 when the Heritage Foundation gave President-elect Ronald Reagan its first 'Mandate of Leadership' in 1981.

This Issue Brief seeks to deconstruct the document highlighting its broad congruence with the Trump Administration's policy agenda. The document is divided into five sections focusing on various key domains and issues including the executive authority, national security, and economic reforms.

Project 2025 – Important Takeaways

The document emphasizes empowering the presidency and improving the federal bureaucracy through streamlining and reforms. The key focus of the section is on the need to limit bureaucratic overreach by strengthening the executive authority, reforming hiring practices by prioritizing

performance and accountability, separating power between the state and the federal government, and, most importantly, selecting appointees who align with the President's agenda.

In the realm of national security, it focuses on rebuilding military readiness, countering global threats, and strengthening border security. The section highlights China as the 'most significant danger' to the U.S., curbing China through external pressure, ranking missile defense as a top U.S. military priority, reforming the war budgeting process, building an effective counterterrorism (CT) enterprise, and establishing an effective diplomatic corps. On the trade front, the document proposes policies that are of national interest while suggesting a 'Global Free Trade Alliance' with allies like the UK and the European Union, and a security and economic outlook for Africa.

The document stresses the de-politicization of multiple departments including defense, homeland, and intelligence agencies. It prioritizes rebuilding the U.S. military readiness and accountability, strengthening missile defense and space capabilities, cyber security, protection of Taiwan, and countering China's military rise and threats from Russia, Iran, North Korea, and transnational terrorism. It further emphasizes strengthening the defense industrial base, deployment of technology, burden-sharing between the U.S. and its allies whether in NATO or Asia-Pacific, sustaining support for Israel, and nuclear modernization and expansion.

The document calls the Department of Homeland Security a 'deadweight' and suggests dismantling or breaking it into multiple missions. It reiterates the need to have diplomats and people serving to match the President's agenda and approach to multiple issues to eliminate a 'tug-of-war.' The document proposes a forward-looking and depoliticized intelligence community in the U.S. with a renewed focus and shift in priorities. It stresses that all the agencies have to come together to fight threats to the U.S. including from Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran.

Priority Areas: The section, moreover, points out China, Iran, Russia, North Korea, and Venezuela as key focus areas for the next Administration:

1. *Middle East:* It calls for re-engagement with the Middle East, furthering sanctions on Iran, encouraging Arab States to join the Abraham Accords, defunding the Palestinian Authority, engaging Turkiye in NATO, and proposing a Middle East security pact including Israel, Egypt, Gulf States, and India.
2. *North Africa:* It suggests stronger security cooperation in North Africa along with European allies to curb 'Islamist' threats and growing Russian influence.

3. *Sub-Saharan Africa:* U.S. foreign policy outlook towards Sub-Saharan Africa is primarily China-driven especially to 'counter malign' Chinese influence. The document suggests that the U.S. must revitalize its foreign policy towards Africa by undertaking fundamental changes in strategic interests in Africa and not letting China dominate the African continent.
4. *Europe:* The Administration's foreign policy outlook on Europe stems from the political, security, and trade dimension. The document calls for a comprehensive review of trade arrangements between the U.S. and the European Union (EU) and re-evaluation and increase of the financial contribution by the NATO members from 2 percent of gross domestic product toward defense. The document also suggests amplifying trade to decrease Europe's dependence on China, a comprehensive review of trade arrangements, and developing allies inside the EU.
5. *South and Central Asia:* Countering China remains the key policy driver in South and Central Asia. To meet that objective the document suggests a robust bilateral relationship with India to counter the 'Chinese threat.' Unplanned withdrawal from Afghanistan has led to more transnational terrorism challenges. However, this has provided an opportunity to reset the Pakistan-U.S. relationship and review U.S. CT strategy in the region.
6. *The Arctic:* Like many other foreign policy outlooks, the U.S. approach to the Arctic is also predominantly Russia- and China-driven. The document emphasizes NATO as more of an Arctic alliance with the accession of Finland and Sweden. Moreover, an Arctic strategy is needed to ensure the weaning of Russian interests in the Arctic and dissuade China's ambitions for a 'Polar Silk Road.'
7. *International Organisations:* While the document refers to international organizations as pivotal for foreign policy, it also demands necessary withdrawals when any organization does not serve U.S. interests. It also suggests ending blind support, pressure when required, and funding termination as a means of 'tough love,' and calls for a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of the U.S. participation in all international organizations.

Moreover, the document emphasizes plans to construct a counter-China infrastructure at USAID and reassess aid through the lens of national interests. It earmarks programs to specifically counter Chinese programs and influence and remove funding to countries that engage with Chinese entities directly and indirectly. Moreover, it suggests ceasing funding and rescinding all climate policies from its foreign aid programs especially USAID's Climate Strategy 2022-2030, and limiting funding to traditional mitigation efforts.

In essence, the document aims to accentuate conservative transformation in the U.S. It brings to light the possible policy trajectory of the incoming Administration on the domestic and global front, giving an impression of increased polarization on the global level, and raising alarm for many developing countries.

While Donald Trump disavowed 'Project 2025' during the campaign, transition officials have used the document for potential hires for the incoming Administration,¹ indicating which goals from this blueprint it would seek to advance first. A certain distance was initially maintained to avoid criticism from the Democrats during the presidential campaign. However, despite repeatedly distancing himself from it, President-elect Trump has named several officials associated with the preparation of the document² as part of his Cabinet. Nonetheless, the most important question is whether the document will be a policy roadmap for Trump's administration during his second term.

During an interview with the *Time* magazine, Donald Trump stated that while he disagreed with the whole document, it does have some very good things.³ Issues such as hawkish views on China, immigration, like-minded political appointments, mass deportations, and cut down of federal bureaucracy represent an overlap between the agenda outlined in the document and Trump's positions.

Conclusion

While the document is conservatively ambitious its practicality and implementation remain uncertain at best. Some issues might take priority for the Administration, while many may be left untouched. In addition, as President-elect Trump appears to agree with several but not all the ideas, he will not be under any obligation to implement the entire project. Some observers critique that the implementation of the document would destroy the U.S. system of checks and balances and create an imperial presidency -- giving presidents almost unlimited power to implement policies⁴ and may also lead to confrontation with the U.S. Congress and the U.S. courts.

¹ Allan Smith and Vaughn Hillyard, "Trump's Transition Team Turns to Project 2025 after Disavowing it During the Campaign," NBC, November 22, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-team-turns-project-2025-disavowing-effort-campaign-rcna180689>

² "Project 2025: What is it and How is it Connected to Trump," Reuters, December 19, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/what-is-project-2025-how-is-it-connected-trump-2024-12-19/>

³ "Donald Trump's 2024 Person of the Year Interview with Time," Time Magazine, December 12, 2024, <https://time.com/7201565/person-of-the-year-2024-donald-trump-transcript/>

⁴ Michael Sozan and Ben Olinsky, "Project 2025 Would Destroy the U.S. System of Checks and Balances and Create an Imperial Presidency," American Progress, October 1, 2024, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/project-2025-would-destroy-the-u-s-system-of-checks-and-balances-and-create-an-imperial-presidency/>