

An Analysis of the “Reform Storm” within U.S. National Security Apparatus

Zhong Lyu*

Department for International and Strategic Studies, China Institute of International Studies, Beijing 100005, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: Since assuming office for the second time, Donald Trump has signed a significant number of executive orders in a remarkably short period, initiating transformations across various facets of American society. Particularly noteworthy is the Trump administration’s overhaul of U.S. national security apparatus. This “reform storm” has deep ideological foundations, inextricably linked to the inherent requirements of Trump’s “America First” policy, the long-held ambition of the Trump camp to purge the “deep state,” and shifts in the domestic and international situation. In terms of concrete measures, the Trump administration has pursued reforms within the diplomatic, defense, and intelligence branches under the U.S. national security apparatus through organizational restructuring, personnel appointments, and budget reallocation. This “reform storm” will accelerate the transformation of the organizational culture within U.S. national security apparatus, propel changes in U.S. global strategic deployment, and potentially lead to greater domestic political turmoil within the United States.

Keywords: U.S. Foreign Policy; Trump Administration; America First; Deep State; U.S. National Security Apparatus

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1. Introduction

Since his return to office, Donald Trump has initiated sweeping reforms targeting U.S. national security apparatus. The personnel reductions and significant functional downgrading of the White House National Security Council^[1] mark the entry of this “reform storm” into an implementation phase targeting powerful entities. These reforms have not only attracted media attention, legal challenges, and protests within the United States but have also generated widespread and profound spillover effects internationally. What, then, are the background motivations for the Trump administration’s launch of this “reform storm” targeting U.S. national security apparatus? What measures have been taken? And what impact will it have on the United States and the world?

2. The Background of the “Reform Storm” within U.S. National Security Apparatus

2.1. The Inherent Requirements of Trump’s “America First” Policy

“America First” is a long-promoted campaign slogan of the Trump camp and a core demand of its “Make America Great

Again” (MAGA) base. Economically, its international economic policy exhibits characteristics of “economic nationalism,” insisting on “profit first,” even to the extent of demanding that countries “write checks directly to the U.S. Treasury^[2]”. On security, it advocates for “Peace Through Strength,” promoting a substantial increase in defense spending, while simultaneously treating U.S. security guarantees as commodities. Guided by the “America First” policy, the Trump administration seeks to “increase revenue and reduce expenditure,” contract the overextended U.S. sphere of influence post-Cold War, and lessen responsibilities towards allies and international organizations. The national security apparatus, composed of career bureaucrats, would not naturally prioritize the “America First” agenda in policy design. During his first term, Trump believed the National Security Council hindered his “America First” agenda^[3]. This deepened the hostility of Trump and his camp towards the “deep state” within U.S. national security apparatus.

2.2. The Long-Held Ambition of the Trump Camp to Purge the “Deep State”

Another crucial factor triggering the “reform storm” lies in the deep-seated antipathy of the Trump camp towards U.S. national security apparatus, which they perceive as possessing characteristics of the “deep state.” Michael J. Glennon argues that compared to the “Madisonian” government institutions established according to the U.S. Constitution, this type of national security institution composed of defense, intelligence, diplomacy, and law enforcement components is considered “Trumanite,” meaning these agencies are subject to less oversight from the President, Congress, or other branches^[4]. Since his first presidential campaign, Trump has used the concept of the “deep state” to attack federal agencies. Furthermore, numerous conflicts during Trump’s first term with national security apparatus intensified his resolve to reshape this establishment. Trump’s first-term cabinet was highly tumultuous, with key members like the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense changing frequently. The myriad of anti-Trump “traitors” constantly emerging within the national security apparatus further increased the resentment and hostility of Trump and his camp towards the entrenched U.S. national security apparatus.

2.3. Changes in the U.S. Domestic and International Situation Since Trump’s First Term

Since Trump’s first term, profound changes have occurred in the U.S. domestic and international situation, strengthening the drive for upholding U.S. hegemony abroad and establishing the “eternal foundation” for the MAGA movement at home, necessitating reforms to U.S. national security apparatus. Compared to his first term, the second-term Trump administration is more eager to comprehensively curb China’s development momentum, striving to delay China’s comprehensive national power surpassing that of the United States. To ensure the “eternal foundation” of the MAGA movement, Trump needs to reshape the organizational structure and culture of U.S. national security apparatus to avoid the reversal of his policies after he leaves office.

3. Measures of the “Reform Storm” within U.S. National Security Apparatus

3.1. Overhauling National Security Personnel

Regarding personnel authority, the U.S. President can directly appoint approximately 4000 senior political officials, about 600 of whom require Senate confirmation. This became a crucial tool for the Trump administration to reshape national security apparatus, though this power was not fully utilized during Trump’s first term. Therefore, in his second term, Trump prioritized individuals with unwavering personal loyalty to him and who faithfully execute the “America First” policy. Most are flag-wavers for “America First” within his camp, with a minority being conservatives with backgrounds in the Republican establishment. The first type includes figures like Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem, Special Envoy for the Middle East Steve Witkoff, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, and FBI Director Kash Patel. These individuals either possess absolute loyalty to Trump or are political allies who joined the Trump camp during the 2024 presidential election. The second type consists of those with long tenure or capability in relevant roles, absorbed into Trump’s second-term cabinet. Typical representatives are Secretary of State Marco Rubio and

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dan Caine. This type constitutes a smaller proportion within Trump's second-term cabinet but holds quite important positions.

3.2. Reshaping National Security Apparatus' Functions

Beyond a "major reshuffle" of key personnel appointments, the Trump administration has also abolished and merged numerous agencies under the U.S. national security apparatus. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was formally closed on July 1, 2025, its functions transferred to the U.S. Department of State, establishing a new "America First" foreign assistance mechanism shifting focus from traditional aid towards promoting private investment and trade linked to U.S. companies, aligning with "America First" foreign policy^[5]. However, the State Department itself has also been impacted. Secretary of State Rubio stated intentions to reorganize and streamline the State Department, eliminating redundant agencies, and terminating programs "inconsistent with core U.S. national interests^[6]". The National Security Council (NSC) suffered a significant blow. Following Waltz's departure, the NSC underwent a major reorganization, its function shifting from "policy advice" to "order execution^[7]". The Trump administration does not aim to abandon corresponding functions of the U.S. government but rather to make these agencies more effective tools for implementing the Trump administration's foreign policy.

3.3. Reallocating National Security Budgets

Concurrently with personnel appointments and agency mergers/abolitions, the Trump administration has correspondingly adjusted department budgets based on its perceived national security priorities. The adjustment principle remains alignment with the "America First" agenda. Institutions and programs not conforming to the "America First" agenda are often targeted for cuts. The Trump administration plans to cut support for humanitarian aid, global health, and international organization funding by 54%, 55%, and nearly 90% respectively^[8]. Conversely, projects aligning with the Trump administration's goals of expanding military advantage and enhancing technological strength receive increased funding. Marked by the 2026 National Defense Authorization Act, the Trump administration has signaled that the focus of its "America First" policy in the national security domain is to continue strengthening U.S. military technological superiority and global military hegemony.

4. The Impact of the "Reform Storm" within U.S. National Security Apparatus

4.1 Accelerated Reshaping of U.S. National Security Institutional Culture

Guided by loyalty to Trump, his administration is reshaping the organizational culture of U.S. national security apparatus. Since Trump's second inauguration, cabinet officials have undergone some changes, but these changes are less related to scandals or poor performance; loyalty to the president is the core factor. While the Trump administration drives changes in national security institutional culture, a cohort of think tanks serving "America First" continuously supply policies and personnel to the government. After Trump's first term ended, many officials from his cabinet established a series of related organizations to continue advancing the "America First" movement, including America First Legal, The Center for Renewing America, the America First Policy Institute, and The Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, among others^[9]. The intricate connections between the Trump administration and these institutions not only provide a foundation for the intellectual resources of its policies but also contribute to promoting a conservative shift within the organizational culture of national security apparatus.

4.2. Accelerated Shift in U.S. Global Strategic Deployment

The Trump administration's adjustments to personnel, institutions, and budgets of U.S. national security apparatus fundamentally serve the shift in the administration's global strategic layout. Consequently, the Trump administration will contract its presence in other secondary theaters like Europe. The Trump administration has released a series of signals

indicating a weakening of the U.S. role in NATO: the U.S. no longer leads the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (UDCG), with the UK and Germany now assuming co-leadership roles^[10]. The Pentagon is also considering withdrawing up to 10,000 U.S. troops from Eastern Europe^[11]. At the NATO summit in late June, Trump successfully pressured NATO allies to increase defense spending to 5% of GDP^[12]. Hegseth's policy pronouncements at the 22nd IISS Shangri-La Dialogue (2025) clearly identified homeland defense and "containing China" as equally paramount priorities^[13]. Hegseth's pronouncements indicate that even if the U.S. must "accept risks" in Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere, it will resolutely shift the focus of its strategic deployment to the Asia-Pacific.

4.3 Increased Domestic Turmoil in the United States

Amid the "reform storm" within U.S. national security apparatus and the broader "transformation" of the U.S. federal government and society by the Trump administration, internal legal battles, protests, and conflicts between the left and right can be expected to intensify. Legal chaos often manifests as repeated battles between Trump administration executive orders and groups opposing Trump's policies within the judicial system. For instance, on June 27, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a ruling limiting the power of federal judges to issue nationwide injunctions blocking presidential executive orders^[14], a ruling Trump hailed as a "huge victory." However, on July 10, New Hampshire Federal District Judge Joseph LaPlante used an exception clause within the ruling to again block the Trump administration from implementing its executive order aimed at restricting birthright citizenship^[15].

5. Conclusion

Compared to his first term, the second-term Trump has not only regained presidential executive power but also accumulated more experience, personnel, intellectual resources, and political energy, which he has been releasing since taking office, creating significant waves domestically and internationally. Even if the once highly visible "Department of Government Efficiency" has receded from the forefront, the momentum and actions of the Trump administration's continued "reform storm" against U.S. national security apparatus show no sign of abating. This means this "reform storm" is still ongoing, its long-term impact still to be observed.

Disclosure statement

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