Released yesterday by the U.S. Intelligence Community, this year’s Annual Threat Assessment is neither a new political doctrine nor a military strategy. Rather, the ATA shows which threats are currently identified by the U.S. Intelligence Community, how they are ranked, and which of them are most consequential for U.S. citizens, the Homeland, and U.S. interests around the world. At the same time, it is not a closed catalogue of threats, but a synthetic description of those that, in the judgment of the Intelligence Community, are the most direct and serious primarily during the next year.

That distinction matters, because the ATA itself does not set a course of action. Its function is to present an ordered picture of the world from an intelligence perspective and to show that the administration’s political and military priorities rest on a specific diagnosis of reality. From that point of view, the ATA is best read not in isolation, but together with the earlier U.S. strategic documents, the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy. Only then does the broader logic of how the current administration of President Donald Trump understands the world come fully into view.

The National Security Strategy sets out the overall logic of state policy. It is there that the Trump administration defines the overriding interests of the United States, stresses the need to evaluate, sort, and prioritize threats, and rejects the logic of diffuse engagement in everything at once. The National Defense Strategy translates that logic into military terms. It is in the NDS that we see clearly stated priorities such as defending the U.S. Homeland, deterring China in the Indo-Pacific, increasing burden-sharing with U.S. allies and partners, and strengthening the U.S. defense industrial base.

The ATA does not replicate the NSS and the NDS directly, because that is not its role. It does, however, show that the hierarchy adopted earlier at the political and military levels is not arbitrary, but flows from a picture of the security environment in which threats to borders, infrastructure, technological primacy, strategic deterrence, and the ability to respond to multiple crises simultaneously matter more to the United States than abstract ambitions of global management. It is therefore no coincidence that the ATA itself cautions against assuming that every problem in the world directly threatens the United States or is of equal importance to it, and stresses instead the need to think prudently and prioritize efforts. It can therefore be argued that these three documents together represent three levels of the same strategic order as seen from Washington.

Materiał pobrany ze strony Instytutu Sobieskiego, sobieski.org.pl[autor].

Selectivity Instead of Universalism

The most important feature of the 2026 Annual Threat Assessment is not the catalog of threats itself, but the way it orders the world from Washington’s point of view. According to the logic of the document, not all threats and crises are of equal importance to the United States or require the same degree of U.S. attention. Given their number and the risks associated with them, they must be prioritized according to their significance for U.S. citizens, the Homeland, technological primacy, and the nation’s ability to respond. In that sense, the ATA does not alter the course set earlier by the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy; it brings it into clearer order. The United States is not abandoning the world. It is ordering it according to its own threat hierarchy.

It is no coincidence that the first category of threats described in the document is not regions, alliances, or values, but the United States’ own territory, that is, the Homeland. This structure itself, much like in the NSS and the NDS, is not accidental. From the document’s perspective, secure borders, constraining drug cartels and transnational criminal organizations, managing migration, and countering the threat of Islamist ideology and terrorism are of central importance to the security of the state and its citizens. Only later does the document move to technological challenges and then to particular regional challenges. This matters because it shows a shift in the current administration’s perspective in Washington. Homeland security is becoming not only the foundation of domestic policy, but also one of the key reference points for foreign policy. International criminal organizations from Mexico and Colombia, transnational crime linked to actors from Venezuela, El Salvador, or Haiti, migration pressure, the threat of Islamist ideology and terrorism, cyber threats, and the risk to critical infrastructure all form a single analytical framework in the ATA. In this context, the significance of the Arctic should also be emphasized. It does not appear in the document as a secondary issue, but as another area directly linked to the security of the Homeland and to strategic competition with Russia and China.

Against that background, it is relatively easy to understand China’s place in the document. Contrary to some oversimplifications, this is not only about the Indo-Pacific or the military dimension alone. No other state today combines the technological, economic, military, and geopolitical dimensions to the same extent as the People’s Republic of China. That is precisely why competition with China concerns the entire structure of global advantage. It includes semiconductors, AI, outer space, supply chains, and the ability to shape the political decisions of other

Materiał pobrany ze strony Instytutu Sobieskiego, sobieski.org.pl[autor].

states. In this sense, China is not simply one of several adversaries facing Washington in a multipolar world. It is the United States’ only full-spectrum competitor.

Russia, although described at considerable length in the ATA, often in connection with China, occupies a different place in this framework. It remains a very serious threat, and in the European dimension the most serious one. The ATA also points to Russia’s aspirations to play the role of a global power in a multipolar world, above all in the post-Soviet space. Russia is described as the United States’ principal nuclear adversary and as a state capable of destabilization, selective confrontation, and cooperation with other U.S. adversaries, above all China, Iran, and North Korea. This does not mean, however, that Russia organizes overall U.S. strategy to the same extent as China. That is the crucial difference. From Washington’s point of view, Russia’s war against Ukraine is not merely a regional conflict. It is also a source of escalation risk and further destabilization in Europe, a region directly relevant to U.S. interests. At the same time, it is worth noting that the ATA also leaves limited room for potential cooperation with Russia in selected areas, should its perception of the U.S. threat change.

The document also places particular emphasis on technological challenges. Not so much as a separate sector of state policy, but as one of the principal sources of strategic advantage. In line with the logic of the ATA, AI, quantum computing, and advanced semiconductors now rank among the key sources of strategic advantage. The same is true of cyberspace and outer space, which are becoming enduring domains of pressure and competition rather than merely new areas of great-power activity. In the background remain weapons of mass destruction and the development of new, novel, or advanced delivery systems.

The problem facing the United States today, therefore, is not one or even several dominant threats. The problem is the overlap of a large number of military, technological, cyber, and regional threats, each of which requires a different set of tools and capabilities to counter. China is the principal global systemic competitor. Russia is an aspiring and very real military and nuclear threat. Terrorism is not disappearing, but is changing its methods in significant ways, making extensive use of social media and modern technologies to influence Western societies. Cartels and transnational criminal organizations, although weakened by the current administration’s actions, still pose a real challenge to domestic security. Cyber operations by groups linked to China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea have a real impact on critical infrastructure and cybersecurity, serving not only as tools of

Materiał pobrany ze strony Instytutu Sobieskiego, sobieski.org.pl[autor].

hybrid activity but also as a source of financing. To this must be added competition in outer space, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and a whole range of regional challenges. Such an image of the world means that, from the U.S. point of view, selectivity and prioritization are necessities, while burden sharing is a key instrument for building resilience not only in the United States, but among its allies as well.

Europe: A Primary but Increasingly Burdened Partner

In the 2026 Annual Threat Assessment, Europe remains among the primary economic and military partners of the United States. At the same time, this does not mean that the document presents the continent as stable or strategically comfortable. Quite the opposite. As in the other U.S. strategic documents, Europe is described as a region increasingly burdened by the effects of war, fiscal strain, demographic weakness, and large-scale migration. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine continues to destabilize the continent’s security, raise the costs borne by European states, and constrain their freedom of economic policymaking. At the same time, structural problems are deepening: mounting levels of national debt, coupled with anemic growth, aging societies, labor shortages, and rising social tensions linked to migration and the limited capacity to absorb new arrivals. In that same context, the ATA points to Islamist radicalization within some immigrant communities, the activity of Islamic movements connected in some cases to the Muslim Brotherhood, and the broader growth of extremist environments. Europe therefore remains a first-order partner for the United States, but at the same time one that is increasingly burdened by its own internal challenges.

This leads directly to the most important strategic consequence. Europe is expected to assume greater responsibility for its own security, but it is doing so from a position of greater weakness than many European decision-makers are prepared to admit. Contrary to some interpretations, this is not about a simple U.S. retreat from Europe, let alone a U.S. exit from Europe. It is, rather, about a change in proportions. From Washington’s perspective, Europe remains important, but it can no longer be treated as a theater requiring unlimited American concentration. Especially not at a time when the United States is simultaneously confronting the China challenge, pressure on the Homeland, proliferation risks, and intensifying technological competition. The problem, however, is that Europe is expected to shoulder a
greater share of the burden at a moment when its own political, social, and fiscal resiliency is weaker than Europe itself often wishes to acknowledge. This is one of

Materiał pobrany ze strony Instytutu Sobieskiego, sobieski.org.pl[autor].

the most important contexts for the ongoing debate over burden sharing, NATO, and the future of the continent’s security. It is also worth remembering that this strategic window will not remain open indefinitely. As pressure in the Indo-Pacific grows, tensions in the Middle East persist, and the concentration of resources on technological competition becomes more necessary, the United States’ ability to sustain a high level of engagement in Europe will naturally diminish.

Poland Must Decide Whether It Wants to Be Seen as a Client or as a Real and Valuable Partner

From the perspective of the 2026 Annual Threat Assessment, the central question for Poland today should not be: what more can the United States still do for our security? It should rather be: how can Poland increase the ability of the United States and the Alliance as a whole to operate in an increasingly complex security environment? This way of thinking is fully consistent with the logic of current U.S. strategic documents. Washington does not assess partners solely by their declared loyalty, but above all by their real utility to the broader system of deterrence, resilience, and power projection.

First, Poland should consistently build its position as a key operational platform onNATO’s eastern flank. This is not simply about the presence of U.S. forces. It is about creating the infrastructure, logistics capacity, and organizational readiness without which effective U.S. and NATO operations in the region would be significantly more difficult, slower, and more costly. That means further developing the capacity to receive, sustain, and rapidly move large allied forces, as well as strengthening storage, transportation, and command support. In practice, Poland should be seen not only as a frontline state, but as the land-based equivalent of a “strategic aircraft carrier,” helping structure the security of the entire eastern flank.

Second, Polish defense investments should be judged not only by the scale of procurement, but above all by their contribution to the real ability of the system to operate. Today’s battlefield increasingly shows that mass alone does not guarantee advantage if it is not embedded in a modern system of command, intelligence, data analysis, and rapid decision-making. Poland must therefore avoid the trap of overly hardware- centered thinking, in which major acquisitions are not matched by investment in systems integration, software, ISR, AI, and infrastructure resilience. Those are the areas that will determine whether equipment purchased today remains operationally useful a

Materiał pobrany ze strony Instytutu Sobieskiego, sobieski.org.pl[autor].

decade or even fifteen years from now.

Third, Poland has a unique opportunity to become a bridge between the experience of the war in Ukraine and the Western, including American, security and defense industrial base. Contemporary conflicts increasingly highlight the importance of inexpensive, rapidly deployable, and flexible technologies such as drones, autonomous systems, data-driven reconnaissance, and dual-use solutions. Because of its location, its regional experience, and its proximity to the Ukrainian theater, Poland should build its position as a state that not only buys technologies, but also tests, fields, integrates, and helps develop their practical application. For the United States, this would represent real added value: a partner capable of connecting lessons learned from a new type of war with NATO’s industrial and operational base.

Fourth, Poland’s response to the logic of the ATA should place much greateremphasis on energy security and maritime security as integral elements of state security. The Baltic Sea has ceased to be merely an economic space and has become one of the key arenas of infrastructure, energy, and hybrid competition. The LNG terminal, the FSRU project, Baltic Pipe, Naftoport, offshore wind farms, and future nuclear energy projects now form a system of assets with not only national, but also regional and allied significance. Under conditions of Russian pressure, shadow fleet activity, and the risk of sabotage against critical infrastructure, Poland should be seen as a state co-responsible for protecting the region’s energy lifeline. This fits directly into both Poland’s own security interests and the broader strategic logic of the United States.

Fifth and finally, Poland should seek much deeper integration into the American industrial and technological ecosystem, not as a mere recipient of military equipment, but as a partner capable of co-producing security. The 2026 Annual Threat Assessment makes clear that technology, industry, energy, cybersecurity, and supply chain resilience now form a single strategic order. From the Polish point of view, this means that relations with the United States must be viewed not only through the lens of military presence, but also through participation in supply chains, technology transfer, joint dual-use projects, and the development of domestic industrial capabilities. Only such a relationship offers a chance to build a truly durable position, one closer not to the classic model of a client, but to the model of a partner whose role is genuinely useful to the system and difficult to replace.

Materiał pobrany ze strony Instytutu Sobieskiego, sobieski.org.pl[autor].

From that point of view, the most important conclusion for Poland is simple: in the world described by the ATA, it is not enough to be a state located in the right place and spending heavily on defense. Poland must become a state that genuinely increases the ability of the broader system to function militarily, technologically, energetically, and infrastructurally. That is the direction in which Polish strategy should now evolve: from the logic of consumed security to the logic of co-produced security. Otherwise, Poland will remain a state with high defense spending but limited utility to the security system it seeks to help build.

The Sobieski Institute publishes commentary in both Polish and English to support the strategic debate at home and to present the Polish perspective to international partners. Both versions of this text are based on the same data and conclusions but differ in style and emphasis, tailored to readers in Poland and in the international environment.

Materiał pobrany ze strony Instytutu Sobieskiego, sobieski.org.pl[autor].