

IT'S TIME FOR A DATA DRIVEN FOREIGN POLICY REBOOT

MITRE's model to evaluate and prioritize U.S. engagements overseas delivers specific recommendations to implement the NDS and NDAA's new guidance now – and offers a tool to dynamically adjust plans based on emerging factors.

By: *Talia Gifford, Marcus Ferrara, Dr. LeAnne Howard*

The 2026 National Defense Strategy (NDS) and the FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) call for a new era in U.S. foreign engagement.

The 2026 NDS orients the Department of War (DoW) around four Lines of Effort (LOEs): defending the U.S. homeland, including borders, Western Hemisphere key terrain, and counter terrorism (CT)/cyber/air missile drone defenses; deterring China in the Indo Pacific through a denial posture along the First Island Chain; increasing burden sharing with allies and partners; and supercharging the U.S. defense industrial base (DIB) by “mobilizing, renewing, and securing” it.

The NDS and NDAA outline a need for more focused security cooperation, and a way to prioritize efficient resource allocation, to build dominant posture against adversarial major powers.

MITRE has developed an evaluation model that enables a structured, data driven framework for prioritizing U.S. engagement with emerging and middle-income countries (EMICs) based on these priorities. **Using consistent assessments that span diplomatic alignment, economic potential, military and security cooperation, and cross cutting strategic value, the framework identifies priority partners in line with new strategic guidance.**

Though various tools and databases have been developed within government and academia over the past decade, the advent of agentic tools enables improved and dynamic capabilities for U.S. departments and agencies to better align limited resources and maximize impact. The NDS

makes intended changes clear, and the next step is applying these changes deliberately across regional and bilateral planning.

New Priorities, New Process

The FY2026 NDAA directs the Pentagon to concentrate security cooperation on partners who demonstrate alignment and capacity for sustained collaboration. To this end, MITRE applied its EMIC methodology and scoring rubric design to evaluate the countries across three categories of economic ties, strategic locations, and law enforcement & military ties. We add analysis on how those results accelerate implementation of the NDS by including ‘cross-cutting strategic value’ in the chart below.

Using these parameters, the data-driven results are distilled into recommendations that can be simplified by region. In short, the model provides clear data to back up what U.S. leaders have identified as priorities while shedding further light on which nations rise in priority based on specific U.S. values and interests.

Each pillar in the EMIC framework maps to the new NDS lines of effort: the economic pillar supports increased burden sharing and supercharging the U.S. DIB by targeting EMICs that are economically strong enough to burden share and help “mobilize, renew, and secure” the defense industrial base through resilient supply chains and critical minerals, while Strategic Location and Law Enforcement & Military Ties align with defending the homeland and deterring China by prioritizing key terrain, border security, by prioritizing key terrain, border security, CT, and homeland defense.

The table below provides a few examples of countries, organized alphabetically by region, under the following categories of analysis:

- **Diplomatic Alignment:** Degree of political alignment with U.S. positions and willingness to engage in strategic collaboration.
- **Economic Potential:** Market size, growth trajectory, and relevance to U.S. supply chain resilience.

- **Military/Security Cooperation:** Existing defense relationships, interoperability, and willingness to support regional stability.
- **Cross Cutting Strategic Value:** Extended implications under the NDAA and NDS; geographic relevance, mineral resources, demographic trends, and exposure to competitor influence.

Table 1: Example EMICs. This summary table was developed based on analysis in MITRE paper *Selective Engagement in Middle Income Countries: A New Framework to Efficiently Strengthen U.S. National and Economic Security*, January 2026.

Country	Diplomatic Alignment	Economic Potential	Military/Security Cooperation	Cross Cutting Strategic Value	Overall Justification
WESTERN HEMISPHERE					
Mexico	Deep institutional ties	Central to North American supply chains	Strong cooperation despite challenges	Border adjacency; migration leverage	Indispensable partner for U.S. domestic and regional stability
Chile	Stable partner	Critical minerals powerhouse	Reliable cooperation	Gateway to South Pacific	High mineral and economic value
Colombia	Historically strong alignment	Reliable trade partner	Long-standing cooperation	Regional stabilizer	Most dependable partner in northern South America
Brazil	Mixed diplomacy	Largest economy in Latin America	Moderate cooperation	Regional influence	Essential hemispheric actor
Peru	Generally aligned	Major minerals exporter	Functional cooperation	Pacific access	High economic value with governance caveats
INDO-PACIFIC / ASIA					
India	Historically non-aligned	Rapidly growing economy	Expanding defense cooperation	Demographic weight; Indo-Pacific anchor	Essential counterbalance to China
Vietnam	Competing alignments yield challenges	Major manufacturing alternative to China	Growing naval cooperation	Strategic South China Sea location	High-value partner for supply chain diversification
Philippines	Treaty ally; renewed alignment	Moderate economic ties	Critical basing and access	Central to Pacific deterrence	Frontline state for Indo-Pacific security
Thailand	Competing alignments threaten historic alignment	Strong manufacturing base	Solid cooperation	Key mainland Southeast Asia geography	Valuable partner if engagement is sustained
Indonesia	Nonaligned but open	Large, growing economy	Improving cooperation	Controls key maritime chokepoints	Crucial for Indo-Pacific maritime strategy
AFRICA					
Morocco	Consistent alignment	Growing investment environment	Strong counterterrorism ties	Gateway to Africa and Europe	Reliable partner with strategic geography
Kenya	Strong diplomatic ties	Growing tech/services economy	Reliable counterterrorism partner	East African hub	Anchor for U.S. engagement in East Africa
Zambia	Improving governance	Critical copper/cobalt reserves	Growing cooperation	Mineral supply chain relevance	Strategic minerals partner
South Africa	Mixed diplomacy trending away from US	Advanced economy	Moderate cooperation	Regional leadership	High potential if alignment improves
DRC	Limited alignment	Dominant cobalt supplier	Weak cooperation	Essential minerals	High-risk, high-reward minerals partner

In tandem to identifying priorities, the model also provides analysis for which nations the U.S. might choose to deprioritize, offering a clear-eyed assessment on where U.S. investment of limited resources could yield minimal strategic return.

Taking Theory to Reality

Political realities must be built into Return on Investment (ROI) calculations. High scoring countries in the model still require a realpolitik review to determine whether domestic politics, strategic hedging, or resistance to U.S. initiatives will prevent engagements from delivering results. In addition to the factors outlined above, affiliations with multinational organizations—such as BRICS—should also factor into U.S. engagement decisions.

INDO-PACIFIC: India, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia are central to a deterrence by denial posture along the First Island Chain and key sea lanes, providing access, basing, and exercises around chokepoints such as the Malacca–Sunda–Lombok corridors. The framework also flags Indo-Pacific EMICs best suited to host crisis communications, de-escalation, and confidence building mechanisms and to serve as hubs for multilateral exercises that both build denial capabilities and preserve stable military to military channels with China.

WESTERN HEMISPHERE: Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and Chile are priorities for trade and minerals and for homeland defense, with Mexico's border adjacency and migration leverage directly supporting NDS goals to secure borders and counter narco terrorists through partner capacity and, if needed, unilateral options. The framework applies a chokepoint and key terrain logic consistent with NDS focus on Greenland, the Gulf of America, and the Panama Canal, prioritizing partners whose geography affects access to this terrain and showing where **Mexico and regional EMICs can shoulder primary responsibility for migration, counter narcotics, and narco terrorist disruption with targeted U.S. support.**

AFRICA: The framework aligns with NDS priorities to prevent terrorist safe havens that could enable strikes on the U.S. homeland, reserve direct action for groups with clear homeland intent and capability, and empower partners against other threats. It surfaces **EMICs such as Kenya and Morocco as reliable CT partners and regional hubs that can take primary responsibility for local and regional groups**, allowing the U.S. to focus more narrowly on homeland focused threats while still considering mineral access and broader strategic value.

This model, and other evaluation tools, are only as effective as the quality of the data being analyzed, and this instance was developed from unclassified information. If the Executive Branch employs a more advanced model, various classified instances and data will ultimately improve the output of results. Additionally, any model must be adjusted to dynamically consider enduring and emerging levels of cooperation. This includes incorporation of analysis on new political agreements and deals, allowing policymakers to adjust engagement according to current conditions.

Next, adjusted institutional mechanisms are necessary to ensure consistent, disciplined prioritization. Congress may encourage the Executive Branch to prioritize optimized, data-driven foreign engagement in NDAA authorizations. Meanwhile, the State Department may reenergize its role to orchestrate diplomatic prioritization and negotiation objectives, regularly coordinated with Commerce, DoE, and DoW. For example, Commerce may take the lead in securing the critical minerals and components needed to 'mobilize, renew, and secure' the defense industrial base, identifying nontraditional suppliers and EMIC based firms that can grow the pool of nontraditional vendors and strengthen organic sustainment.

How the Executive Branch orchestrates this is based on the President's prerogative. **This framework provides a clear, data-driven approach that drives informed choices and coordinated implementation.** Whether it be DoW or State or another entity, whoever is empowered to lead this approach should drive policy specifics, synchronization across departments and agencies, and implementation of new strategic guidance at regional and bilateral levels.

Finally, continually refining and applying agreed upon prioritization metrics and emerging geopolitical factors is critical. This process will enable the Executive Branch to make recommendations to Congress across multiple committees.



Conclusion: Strategic Rationale for Prioritization

The 2025 NSS, 2026 NDS and FY2026 NDAA call for a more disciplined, strategically aligned foreign policy. MITRE's EMIC model supports this goal, as it is a practical instrument for operationalizing all four NDS lines of effort:

- Prioritizing EMICs that contribute to homeland security, border control, CT, and outer ring defenses.
- Identifying Indo-Pacific EMICs essential for deterrence and defense through denial and stable engagement with China.
- Surfacing where allies and EMICs can assume greater burden sharing responsibilities.

- Targeting EMIC partnerships that underpin the DIB "national mobilization" through secure minerals, components, and industrial linkages.
- Transparent, auditable, and adjustable, allowing leaders to rapidly re-weight criteria as the NDS evolves or as new agreements and geopolitical developments emerge.

MITRE's data driven EMICs prioritization model informs interagency trade-offs and decision-making and ensures that U.S. engagement is efficient, competitive, and aligned with long term national interests, as well as emerging geopolitical dynamics.

The model provides a starting point to rapidly explore and implement more effective national frameworks for institutionalizing prioritization that enables smarter resource allocation and strengthens U.S. competitiveness.

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The Department of War is laser-focused on restoring peace through strength. As detailed in the NSS, the President's approach is one of a flexible, practical realism that looks at the world in a clear-eyed way, which is essential for serving Americans' interests ... prioritizing the missions that matter most for Americans' security, freedom, and prosperity.

— 2026 National Defense Strategy

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