ieee.es
Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos

Opinion
Paper

38/2025 22/05/2025

*Gonzalo Rodríguez Suanzes**

The American "Grand Strategy" and realism in the 21st Century: decline or hegemony?

The American "Grand Strategy" and realism in the 21st Century: decline or hegemony?

Abstract:

The realist approach to international relations holds that states must confront reality as it is, outside of liberal conventions, treaties, or agreements that might give false hope for peace. From this perspective, states are immersed in the search for a balance of power to ensure their security and survival, so war may constitute a necessary resource to promptly restore that balance.

In the current context, the evolving strategic environment and the conflict in Ukraine have driven a more defensive reconfiguration of states. The arrival of the new Trump administration has reinforced this trend with the adoption of a unilateral foreign policy focused exclusively on national interests.

Keywords:

Grand Strategy, Hegemony, US, China, Russia, Realism, Trump, Balance of Power

How to quote:

RODRIGUEZ, Gonzalo. *The American "Grand Strategy" and realism in the 21st Century: decline or hegemony?* Opinion Paper. IEEE 38/2025.
Web link IEEE and/or link bie[3] (accessed on the web day/month/year)

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

Introduction

In his book, *Recurring Debates in U.S. Grand Strategy*[1], Christopher Hemmer describes the four debates that have served as the basis for successive U.S. administrations in developing their Grand Strategy. These debates are known as National Security Strategies (NSS).

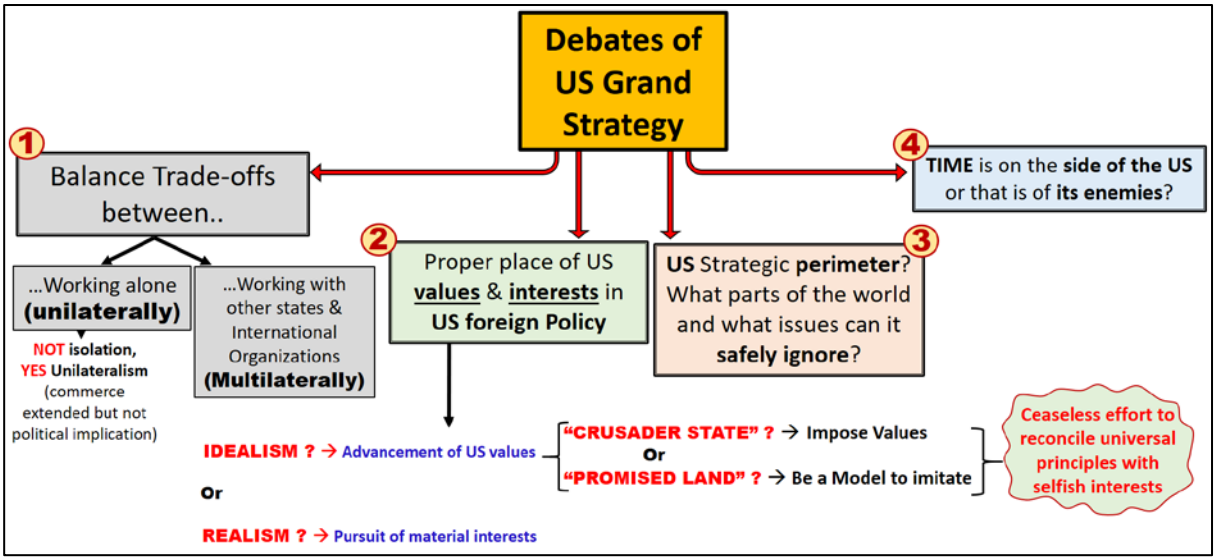

Figure 1. The four debates of the US Grand Strategy[2] according to Hemmer (Own elaboration)

From a geopolitical perspective, a strategy studies the most appropriate **ways** to achieve a series of (political) **ends** through the rational use of the **means** available at its disposal[3].

In this context, a Grand Strategy differs from a conventional strategy in its use of **means**—which would integrate all the instruments of state power—and the definition of **ends**—which would have national impact and never concreted to a specific sector of society[4].

In the case of the United States, the nuance lies in the **ways** it develops its Grand Strategy, reflecting its recognized position as the world's leading power, issuing a

[1] HEMMER, Christopher, "American Pendulum. Recurring Debates in US Grand Strategy", Cornell University Press, New York, 2015.
[2] The period covered is from 1914 to 2014
[3] ALONSO BAQUER, Miguel. "Estrategia, Geoestrategia, Geopolítica". Documento de Análisis IEEE, 2010.https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2010/DIEEEA08-2010
[4] HEMMER, Christopher, "American Pendulum. Recurring Debates in US Grand Strategy", Cornell University Press, New York, 2015.

narrative of its position to the world so that its allies, or potential allies, can feel reassured, and its enemies, or potential enemies, can be formally dissuaded.

When we refer to American Grand Strategy, the combination of these three elements—**means, ways, and ends**—is what paves the way for the "rules of the game" of the international order.

Therefore, this Grand Strategy constitutes the showcase of American credentials as the great global geopolitical architect, where intent is more important than content, and which offers the US vision of how to address the future of its international relations in the medium to long term. All of this is in accordance with strategic objectives aimed at a single grand end or purpose: the pursuit and preservation of **National Security**.

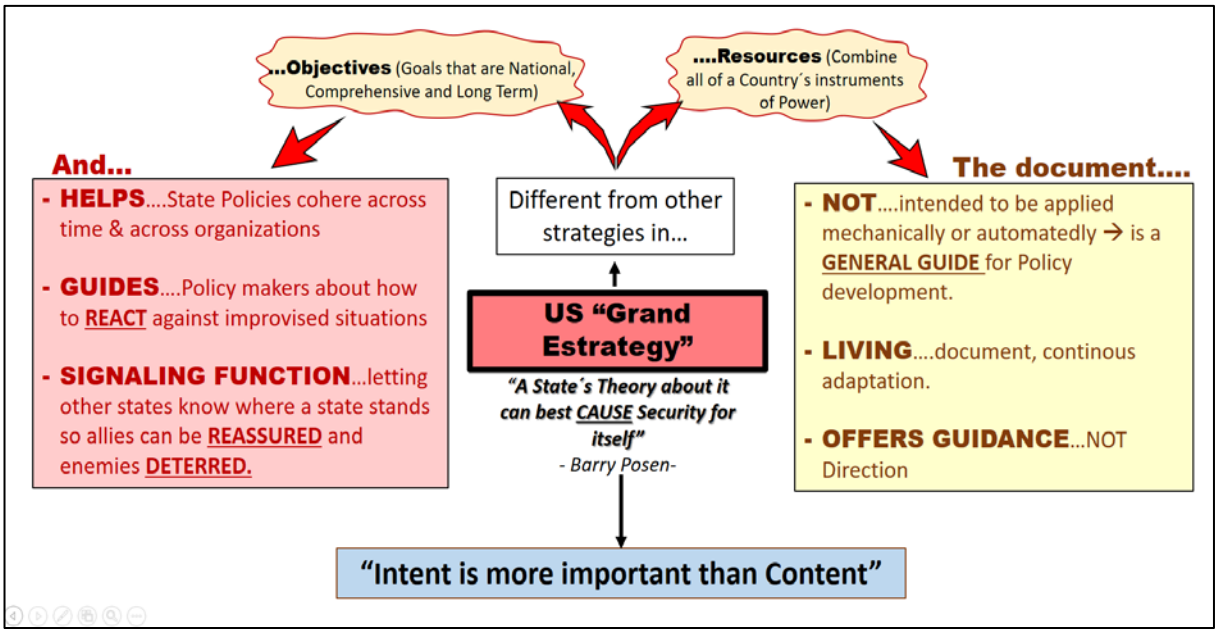

Figure 2. Explanatory graph “US Grand Strategy” according to Hemmer (Own elaboration)

However, the rational and practical approach to Grand Strategy has historically been difficult for the US, given that its status as a leading power and the need to prosper economically have led it to aspire to grand objectives—such as ridding the world of war—that would prove to be practically unattainable. Graham Allison already alluded to this idiosyncratic aspect of US administrations, stating that: “Prioritize everything is to prioritize nothing (…) Geopolitical projects decoupled from national priorities are bound to fail[5]”.

[5] ALLISON, Graham, “Destiny for War. Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?” Houghton Mifflin

The key to achieve an effective Grand Strategy is to develop foreign policy objectives without neglecting domestic priorities. This will allow for an optimal balance between the use of means and the adequacy of ends, thereby determining its true effectiveness.

Is then an effective Grand Strategy foreseeable under the new Trump Administration? The expansion of US liberal hegemony has given way to a loss of relative US power in an increasingly complex and multipolar strategic environment, impacting national security policies and the dynamics of the new administration's current behavior.

How did we get here?

From the fundamentally isolationist “Monroe” Doctrine to the liberal institutionalism´s first attempt promoted by Woodrow Wilson[6], the expansion of American liberal hegemony officially began at the end of World War II [7]. The problem with this expansion would have been to translate the theory of hegemonic stability [8] to an effective foreign policy, where investment in military power and liberal institutionalism would take center stage in the goals of achieving lasting peace and a stable global economy.

However, the evolution of US Grand Strategy until the end of the 20th century would ultimately be unproductive in its contribution to strengthening national security, which would be profoundly affected by the attacks of September 11, 2001[9].

With this paradigm shift in international security, the seven strategies that would emerge throughout the 21st century would respond to the pulse of globalization, the evolution of

Harcourt, Boston, 2017.

[6] Twenty-eighth President of the United States (1913–1921), known for pushing for the failed creation of the League of Nations based on the need to abandon American isolationism.

[7] "It was necessary to undertake a reconstruction that went far beyond the purely economic, reestablishing reference values (…). It had to become more involved, this time becoming an active part of the new international organizations and assuming a leading role in designing the new international order, a "liberal" one (…)" PORTERO, Florentino, “Los Fundamentos de la acción exterior de Estados Unidos” Panorama Estratégico 2024, Págs. 67-89, 2024 https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=9422638

[8] This theory states that “a liberal and open world economy requires a hegemonic power for its maintenance and stability.” MOLINA CAMPANO, Eduardo, *“*El Concepto de hegemonía en las relaciones internacionales: Una crítica a Andreas Antoniades*”* Revista Internacional de Pensamiento Político, 2019. https://www.upo.es/revistas/index.php/ripp/article/view/4827/4236

[9] The United States would emerge as the undisputed world leader after the Cold War, but it would be the last decade it would enjoy as a "unipolar moment." KRAUTHAMMER, Charles, *“*The Unipolar Moment Revisited*”* The National Interest—Winter 2002/03, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/pantheon_files/files/publication/krauthammer.pdf

technology, the shift to the Indo-Pacific (driven by the emergence of China), and transnational threats.

While awaiting the new NSS, this evolving conception of American Grand Strategy appears to have taken a significant turn with the recent arrival of the Trump Administration, where maintaining the rules of the game of the liberal order seems to be no longer a priority.

The new American foreign policy has now focused on "punishing" its allies with threats to withdraw US security umbrella and impose tariffs to satisfy national interests that have supposedly never been considered. For this reason, today it is perhaps especially relevant to talk about a new Grand Strategy that, according to Barry Posen's definition of "A State's theory about it can best cause security for itself[10]", it shows a face of a new administration determined to pressure the states (whether they are allies or not), to develop foreign policy lines of action based exclusively on national interests.

Therefore, the effectiveness of a Grand Strategy resulting from a desirable balance between the use of means and proper ends seems to be distorted from reality. Trump has begun his term by striking a blow of authority within both increasingly complex and multipolar international landscape. The problem is that the emergence of new actors, the lack of capacity to resolve current conflicts, and the rise of China seem to be affecting the US's loss of relative power, potentially affecting its national security.

Precisely because of the risk and global implications that this potential loss of US security could have on the international scene, this article offers a series of reflections on the hegemonic role[11] and current state of US Grand Strategy from the perspective of "Realism," given that it has historically been the most influential theory in International Relations.

[10] POSEN, Barry. “Restraint. A new Foundation for US Grand Strategy”. Cornell University Press, New York, 2014, (p.1)

[11] “The hegemony of the United States must be understood as the continuous articulation between 1) the permanent accumulation of collective power (which involves the media diffusion of the “universal” project of the hegemon; protagonist in the creation and functioning of the spaces of articulation; maintenance of the geographical expansion of capital and asymmetric exchange) and 2) the permanent exercise of dominance (…) that enables and impels the hegemonic power to direct the modern world-system towards the maintenance and expansion of capitalism, although this objective faces a process of relative hegemonic decline” MOLINA CAMPANO, Eduardo, “El Concepto de hegemonía en las relaciones internacionales: Una crítica a Andreas Antoniades” Revista Internacional de Pensamiento Político, 2019.(p. 432)

To achieve this goal, three fundamental premises of this current of thought will be established as a line of reasoning[12].

- The first is to determine whether "**facts prevail over purposes**" – that is, whether there is a thorough analysis of the most relevant geopolitical facts and the origins of leader´s behavior are being clarified. This is necessary to understand their aspirations and is the first step in building coherent strategic lines of action.
- The second is to identify whether "**passions dominate reason**" – a misinterpretation of the situation, a perception of a lack of credibility, insecurity, overconfidence, overstated self-image, a false perception of power… are always present and can give rise to a foreign policy contrary to the true interests of the state.
- The third is whether there is prudence in appealing to a "l**ogic of relative gains**." This premise would imply the moderation of particular interests in foreign policy so that the maximization of US power is seen as the force driving the general interest. "A dominant state exercises a hegemonic function if it directs the system of states in the desired direction and this is perceived as the pursuit of the general interest[13]”.

Why a realist approach?

The essential contribution that realism has made throughout history can be summed up in a simple phrase: "It is the theory that calls for facing things as they are, rather than domesticating and imposing an ideological straitjacket on them to be seen as we want them to be[14]”.

[12] These three premises correspond to postulates of different branches of Realism, specifically Neorealism (Kenneth Waltz), Classical Realism (Hans Morghentau), and Defensive Structural Realism (Stephen Waltz), respectively. These were chosen because they were considered the most appropriate to meet the objectives of this article. The realist school of thought has always been present throughout history and is the most widely used in the discipline of International Relations. It became popular in the wake of World War II and among its characteristics assumes that war is inevitable and inherent to human beings and that it is not advisable to treat wars from a moral perspective. It also affirms that we must deal with an international system that is increasingly anarchic and conflictual, which incentivizes the pursuit of power, and that we must distrust alliances and the real possibilities of International Law. (Baqués et al.,2023)

[13] PÉREZ TAGLE, Jesús A. “La hegemonía de EEUU: una propuesta conceptual”, Iztapalapa Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, 2022. (p.202) https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=8830241

[14] SANHUEZA CARVAJAL, R.A. “El Realismo Político. ¿Un denostado desconocido?” UNED. Teoría y Realidad Constitucional, 2003.

The theory of Realism in international relations is framed within an overall vision of great powers that coexist in an **anarchic system**[15] where there are no guarantees that one state cannot be attacked by another because there is no "referee," or higher authority, above them who can intervene or moderate a potential confrontation.

To modulate this anarchy, states cling to a constant search for power to achieve a balance that acts as a buffer against potential conflicts. This is why, for realists, war constitutes a legitimate means that can be used to restore this balance and thus continue to guarantee the survival of the state.

Therefore, the first objective of a Grand Strategy is to accept the fact that states find themselves in a world where war is always possible[16].

In this context, and considering the international scenario at hand, we would find ourselves immersed in a multipolar world with an increasing number of revisionist actors who do not accept the *status quo* or the imposition of a rules-based order.

These actors would tend to associate and lean toward a more antagonistic position because they are assumed to be held in thrall by powerful states. A representative example of this could be seen in the BRICS[17], el “Global South[18]”, and the so-called "Authoritarian Axis" led by China and including Russia, Iran and North Korea[19]. From this perspective, these states would be more appreciated and more secure, as long as the coalition they join achieves sufficient economic and defensive power to maintain the desired balance of power against the Western bloc.

[15] We define here as “System” the “Organization of a domain that acts as a limiting or authorizing force of the interacting units” (WALTZ, Kenneth, “Teoría de la política internacional”, 1979, p.108)
[16] POSEN, Barry. “Restraint. A new Foundation for US Grand Strategy”. Cornell University Press, New York, 2014, (p.2)
[17] BRICS refers to certain emerging market countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and the list of countries joining the bloc is growing. They seek to establish deeper ties among member nations and cooperate primarily in economic expansion to counter Western influence in global institutions.
[18] “Whether we like it or not, the Global South is now a geopolitical reality, not a Russian invention or a Chinese-led conspiracy against the West. The leaders of developing countries who refuse to isolate either Russia or China are neither foolishly naive nor chronically misinformed. Like the West, they pursue their own domestic and foreign interests.”https://www.politicaexterior.com/el-sur-global-es-una-realidad-geopolitica/
[19]“China is hardening its own system globally, radically focusing on the possibility of a heated conflict with the US and increasing investment in an authoritarian axis that, while still fragile, is building a stronghold of decidedly anti-American, anti-Western, and anti-liberal power bases from Moscow to Tehran and Pyongyang.” https://www.politicaexterior.com/alemania-y-el-epicentro-del-reordenamiento-mundial/

Applying the Realist Approach to the 21st Century´s main scenarios

With the prior approach in mind in the current strategic landscape, it is worth asking a first question: If the pursuit of a balance of power constitutes, for many realists, the "law of gravity" in international relations, what then is the true purpose behind the seemingly expansionist strategies of Xi Jinping, Putin, and Netanyahu?

The realist perspective we are proposing could provide a possible answer: **modulating the global balance of power by aspiring to a preeminent position in the international order**. This would prompt these actors to increase their claims to sovereignty—or a share of power—thus strengthening their systemic position—and therefore their security—in the international order. This reasoning could explain why China has spent so many years focusing its efforts on not being confined, either by land or sea, in a region to which it "naturally" belongs, or why Russia has responded in the worst possible way by invading Ukrainian territory in response to the "existential" threat it perceives in NATO expansion; or why Israel continues to increase its settlements and escalate the war in Gaza and Lebanon, if not to find itself less surrounded by enemies who threaten its security [20].

But what is truly striking about this logic is that it could be perfectly applicable to the United States, since the aspirations of the new Trump Administration regarding Greenland, Panama and Canada confirm that the expansion of sovereignty could become a subject of National Security[21].

Therefore, the approach of Realism could be more relevant today than ever for avoiding future wars, since it is essential to delve into the causes that originate them. This theory opposes others such as liberalism (Idealism), which, in contrast to this realist perspective, defends that association, promotion of values, alliances, and foundations of International Law are the only effective elements to prevent wars[22].

[20] “Security as emancipation: global norms must correspond to local and regional realities. Conflicts in the international system are becoming more regionalized, necessitating a decentralized system to maintain order, a horizontal approach from all levels.” https://revistafal.com/equilibrio-de-poder-una-mirada-desde-la-teoria-critica/

[21] https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/mirar-un-mapa-groenlandia-la-clave-del-artico/

[22]Here another “realist” author, Van Evera, attributes the lack of concreteness of realism as the main defect of this current, because it has given hope to failed ideas of peace and disarmament (…) “A greater concreteness [of realism] is the indispensable step to offer countermeasures that support decision-making in favor of peace.” BAQUÉS, J., “¿Cómo funciona el Mundo? Una perspectiva desde la geopolítica”. Valencia, Tyrant Lo Blanch, 2023 (p.86)

For realists, the great error of the liberal movement is precisely the emphasis placed on the capacity of institutions to mitigate the anarchy of the international system.

Realism also maintains that interstate associations and alliances threaten the security of states by, in a sense, ceding part of their sovereignty through the commitments and obligations they undertake. Furthermore, it interprets these commitments as fragile because they come up from particular will of the states, and not from one universal will established above them[23][24].

Translated to the case of the United States, Democrats would always have shown a greater tendency toward multilateralism, arguing that international institutions help create a common language of orderly, rational, and peaceful relations. Furthermore, the great power of the United States would grant the privilege of writing the rules of those relations, institutionalizing them into its values and dominating both decisions and outcomes[25].

However, Republicans (more realistic) would always reproach Democrats for their willingness to sacrifice their sovereignty in favor of international organizations[26], A trend that will undoubtedly gain particular prominence today with Trump, with his evident rejection of multilateralism that is already affecting the credibility of NATO and US relations with its traditional allies.

However, in a postmodern, interconnected, and borderless world, it is irremediably necessary to act as a cooperative system rather than individual states, especially when facing transnational or common threats.[27]. Furthermore, the compendium of interstate interactions and relations should also serve to limit the self-interested options of states[28].

In practical terms, the reality is that the US would never have been too affected by these potential constraints arising from cooperative action—and this will be especially significant in the new Trump administration—having already demonstrated that the US can freely act against the rules of the liberal order founded by itself.

[23] Ibídem.
[24] The recurring vetoes and abstentions in the UN Security Council by the US, China, and Russia are a clear example of the prevalence of national interests over all other considerations.
[25] POSEN, Barry. "Restraint. A new Foundation for US Grand Strategy". Cornell University Press, New York, 2014
[26] Ibídem
[27] These threats include international terrorism, pandemics and epidemics, climate change, and illegal immigration.
[28] BAQUÉS, J., "¿Cómo funciona el Mundo? Una perspectiva desde la geopolítica". Valencia, Tirant Lo Blanch, 2023.

Even with all this, and from a realistic perspective, states should accept, in addition to the possibility of war, cooperative action as long as it does not affect the balance of power in the System[29].

System imbalances and their impact on security

For anarchic equilibrium to be modulated in the international system, states must be able to guarantee their own security (self-help)[30]. The problem is that the rise of the US as a liberal hegemon has been devouring the Western bloc's defense capacity, leaving its security increasingly subordinated to the protection of the US giant's military umbrella.

However, in the current context, the US has chosen to be more "feared" than "loved," a clear allusion to Machiavellian notion that "interstate relations are more reliable if they are resolved in terms of power; or rather, in terms of fear." And this fear is rooted in the possibility that oppresses a large part of the international community of no longer counting on the US as a great benefactor and protector if the demands of the new administration are not met.

This constitutes a serious problem today, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine, where the deterioration of US relations with the EU has made clear the European bloc's inability to defend itself autonomously against the Russian threat.

Before Trump's arrival, the US orchestrated a liberal order to which it provided benefits to strengthen its systemic position because its national interests so dictated[31] (a fact that made it a *de facto* liberal hegemon).

---

[29] This realist perspective focuses more on a "defensive" conception of international relations, where the most powerful state meets the needs of other states without relinquishing its leadership position, and in turn, these states try to improve their position of power in the system without aspiring to achieve that leadership position. Defensive realism predicts that in a situation that favors defense, states will support maintaining the status quo (JORDAN, J. 2013). The other branch is offensive realism, inspired by John Mearsheimer. This perspective maintains that "states tend to accumulate as much power as possible, even aspiring to a hegemonic position (...) which does not prevent them from reaching agreements based on cooperation on matters of common interest" (MEARSHEIMER, J. 2003).

[30] “Given anarchy, states, as self-interested political units, must contend and work within the distribution of their material capabilities, understood as military power. The differential distribution of these capabilities generates uncertainty, which motivates states to ensure their security by maximizing relative gains in order to protect their position in the system (Grieco, 1988). States fear the power of other states, but they cannot turn to any other body that can guarantee their security in the event of conflict. Therefore, for neorealists, self-help is a function of anarchy. (Waltz, 1979)” FRANCIS O. CHAN, Aaron, “A Study of Self-Help in Anarchic International Systems”, 2010, https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/4697

[31]“Hegemony or leadership is based on a general belief in the legitimacy of the hegemon, while at the same time being constrained by the need to maintain its position; other states accept the rules of the hegemonic state's game because of its prestige and status in the international political system”. SANHUEZA CARVAJAL, R.A. “Political Realism. A much-maligned unknown?” UNED. Teoría y Realidad Constitucional, núms 10-11, 2º semestre 2003, pp. 401-421. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=1039041

This hegemonic leadership provided a relatively stable order that could only endure if consensus among the political systems of all the states involved continued, along with a demonstrated capacity to adapt to changes in the international system[32].

However, this has not been the case, and what it has ultimately caused is a fissure in the balance of power structure[33], turning "anarchy" into a "hierarchy" of dependent states aligned with US leadership, from which a protectorate has emerged showing clear signs of fragility.

This fragility is caused by the US's tacit refusal to continue acting as a traditional liberal hegemon, as it is no longer interested in leveraging its power to maintain a regime that no longer serves its national interests.

With all the above, and to highlight the importance of this realistic approach, a second question might be worth asking, specifically in light of this US hegemonic disconnect in the context of the war in Ukraine: What might Putin fear most: the effects of a possible use of armed force upon activation of NATO Article 5[34]?, or a visible defensive reconfiguration of NATO´s member states? Or: What would be most effective way to put an end to Russian pretensions: relying on the foundations of the collective security treaties and international law, or a clear and decisive commitment to conventional deterrence?

What is really being debated is whether, if we advocate a policy of appeasement with Russia, or disarmament, or even the surrender of Ukraine—all at the behest of the US—what signals would we be sending to Putin?[35]

[32] “Leadership (…) must be constantly renewed, since “the dominant group” has to face a “constant overcoming of unstable balances” with subordinate groups. PÉREZ TAGLE, Jesús A. “La hegemonía de EEUU: una propuesta conceptual”, Iztapalapa Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, 2022. (p.205)

[33] “Anarchy continues as long as unlimited self-help remains the preeminent option (…). Hegemony is a defect of the structure (…). HAAS, Ernst B, “Words can hurt you; or, who said what about regimes”, Cornell University Press, 1989.

[34] *“The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them, (…) shall be considered as an attack directed against all of them, and, consequently, they agree that, if such an attack occurs, each of them, (…), shall assist the Party or Parties attacked, by taking thereafter, individually and in agreement with the other Parties, such measures as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore security in the North Atlantic area.”* NATO - Topic: Collective defence and Article 5

[35] *"If Putin emerges victorious after standing on the brink of failure solely by a sudden shift in US policy, it will reshape global security in dangerous ways"* (Foreign Affairs, 2025) Ukraine Without America: How Kyiv Can Persist in the Face of a Hostile Washington

Realist Premises Applied to American Grand Strategy

As mentioned above, the primacy of facts over purposes constitutes the first realist premise to be addressed in the analysis of American Grand Strategy.

According to Edward Carr, precursor of the first major debate in International Relations, "good theory is not that which competes with facts, but that which is capable of accounting for those facts (...) International Law, the notion of the International Community, are fallacies (...). Good purposes cannot prevail over facts".

Therefore, from this perspective, the necessary measures to mitigate the current potential instability would require that purposes, whether promoted by International Law or fueled by specific interests, not prevail over the reality of the facts, thereby avoiding a combination of ingenuity and malpractice in the actions derived from the application of American Grand Strategy.

Based on this first realist premise, it is important to keep in mind that the implementation of US foreign policy actions will always be influenced by a combination of three fundamental aspects (all of them characteristic of any Western government):

- The ideology and political affiliation of the rulers.

- The lack of continuity among governments that alternate in power.

- **The psychological predisposition of certain rulers toward certain patterns of action.**

It is on this last aspect that we want to focus our attention, given its relevance today. Kenneth Waltz already alluded to the psychological factor of rulers and its impact on the possible outbreak of war, stating that: "Pride, vanity, anger, or even hatred are factors that explain wars as a fatality from which we cannot escape[36]"

This statement by Waltz leads us to the second realist premise we want to emphasize: "Passions dominate reason." This premise is very appropriate in the current landscape, given the uncertainty surrounding Trump's return to the US presidency.

[36] BAQUÉS, J., “¿Cómo funciona el Mundo? Una perspectiva desde la geopolítica”. Valencia, Tirant Lo Blanch, 2023

The global implications we are already seeing with Trump's return reflect a notable impetuosity, improvisation, and anti-system ("outsider") personality attributed to him, which clearly differentiates him from his predecessors[37], especially regarding the vision of the place the US should occupy in the world, and how it should be acted upon (or rather, in relation to) it.

In this sense, there is an obsession with tightening foreign policy toward China, especially in both economic and technological spheres, as the US continues to view China as its greatest geopolitical rival and therefore the only major power that could challenge its hegemony.

To focus on China, Trump faces his new term with a psychological predisposition—and a tendency inherited from the Biden Administration—to continue strengthening his competition with the Asian power and relegating other international affairs to the background, employing coercive diplomacy with allies and non-allies alike, which translates into economic and military pressure measures to decisively end world's problems and favor US interests exclusively. However, the reality is that behind these aspirations lie many vulnerabilities of the American political system, especially domestically, with a loss of confidence in political class seen in recent years and a democratic crisis that has led to the need of raising priorities in domestic affairs.

That is why the US urgently needs to focus on domestic policy issues and appeal to effective cooperation with its allies on international challenges despite Trump´s trend seems to be focused on an aggressive foreign policy at global level without considering potential implications at domestic level. The combination of an ambitious foreign policy agenda and a neglected focus on domestic affairs threatens to create an imbalance between the means and the ends of US Grand Strategy.

[37] According to Fiona Hill, senior director for Europe and Russia at the US National Security Council during Trump's previous term and author of "There Is Nothing for You Here: Finding Opportunity in the Twenty-First Century," there are more similarities between Trump and Putin than between Trump and his predecessors in office. The manipulation and exploitation of national media, appeals to their own versions of their respective countries' "golden ages," the compilation of personal lists of "national heroes" to appeal to their voters with nostalgia and conservatism, and his compilation of personal lists of enemies are characteristics that Fiona Hill believes both leaders share. Fiona Hill: How Putin Exploits American Dysfunction and Fuels American Decline

What is also evident is that the US cannot address all of today's world problems because it would affect its own security, especially given a transnational nature of today's threats and because the American power has formally lost the protection of its "natural borders."

This reality reveals a great power that has reason to doubt itself[38], which could affect the idiosyncrasy of the American political mindset of maintaining its credibility. This is highlighted by Dominic Johnson in his book “Overconfidence and War”, when he talks about the paradox that has always dogged American Grand Strategy: "The United States might have to go to war only to reaffirm a credibility that is supposed to make war unnecessary[39]”.

Therefore, the US perception of losing credibility at international level could have serious setbacks globally. The distrust generated among its traditional allies could lead to a search for a reorganization of this fractured order, and therefore an establishment of a future hegemonic successor in the international system[40]. If China's initial aspirations were not to be the new hegemon, the new US behavior (of exercising a dominant position without leadership[41]), is giving it incentives to do so.

Therefore, the realistic conception of international affairs implies the adoption by the United States of a situational awareness of the current image it projects on the world, that is, how it is perceived by the rest of the powers[42]. This awareness will undoubtedly best define how to act responsibly in foreign policy, with strategic empathy that will shape our final realist premise.

[38]ZAKARIA, Fareed, “La superpotencia que duda de si misma”. Política exterior, 2024 https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/la-superpotencia-que-duda-de-si-misma/

[39] JOHNSON, D. “Overconfidence and War- The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions”, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 2004.

[40] “State units become more inclined to support a reorganization, which paves the way for the emergence of leaderships with hegemonic pretensions. The hegemonic shift works by providing substance to the new interstate system and reactivating cooperation among its units, helping to give new impetus to the World System.”

[41] “The power of the hegemon is configured and expressed through an ever-changing balance between coercion and consensus (…) Leadership must always think about dominance and vice versa, (…) in a dynamic in which the two vectors constantly work to couple with each other.” (Ibídem, p.202)

[42] A very illustrative example of this is the American perception of Vietnam in the context of the Vietnam War. The US government's conviction in the need for intervention to liberate the region from communism contrasted with the Vietnamese people's perception of Vietnam as an occupying force hindering their independence. Fear of the spread of communism and a failure to understand that the problem could only be solved domestically without external interference were the two main reasons that led the US to fail in the Vietnam War. (TOUCHMAN, Barbara W. “The March of Folly”, 1984)

This premise leads us to a need of appealing to prudence when maximizing relative gains that would necessarily affect US interests, as it would force the US to prioritize international affairs based on universal goals of security and stability.

From the US sight, this perspective would have more disadvantages than advantages: on the one hand, it would improve the US's international image and credibility by effectively contributing to international security, but on the other hand, it would shift the US focus away from its geopolitical competition against China.

However, it is important to emphasize that this option of "re-prioritizing" US interests in favor of global stability should not be understood as the adoption of "appeasement" policies to prevent crisis escalation in a given region. The adoption of this type of policy would, for example, grant Russia the possibility of annexing already occupied Ukrainian territory—which, at present, seems quite likely—or allow China to accumulate more power and influence; or even drastically reduce or cut off support for Israel, both economically and militarily, in Gaza war.

These three courses of action would create a false perception of immediate and lasting peace, but the reality is that, with luck, it would cease hostilities only temporarily. History tells us that appeasement policies are a poor investment for future[43].

Faced with this perspective of relative gains, the only logic that keeps the great powers away from a possible confrontation is what we could call "zero" gains; that is to say, the logic represented by nuclear deterrence. In this logic, no one would gain "anything"—or everyone would lose "everything"—due to the immutable principle of mutually assured destruction. It is therefore paradoxical to think that nuclear weapons contribute to international peace while their possession is precisely what prevents their use[44].

During the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis—the only time the world was on the brink of nuclear war—this zero-win logic was very present throughout the decision-making process. No

[43] See, for example, the "Munich" case, which was the prelude to World War II, and the Yalta Conference at the end of the war, which would award part of Poland to Stalin's Soviet Union. On the other hand, Winston Churchill, addressing the House of Commons in 1950, as the Iron Curtain descended, maintained that conditions, rather than dogma, should decide the issue. "Appeasement in itself may be good or bad according to the circumstances. Appeasement by weakness and fear is equally useless and fatal. Appeasement by strength is magnanimous and noble and may be the surest and perhaps the only road to world peace." https://engelsbergideas.com/essays/churchill-arch-pragmatist/

[44] (…) "One of the factors that most influences the preservation of international peace is perhaps that these great powers benefit from the deterrence offered by the nuclear weapons they all possess." (IKENBERRY, 2011)

one wanted a nuclear confrontation, but neither did they want to abandon their strategic priorities in national security. Therefore, in addition to addressing rational aspects of the decision-making process, the passions and biases that were an integral part of those debates also had to be overcome.

The world was the only player that could win, but it would have to come at the cost of both countries compromising their interests. Resistance to a logical and reasoned solution is a clear example of passions dominance over the entire crisis since, from a strictly rational point of view, it is difficult to understand why the situation escalated to the limits it reached without having long beforehand found a solution[45].

In the words of President Kennedy: "It is essential that while we defend our vital interests, we avoid situations between nuclear powers that force one of the adversaries to choose between humiliating withdrawal or nuclear war."

Therefore, to this day, it is still worth asking whether, in those thirteen agonizing days when the world was on the brink of nuclear holocaust, it was "realistic" debates that helped overcome the situation, or was it the “reality” of the situation that helped overcome the debates.

Conclusions

The evolution of the strategic environment and the growing conflict throughout this century are resulting in a defensive reconfiguration of states and a definitive acceptance that war is always possible. The arrival of the Trump administration and its break with the West has only created a real awareness of this possibility, making it necessary to propose a realistic approach to analyzing the current US strategy.

With the liberal order fractured and the security of the Western bloc exposed, the new US president represents a paradigmatic case of the search for immediate solutions to complex problems through fierce unilateralism. This trend results in a greater

[45] The United States would withdraw its American missiles from Turkey within six months, thereby renouncing a national security principle, and the Soviet Union would do the same with its missiles from Cuba, relinquishing a strategic position that gave it an advantage over the disproportionate number of nuclear weapons.

concentration of economic and technological effort in competition with China, a shift away from US protectionism to Europe, and a global tariff war.

Facing this way of seeing the world, reality presents both ongoing international conflicts and a Chinese strength that are difficult to manage thus affecting the loss of relative power of the United States. This fact combined with domestic problems and Trump's anti-system character – who has never stopped seeing enemies both outside and within the American political system itself – raises doubts on whether we are facing a power in decline or a new form of hegemony that gives up leading for the common interest and seeks to reassert itself with "domination policies".

The lack of analysis of the causes that drive behavior of various actors, the primacy of passion over reason, and the tendency to maximize power and relative gains, hinder any possibility of constructing an effective strategy—balanced in terms of means, ways and ends—that would return the United States to the leadership position that provided relative stability to the international order.

The chance of having a balanced Grand Strategy focused on domestic issues appears to be definitively relegated to *ad hoc* policies, thus eliminating bureaucratic procedures and decision-making debates, which will be conditioned by the US president's impromptu policy making.

The development of an effective Grand Strategy must therefore be based on a realistic conception of what is happening in the new order that is being formed, opting for strategic prudence and empathy as well as for an effective analysis of the causes that explain global conflict.

The US's inability to resolve its proper position in the system and the consequences that could arise from it, could lead states to a reorganization that paves the way for China to emerge as the next hegemon. The configuration of this new order could confirm the great paradox that has always came along with US Grand Strategy: justifying war on the grounds of credibility.

CDR Gonzalo Rodríguez Suanzes

Department of Strategy, Security & Defense

Spanish Joint Staff Collegue