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A Great Strategy for Competition. The conflict in Iran as a learning experience about the complexity of the geo-economic order

A brief overview of US grand strategy

The United States has had few doctrines that can be described as grand strategies and that have proved successful throughout its history. As the power and reach of the young nation grew in the nineteenth century, an initial US strategic vision took shape around the so-called Monroe Doctrine, proactively limiting the power and influence of the great powers in the Western Hemisphere.

This vision of foreign policy began to shift towards the end of that period, under the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, when the opportunity for expansion into the Pacific and economic and political interactions with the European powers, both in Europe and North Africa, broadened the horizons of US foreign policy towards internationalisation.

Subsequently, intervention in the Great War and the Treaty of Versailles brought the emerging power into the peace negotiations and the shaping of an international order whose failure, in the 1920s, was also exacerbated by the strategic inconsistency displayed by the United States under successive presidencies during the interwar period.

Following the Second World War, a national consensus took hold that the United States could no longer protect its interests through active, yet geopolitically limited, defence. The country had become a power with global interests and, consequently, had assumed the responsibilities inherent in that position to preserve its influence in the world. From then on, Washington had to address threats proactively, before they reached US territory.

Although the United States' global strategic projection in the Pacific, Europe and the Mediterranean had been confirmed by the course of the war and by the successive peace conferences, the debate over the shape of the post-war grand strategy centred on how to respond, proactively and in the long term, to the challenge posed by the Soviet Union – a confrontation that historiography would eventually define as the Cold War.

This vision initially took shape in the Truman Doctrine, or the doctrine of Containment, which set in motion a strategy aimed at containing the USSR from the so-called Eurasian *Rimland*. However, this strategy varied considerably in practice, as containment had to be implemented in geopolitical spaces with different configurations.

In Europe, it took the form of a reconstruction programme and a strategic alliance, realised through the Marshall Plan and NATO; in the Middle East and Asia, it was implemented through agreements with groups of allied countries and through conflicts designed to counter the spread of communism following decolonisation; and in relation to the USSR, it also resulted in a long-term nuclear arms race.

Secondly, following the defeat in Vietnam and the abolition of the dollar's convertibility, the strategy of containment had to be adapted from 1973 onwards and embrace the policy of détente to address the global crisis resulting from three decades of bipolar confrontation.

The United States never contained the Soviet Union, either literally or militarily. However, Washington managed to outmanoeuvre Moscow by maintaining and expanding its economic, military and political influence until the Soviet Union was no longer able to stand up to it.

President Ronald Reagan was the architect of the revitalisation of the original concept of the great bipolar strategy and, ultimately, laid the foundations for the end of the Cold War. Its implementation was based on strengthening pressure through increased military spending and innovation; on boosting the economy and projecting it internationally through investment and trade; and on utilising US-led communication channels to globalise the impact of propaganda.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, successive US presidents attempted to establish their own version of a new grand strategy, but none succeeded. The paradigm of globalisation as a catalyst for trade liberalisation and economic interdependence did not translate into a strategic vision because, in its early phase, US supremacy was not challenged by threats or by consistent revisionist actors.

Following the attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001, the response in the form of the 'war on terror' did not amount to a strategic reconfiguration, but rather a series of actions and operations of varying intensity in Iraq and Afghanistan, lacking a solid and sustainable strategic framework.

From an economic perspective, unrestricted globalisation ultimately weakened certain key industries both in the United States and in other countries, and failed to limit its

detrimental impact on the domestic workforce. Nor did it succeed in resolving other issues of global significance, such as the weakening of supply chains, unregulated trade flows and the spread of a state of permanent war in regions as sensitive as the Middle East.

Furthermore, it proved incapable of curbing the expansion of Chinese mercantilism and the disregard for rules by revisionist powers, which also used deregulation to further their illiberal aims.

The loss of cohesion in views on foreign policy in the United States and other allied countries, exacerbated by the growing polarisation in liberal democracies during the second decade of the 21st century, has given rise to a distinct trend in recent years, aimed at seeking convergence between realism and liberalism across different schools of thought.

Charles A. Kupchan, in the podcast entitled 'A new US strategy: the case for liberal realism'¹, proposed, shortly before the 2024 elections, to revive the ideas and principles of the liberal order, framing them within a more realist strategic framework. This would, according to the author, allow for its implementation in a multipolar system such as the current one, distinct from previous bipolar and unipolar systems, in which liberal realism served as the doctrinal foundation after the Second World War and at the end of the Cold War.

The idea of devising a strategy based on this doctrinal convergence was not new in American thought. In 2021, John Lewis Gaddis and Hal Brands² put forward a grand strategy to address the growing bipolar competition with China.

With the advent of Donald Trump's second presidency in 2025, Russell Mead revisited this idea to incorporate a concept historically associated with American doctrine: pragmatism. The author grounded his argument in the ideas of Alexander Hamilton, and its relevance today stems from the need to find a paradigm with which to overcome the end of globalist liberalism and tackle the new rivalry between great powers.

¹ KUPCHAN, C. 'A new US strategy: the case for liberal realism', in *the James Lindsay Podcast*. Council on Foreign Relations, 30 July 2024.

² BRANDS, H. and GADDIS, J. L. 'The new cold war: America, China and the echoes of history', in *Foreign Affairs*. Nov–Dec 2021.

‘Never has the strength of the state been so closely tied to the dynamism of the corporate world. This connection operates most strongly at the most advanced levels of technology and production... Both business and government leaders are today discovering something that Hamilton could have told them has long been true: economic policy is strategy and vice versa’³.

A year and a half into his second term, President Trump’s active foreign policy and military actions have confirmed that, whilst his transactional approach has been coloured by a pragmatic philosophy, offensive realism has guided some of his most significant decisions and has made it clear that the use of force is regarded as a means of defending US interests and, according to this approach, preserving peace⁴.

However, it is not clear at present whether US policy is guided by a pre-defined grand strategy.

In fact, analysts at some of the leading US *think tanks* do not agree on a single strategic approach, and there is a succession of proposals as to what the most appropriate course of action should be.

A. Wess Mitchell, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs during Trump’s first term, proposes, for example, in the latest issue of *Foreign Affairs* magazine, a grand strategy of consolidation. To this end, draws on the term used by Admiral John Fisher to explain how, in 1904, Britain opted for a strategic realignment centred on its priority imperial interests, which would steer the country away from constant confrontation with other European powers and with the emerging powers in the Pacific: ‘This was not a retreat or acquiescence to national decline, but a prioritisation of the waters adjacent to the British Isles to deter Germany, the top threat’⁵.

According to Mitchell’s view, US power is overstretched and excessively dispersed. In the manner of Britain before the First World War or, historically, Hadrian’s strategy of limiting Rome’s imperial reach, the United States should formulate a grand strategy to protect its

³ RUSSELL MEAD, A. ‘The return of Hamiltonian statecraft: a great strategy for a turbulent world’, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 103, No. 5. September–October 2024, p. 55.

⁴ This analysis of Russell Mead’s work is included in the chapter: PEREDO POMBO, J. M. ‘The United States in 2025: A Strengthened America for Competition’, *Strategic Outlook 2025*. IEEE, 2025.

⁵ WESS MITCHELL, A. ‘A Grand Strategy of Consolidation’, *Foreign Affairs*. May–June 2026, p. 131.

geopolitical space in the Western Hemisphere, whilst continuing to pursue a foreign policy geared towards competition and a policy of technological and economic leadership.

In the *2025 National Security Strategy* itself⁶, one of the top priorities was to secure the border and prevent any adversarial power from gaining a foothold in the Panama Canal and Greenland.

It was on this basis, allegedly, that he took action against the persistent presence of the cartels, which were destabilising the heart of the Western Hemisphere. Trump's swift action in Venezuela and the restrictions imposed on Cuba can be interpreted as moves aimed at eliminating potential hotspots of unrest in the region and, at the same time, as forceful measures to protect the US's own sphere of influence and prevent China and other powers from interfering in the Western Hemisphere with the intention of distracting and hindering US efforts to act in other theatres.

In the same issue of **Foreign Affairs**, Edward Fishman, a geoeconomics specialist at the *Council on Foreign Relations*, puts forward a perspective that prioritises economic conflict as the paradigm for developing a long-term strategy.

His argument is based on the observation that the vulnerabilities of major powers and smaller actors to economic coercion are complex and ever-changing as a result of the interdependence inherent in the current order. He highlights, as a strength of a major power in this heteropolar geo-economic order, its ability to control certain *choke points*.

Whilst acknowledging that this capacity is not unipolar but lies in the hands of various actors, primarily the United States and China, he also points out that, in any case, it must be accompanied by consistent leadership in the relevant market or flow, as is the case with the role of the dollar in commercial transactions:

'A single Silicon Valley firm, Nvidia, accounts for more than 85 per cent of the market for AI chips. China, for its part, refines roughly 90 per cent of the world's rare earths. In each case, the United States and China are not just market leaders; they are effectively monopolists'⁷.

⁶ Available in the document *National Security Strategy*. Washington, 2025.

⁷ FISHMAN, E. 'How to fight an economic war', in *Foreign Affairs*. May–June 2026, p. 43.

According to the author, this reality means we must not speculate on attempts to exploit non-existent chokepoints, as this would prevent coercive sanctions from serving as weapons of geo-economic deterrence. On the contrary, he emphasises the importance of correctly assessing the competitive objectives and the applicable economic deterrents in each situation of tension or strategic manoeuvre.

It is therefore not surprising that the Trump administration is seeking a strategic approach based on secure connectivity that transcends any other sphere. This vision, thus conceived, is founded on the existence of free and open spaces, where nations situated along connectivity corridors (whether geopolitical or digital) have a vested interest in maintaining the networks that link people, goods and services.

In the same vein, Jake Sullivan emphasises the importance of developing a comprehensive strategy, focusing his analysis on technological innovation – an area in which competition between the United States and China is evident in sectors such as semiconductors, AI, biotechnology and clean energy.

The mistake in US strategy in recent years, according to the author, has been to try to beat China in specific innovation races. However, the ‘ ’ resulting from a strategy should not be geared towards a specific end goal where the race finishes, but rather a long-term, ever-changing competition in which various actors and multi-domain factors come into play, such as space research, population movements or, quite simply, market reactions.

Sullivan advocates a major commitment to technological innovation in the United States, based on the identification of critical sectors (computing, quantum systems, biotechnology, AI and biomanufacturing); on technological and industrial revitalisation, through cooperation between the military and private sectors; and on the construction of a digital order based on democratic principles, protected by high standards of security and transparency, and vigilant against violations of privacy and human rights. All of this under the ‘*small yard and high fence*’ paradigm⁸.

The offensive realism pursued by the Trump Administration has laid bare the so-called ‘unlimited’ alliance between China and Russia, given their inability to counter US military

⁸ SULLIVAN, J. ‘The tech high ground’, *Foreign Affairs*. May–June 2026.

action. However, the war in Iran has also demonstrated that, in a deeply interconnected world, no power has the capacity to impose a solid sphere of influence and control vast extraterritorial spaces.

Whilst the United States can employ a military tactic of 'shock and awe' on an unprecedented scale, even Washington lacks the autonomous and unilateral capacity required to maintain a decisive force in a theatre critical to the international order over an extended period.

Regional and global effects of the conflict in Iran

The 2026 war began with a devastating attack by the United States and Israel on Iran. From that point onwards, the conflict spread and escalated. Iran retaliated against targets throughout the Persian Gulf and beyond; it used drones, missiles and other means to block traffic in the Strait of Hormuz.

The US-Israeli campaign against Iran turned into a regional war with global repercussions, given the geopolitical significance of the Strait of Hormuz.

Trump supported Israel in its fight against Iran's allies: Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis. He collaborated with Israel to dismantle Iran's air defence systems and weaken its nuclear enrichment facilities.

Trump, firmly motivated by a desire to limit Iran's influence as a source of instability in the Middle East, has sought to force a strategic agreement with the regime to eliminate its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, as well as its support for terrorism, in exchange for economic relief and integration into the market.

Following several months of negotiations and limited military action by the opposing sides, the war has highlighted the absence of a properly designed strategy on the part of the United States in its short- and medium-term operational aspects.

However, some of its effects can be interpreted as a set of lessons to better understand the complexity of carrying out military actions not linked to a broader, more far-reaching strategy.

1. Firstly, the crisis has marked a qualitative leap towards militarisation within a geo-economic order in which each of the so-called '*choke points*' represents a potential arena for armed interdependence.

Contrary to what President Trump has claimed, US officials have known for decades that Iran could close the Strait of Hormuz in the event of a crisis. Once the war began, that possibility became a reality: the most recent and striking manifestation of an era in which geo-economic integration and geopolitical fragmentation collide.

Control of the Strait of Hormuz enabled Iran to deal a severe blow to a major power such as the United States. A fractured yet interdependent world offers major powers the opportunity to multiply their influence, but it also creates significant vulnerability.

The United States' years-long effort to restrict China's access to high-end semiconductors, or Beijing's militarisation of rare earths – which gave Chinese leader Xi Jinping the ability to paralyse dependent industries worldwide – are examples of how those who resort to economic warfare have, in many cases, reaped rewards for doing so.

However, these rewards – or, where applicable, these failures – must be assessed over the long term, taking into account the impact they have on public perception and market sentiment.

2. Michael Brown, former director of the Pentagon's Defence Innovation Unit, refers to this conflict as the 'first AI war'. It is undoubtedly the first time that the world's leading technological power has deployed AI-based military capabilities on a large scale.

It is estimated that advanced AI models helped the Pentagon sift through a vast amount of information and rapidly translate it into a thousand targeted strikes on the first day of the campaign. At the same time, the war has revealed – or confirmed – that weaker powers can use other modern weapons – drones and missiles – to inflict serious damage on an unsuspecting adversary.

In this respect, the war in Iran has served as a testing ground. The Chinese military can draw lessons applicable to the Western Pacific, whilst Russia has not merely stood by and watched.

Moscow, drawing on its experience in Ukraine, has helped Iran increase the lethality of its drone and missile strikes, notably by providing intelligence that enables Tehran to target US bases, according to media reports.

3.- Thirdly, this war may bring non-proliferation to a crucial crossroads. Trump and his advisers explained that the Administration launched the attack to prevent Iran from building a nuclear shield and a vast arsenal of missiles with which it could threaten the region.

One consequence of this campaign could be a severe blow to proliferation, by sending the message that leaders who attempt to build the atomic bomb will end up dead. However, if, on the contrary, Tehran retains and eventually recovers the highly enriched uranium buried beneath its nuclear facilities, it could rush to develop a nuclear weapon.

In fact, this war could increase the incentives for proliferation amongst US allies. If Trump's statements and actions divide NATO, the prospect of nuclearisation in Poland, Scandinavia and other parts of Europe may intensify.

And if the US becomes bogged down in the Middle East once again for years and struggles to restock the weapons needed for a future crisis in the Pacific, the push for nuclear capabilities in South Korea and Japan could gain momentum.

In such a scenario, one might expect other regional powers in the Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia, to explore their own options for nuclear protection, such as forging closer ties with Pakistan.

4. The regional order in the Middle East is changing, but it is impossible to overlook the strategic importance of that region. This war has marked a turning point in the multi-phase, multi-stage conflict that erupted following Hamas's attack on Israel.

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz once again highlighted the world's continued dependence on this strategic chokepoint. Had the Houthis managed to close the Red Sea or attacked oil tankers loading off the western coast of Saudi Arabia, the economic crisis would have been exacerbated even further.

The region is also becoming increasingly important for the global technological future, as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates compete to become hubs of the global AI

ecosystem. And the region remains an arena where Russia, the United States and China are vying for greater influence.

Images of hotels and data centres ablaze are not good for Dubai's brand. Saudi Arabia could stand to gain if the United Arab Emirates is perceived as a riskier economic and commercial venture.

An increase in the construction of oil pipelines is expected, as numerous countries will seek to bypass the Strait of Hormuz by creating new routes to the rest of the world.

But, for now, the war has highlighted the importance of a region whose resources and sea lanes underpin a significant part of the global economy and whose conflicts illustrate the complexity that the new era may present.

5. Finally, the war in Iran could ultimately pave the way for a world with little or no regard for the rules. International law has suffered serious consequences amidst Iran's attacks on freedom of navigation.

Even before this war, Trump employed tactics – such as lethal strikes against vessels suspected of drug trafficking – which are, at best, legally questionable. 'We live in a world [...] governed by force, governed by power,' proclaimed Stephen Miller, a White House adviser.

China and Russia have repeatedly violated the sovereignty of their neighbours. Freedom of navigation has been undermined from the Gulf of Aden to the South China Sea. Brutal atrocities committed by armed groups and terrorists, as well as illegitimate international aggression, are proliferating.

Meanwhile, the concept of a 'rules-based order' is, in effect, being permanently undermined by circumstances.

In this unpredictable, changing and damaging context, the countries that appear most defenceless are those states – particularly in Europe – that place their faith in international law and diplomatic processes, rather than investing adequately in the foundations of sovereign strength.

This is an unfavourable situation in an era in which sheer geopolitical power will carry greater weight, as global norms lose their relevance.

Conclusions

1. At this historic moment, the United States appears to be a power that is both less constrained and, at the same time, less predictable. Its administration rejects the idea of a US-led world order. Trump speaks of abandoning alliances that took decades to forge and shrugs off responsibilities that the United States has long shouldered, including its role in providing global public goods and its practice of offering support and advice to its allies.

The President launches military attacks against weaker rivals and uses tariffs and sanctions to reshape the international economy according to national and unilateral criteria. He oscillates between a rhetoric that proclaims threats of war and one that promises peace agreements, without any criteria to lend credibility to the messages he projects to the public.

But the reality is that the international interpretation of this political communication strategy does not convey a uniform view on whether the United States is in fact retreating from its leadership role.

It could be argued that Trump's presidency marks the end of a period in which the United States was overly predictable and respectful of the rules, and the beginning of an era in which it reminds its adversaries that they have much to fear from American wrath.

However, this lack of restraint in implementing tough, force-based actions carries its own risks and drawbacks. For many international observers, the conclusion drawn from this conflict is that Trump started a major war without a plan to end it, and did so with utter disregard for the regional and global damage it might cause.

Furthermore, many allies fear that a superpower whose sole criterion is self-interest, as defined by Trump, could turn against them at any moment.

US power was for a long time a source of reassurance for many countries, because it was generally used in a relatively stabilising manner. If Iran and the Strait of Hormuz symbolise the coming of age of a superpower that acts in a less predictable and, perhaps,

less responsible manner, then they will have helped to transform the world in a fundamental and, perhaps, more dangerous way.

In Washington, by contrast, the most hardline factions hope that Beijing will be the real loser in the conflict, should the final outcome result in the weakening of China's strategic partner in the Middle East.

But determining who will emerge victorious in the Persian Gulf will take time, given that the conflict is constantly generating powerful geopolitical effects which are constantly being reshaped and which will prompt changes that, in turn, will shape the transformation of the current order.

However, the challenge facing Trump and future administrations is not the same as that faced by Reagan when he adopted a tougher policy towards the USSR. This is because the geopolitical landscape currently facing the US president is undoubtedly more complex.

The Soviet Union primarily posed a military and ideological threat, but today China has the capacity to challenge the United States in all areas of the competition for global power.

Without a sustainable long-term strategy, geared towards stabilising the international order rather than short-term objectives, and supported by non-aggressive alliances, US leadership may be weakened by ill-conceived specific actions, such as that which has taken place in Iran⁹.

2.- This increasingly turbulent world presents a complex mix of opportunities and dangers for revisionist powers. The Gulf conflict has yielded unexpected benefits for Russia and China. Rising energy prices are having a positive impact on the Russian economy. The fighting has depleted US missile interceptors and other capabilities that might otherwise have been deployed to Ukraine.

⁹ A recent report by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (June 2026), **Wartime Footing**, examines the feasibility of the United States defending itself on two simultaneous fronts: the Pacific against China, and the Euro-Atlantic against Russia.

Xi, for his part, probably sees a strategic opportunity at a time when the United States is militarily tied up, and Trump's desire to maintain calm in Sino-American relations will be constrained by his problems in the Middle East.

However, there is also a danger for Beijing and Moscow, as a hyperactive superpower lashes out at its enemies and intervenes against the political and institutional structures of regimes it considers hostile. Trump's America has dealt a heavy blow to two allies of Russia and China: Venezuela and Iran. Perhaps it will soon intervene in Cuba as well.

Despite its abundant energy reserves, China remains vulnerable to a world in which geopolitical instability can disrupt its supply chains and send oil prices soaring. Indeed, the current crisis demonstrates that this emerging world power is not prepared to take on a leading role.

Beijing has squandered much of its power in an attempt to consolidate and expand its sphere of influence and control. Its grandiose 'Belt and Road' initiative is evidence of this ambition, in its attempt to subjugate distant countries for China's benefit.

For decades, China built its prosperity on the foundation of seas protected by the US Navy. It has benefited from them, whilst also feeling uncomfortable with the contours of a relatively stable world in which Washington played its hegemonic role.

In the long term, an ambitious China could benefit from an environment in which the United States appears to generate more instability than it suppresses. In the short term, it could suffer, both economically and geopolitically, from a vacuum of stability that it is not yet prepared to fill.

3. Thirdly, the war in Iran revealed a deep rift in the transatlantic pact and confirms that the traditional model of US alliances is undergoing a transformation.

Trump never really consulted NATO allies before launching a war that shook their economies, just a few weeks after warning them of his interest in Greenland. When the conflict broke out, the allies refused to join the fighting and, in some cases, even denied the US the right to establish military bases and fly over the area.

'This is not our war,' declared European leaders, with some viewing the conflict as reckless and destabilising.

Many allied officials have come to the conclusion that Trump is an untrustworthy ally, capable of blackmailing their countries if he deems it necessary to defend his own interests.

Although the US president is unlikely to withdraw from NATO – as doing so would unleash a political storm in Washington – the strategic trust that once held the Alliance together is rapidly fading.

The question now is whether NATO can be preserved on a more explicitly transactional basis or whether, on the contrary, the coming years will bring with them an endless stream of recriminations that will destroy the credibility and cohesion on which the alliance is founded.

That would spell a dangerous situation for a Euro-Atlantic democratic community that needs solidarity to overcome threats from common enemies. But it might prove tempting for a president who seems to prefer a different model of alliance.

At the same time, the conflict in the Persian Gulf has marked a step forward in strengthening the military alliance between the United States and Israel and appears to confirm that this administration prefers bilateral alliances – which can be easily renegotiated – to the formal multilateral structures built by Trump's predecessors.

It is no longer inconceivable that the United States might in future opt for a smaller set of more flexible alliances and for more capable allies. If so, this war will have been a crucial catalyst for that change.

And also in view of the fact that an ally may be regarded as strategic in the current environment depending on whether, in the conflict in question, its actions are decisive or not.

But the war has also made it clear that a power cannot act without allies. The United States has a Euro-Atlantic security framework established through NATO and, although the redefinition of the organisation in budgetary terms is a priority for the current Republican administration, its strategic and political strengthening is essential for both Americans and Europeans.

A grand strategy, designed to address the complexity of a changing world order, cannot be established without a European pillar and a strengthened transatlantic bond.

The need to increase defence spending has become clear in light of the arms revolution highlighted by the wars in Ukraine and, now, the war in the Persian Gulf.

However, adapting defence spending and industries to this process of transformation requires time and deeper, more efficient collaboration between European NATO members and the United States to tackle the challenges posed by the advent of AI, the diversity of actors capable of influencing the international order, and economic, commercial and military interdependence within a geo-economic environment that is open yet fragile at certain points of friction.

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