



## Interest

The current international environment has significantly heightened interest in geopolitical issues. Programs, books, analyses, and other resources accessible to the general public have expanded their reach, leading to the widespread popularization of concepts and theories associated with this field. They are, quite simply, in vogue.

Whereas geopolitics focuses on the interaction between geography and politics, geostrategy concentrates on strategy itself. Not only has understanding and anticipating international politics and the strategies of the great powers through the geographic variable become essential, but also a necessary field of study.

Google Trends supports this tendency by offering an almost real-time measure of societal interest across a wide range of topics.<sup>1</sup> This tool reveals society's immediate concerns, providing insight into shifts in collective attention. In this context, a clear rise in interest in geopolitics and geostrategy can be observed, particularly during periods of crisis, conflict, or international tension. At such moments, users seek information on wars, the actors involved, threats, and geopolitical consequences. These peaks of interest tend to correlate with the geographic proximity of events and with attention to the actions of global actors such as the United States, China, Russia, and Europe.

By contrast, with its empirical approach to language, Ngram Viewer makes it possible to trace the frequency of terms across books and historical periods.<sup>2</sup> This tool facilitates the identification of trends and variations in specific conceptual frameworks. The data reveal sustained growth since the second half of the twentieth century, with peaks around the Cold War, the post-1989 period, the post-2001 era, and another surge during the 2010–2020 decade, driven by renewed great-power rivalry and successive crises.

These trends are also reflected in the academic and popular literature, which has evolved and, in many cases, has popularized geopolitics as an increasingly indispensable discipline for understanding international dynamics. In an ever more interconnected world, marked by rivalries and power dynamics with the potential to affect all of us—to the point of altering our way of life—concepts such as geopolitics, geostrategy, and international relations have become central protagonists.

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<sup>1</sup> Search for the terms geopolitics, geostrategy, and geography on Google Trends, <https://trends.google.es/trends/>

<sup>2</sup> A similar search conducted using Google Books Ngram Viewer <https://books.google.com/ngrams/>

## Uncertainty as the Central Protagonist

Uncertainty has ceased to be a residual variable. Instead, it has become a structural element of the international system—a complex ecosystem in which technological, economic, social, and environmental factors converge. In this context, uncertainty is fueled by the interaction between so-called Black Swans and Gray Rhinos. Black swans are highly improbable events that nonetheless produce disruptive or extreme effects once they materialize. Gray rhinos, by contrast, are obvious and previously identified threats that fail to elicit an adequate strategic response until they erupt into full-blown crises.

The principal contribution of this analytical framework lies in highlighting that the core problem is not a lack of information or analysis, but rather a systemic inability to act effectively on what is already known. Action is ultimately more decisive than knowledge; avoiding paralysis is paramount.

Advanced democracies, and Western societies in particular, have developed a political culture oriented toward managing the immediate, often penalizing, preventive policies whose benefits are not always visible in the short term. This dynamic encourages the normalization of risk and the postponement of key strategic decisions, leaving societies exposed to disruptive events—or to these strategic “animals.”

The COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a paradigmatic example of a functional black swan. Although the possibility of a global pandemic had been contemplated in reports by international organizations and strategic think tanks, its actual impact far exceeded anticipated scenarios. The collapse of healthcare systems, the disruption of supply chains, and the erosion of institutional trust exposed the fragility of structures that had previously been regarded as robust and well prepared.

In parallel, the war in Ukraine can be understood as a gray rhino. The progressive deterioration of Europe’s security architecture, the militarization of Russian foreign policy, and the erosion of arms-control mechanisms were widely documented trends. Nevertheless, the 2022 invasion demonstrated the extent to which these warning signs were absorbed into the strategic landscape without translating into a sufficiently preventive response. As a result, these risk dynamics escalated into large-scale crises, underscoring the urgent need to rethink our strategies of prevention and response.

## Living and Deciding Amid Twenty-First-Century Uncertainty

This accumulation of black swans and gray rhinos generates a form of strategic saturation, undermining the ability of international actors to sustain clear or robustly defensible positions. The overload of unexpected events and visible threats complicates decision-making and amplifies uncertainty, both in geopolitical and strategic terms. As a result, strategic culture becomes broader and, in many cases, more ambiguous, since responses to these challenges are neither easy to define nor straightforward to implement. Social sensitivities are likewise heightened, as crises and conflicts are no longer confined to a single region or sphere of influence; in the twenty-first century, everything is interconnected.

Spain's 2021 National Security Strategy explicitly acknowledges this reality by placing anticipation, prevention, and resilience at the core of its guiding principles. This approach recognizes the need to address uncertainty structurally, acknowledging that unforeseen changes can be just as disruptive as clearly identifiable threats. Nevertheless, the true challenge lies in translating this diagnosis into sustainable public policies—policies that not only respond to short-term events but also persist over time, enabling strategic decisions that are not overridden by immediate pressures. In this sense, engaging in strategy and geopolitics means constructing solid frameworks that can withstand volatility and recurrent crises.

Concerning global scenarios carrying the greatest potential consequences, those associated with the Global South—such as the African region—along with the enduring instability of the Middle East and the recent war between Ukraine and Russia, stand out for their complexity and impact. Analyzing these scenarios through the lens of black swans and gray rhinos will not allow us to predict the future with certainty. Nonetheless, it will better prepare us to confront—or coexist with—its inherent uncertainty. The resilience of a country or an international actor does not depend on forecasting every disruptive event, but rather on the capacity to adapt rapidly to unexpected situations. In an environment defined by accelerating change and global interdependence, strategic advantage no longer belongs to those who most accurately anticipate a specific event, but to those who cultivate the greatest degree of systemic adaptability. Strategy is built through continuous learning and a willingness to adjust to the unexpected. The challenge lies in being proactive in both knowledge and action, guided by sound judgment.

## Looking to the “South”: Where We Have Been — Africa as a Nexus of Fragility

Everything happens in Africa. The Maghreb and the Sahel constitute one of the principal axes of instability in Europe’s strategic environment and, in particular, in Spain’s immediate surroundings. Far from being merely cyclical crises, the region exhibits structural dynamics of fragility that tend to reproduce themselves and expand over time.

This space—defined by the convergence of weak state institutions, armed violence, demographic pressure, environmental degradation, and intensifying geopolitical competition—multiplies the likelihood of crises and persistent pockets of instability.<sup>3</sup>

The central Sahel has become the epicenter of this dynamic. The gradual collapse of state authority across large swathes of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has enabled the expansion of jihadist organizations that operate not only as armed actors but also as quasi-governmental entities, providing basic services and articulating alternative systems of governance. This reality calls into question traditional security approaches focused exclusively on the military neutralization of adversaries, while also fostering a redefinition of what a coup d’état means in this context. If we are told that nine of the ten most recent coups worldwide that achieved a certain degree of success originated in Africa, and that more than 400 coups occurred on the continent during the twentieth century, it is hardly surprising. Thus, in this region, black swans have effectively become gray rhinos.

The withdrawal or downsizing of international missions, combined with the rise of military regimes with limited legitimacy, has further exacerbated the situation. Not long ago, Spain’s Armed Forces made a significant contribution to the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali). Its objective was to strengthen the capacities of the Malian armed forces to combat terrorism and stabilize the country, while promoting regional security and development. Experience, however, has shown that the European response has been fragmented and reactive.

For Europe—and especially for Spain—this instability has direct consequences. Irregular migratory pressure, the terrorist threat, and organized crime are all closely linked to these developments. Geographic proximity turns these risks into an immediate security concern, as reflected in Spain’s 2021 National Security Strategy, which identifies the southern flank as a strategic priority. It is a textbook strategic gray rhino: visible well in

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<sup>3</sup> SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. El Sahel: ¿también epicentro de la reconfiguración global?. IEEE. March 18, 2025.

advance, insufficiently addressed, and allowed to deteriorate over time.

### **Looking Where We Always Look: The Middle East and Permanent Volatility**

The Middle East remains one of the most volatile regions in the international system. Far from moving toward a framework of cooperative security, the region is defined by persistent unresolved conflicts, strategic rivalries, and profound political fragmentation—hence its frequent characterization as a “Shatterbelt.”<sup>4</sup>

Lebanon, for years, and Gaza more recently, have become names inseparable from military efforts. They represent paradigmatic theaters of proxy warfare, where both state and non-state actors engage in confrontation in pursuit of their objectives and according to their respective geopolitical logics.

Within this complex setting, Spain has played an active role through Operation Libre Hidalgo under a United Nations mandate. Designed to contribute to stability and security, its current phase is approaching an end.<sup>5</sup> In this area, blue helmets and blue berets have played a prominent role since 1974, when the UNDOF mission (United Nations Disengagement Observer Force) was deployed in the Syrian Golan Heights.<sup>6</sup>

Today, attention has shifted to Gaza, where international efforts are increasingly focused on establishing an International Stabilization Force (ISF) to secure the borders alongside Israel and Egypt and to train Palestinian police.<sup>7</sup> An ISF could be tasked with additional responsibilities, all of which would pose significant challenges and could, paradoxically, reinforce a gray rhino: an evident risk that remains, for now, manageable.

These theaters must be understood as an interconnected whole, in which the proliferation of relevant actors is decisive. Powers such as Iran project influence through proxies, increasing the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation. While Gaza remains marked by cycles of violence, confrontations between Israel and Iran continue to materialize in multiple forms, reflecting the difficulty of reaching a viable political settlement—even as advanced military capabilities, including the nuclear factor, remain integral to the equation. Risk is thus constant; a black swan could emerge from any corner

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<sup>4</sup> CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. La tercera partición del Oriente Próximo y la cuestión siria. IEEEE. January 14, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> [La ONU prolonga la misión de paz en Líbano hasta finales de 2026 - RFI](#)

<sup>6</sup> [FNUOS | Naciones Unidas Mantenimiento de la paz](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Así es el plan de Trump para Gaza respaldado por el Consejo de Seguridad | Noticias ONU](#)

of this vast area. This complex interaction of actors and events underscores how Middle Eastern geopolitical dynamics not only affect regional powers but also international interests.

### **Looking to the “East”: Where We May Be Headed — The Return of War to Europe**

The war in Ukraine has marked the return of high-intensity conventional warfare to the European continent, after decades in which asymmetric conflict and low-intensity wars predominated. This interstate confrontation has revived the salience of traditional war, restoring it to a central place in global strategic thinking. It has profoundly altered Europe’s security architecture, generating a new geopolitical dynamic that is redefining the balance of power.<sup>8</sup>

Firstly, the war reinforced NATO’s role as the primary guarantor of European security, acting as a barrier against potential expansions of Russian aggression. At the same time, it has exposed the limitations of the European Union’s strategic autonomy. The debate over strengthening Europe’s defense autonomy has reemerged—an issue that could reshape the future of transatlantic relations, now openly contested.

Beyond the geopolitical and strategic dimensions, the conflict is also transforming the very nature of warfare, propelled by the deployment of highly advanced technological capabilities. Drones, digital applications, electronic warfare, and cyberattacks are drastically changing how conflicts are fought. Ukraine is becoming a laboratory of war—not only for conventional operations, but for the fielding of new tactics and technologies that directly reshape the concept of war itself.

Despite uncertainty about the conflict’s duration, international powers are already considering options for deploying a military force to stabilize the region once the war ends—provided that a credible and verifiable ceasefire is achieved.<sup>9</sup> This possibility reflects an implicit recognition that, even after active combat ceases, rebuilding security and guaranteeing peace will require sustained military and political commitment. The need for a new approach to collective security—spanning economic, technological, and diplomatic dimensions—could itself become a black swan. Ukraine may yet prove to be

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<sup>8</sup> FUENTE COBO, Ignacio. Ucrania. ¿Mejor una buena guerra que una mala paz? IEEE. February 18, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> [España estudia su participación en una misión de paz en Ucrania mientras el Gobierno descarta un envío inmediato de tropas](#)

a geopolitical inflection point.

### **A New Protagonist**

Known threats that are not adequately addressed—the gray rhinos—or low-probability, high-impact events—the black swans—may still fail to provide a complete picture. It is therefore useful to introduce an intermediate category. In some contexts, the term “pink flamingo” is used as a metaphor for a highly improbable event, akin to the black swan. Unlike the black swan, however, whose defining feature is massive disruptive impact coupled with fundamental unpredictability, the pink flamingo denotes a rarer event whose impact is more limited.

Geopolitics is replete with improbable events, and when they occur, they are often less extreme than the black-swan archetype, because risk valuation must always be weighed against the spectrum of plausible outcomes. Few anticipated such a precise action in Venezuela, yet the impact—in terms of casualties or injuries—was more limited than it might have been.<sup>10</sup> The underlying idea is that, although the phenomenon is uncommon, it is easier to recognize. They are rare and surprising, but visible, intelligible, and bounded within certain limits. It is a way of conceptualizing uncertainty as unusual, although it is not fully out of the realm of what is possible.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, remain the classic black swan: few expected them, and their global impact was enormous, reshaping geopolitics through subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq that profoundly altered international politics and global security. Their magnitude far exceeded what had been anticipated.

War in the Middle East—or in Syria—by contrast, fits the gray rhino: a widely recognized threat, with clear signals of political and sectarian instability, heightened by tensions and protests during the Arab Spring. The international community was slow to intervene in a meaningful way. The threat was evident, yet action lagged.

The Russia–Ukraine conflict, initially in 2014, was comparatively limited in scope and duration. Clear indicators had already suggested that tensions between Russia and its neighbors were rising, particularly given the precedents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008. Russia’s later full-scale invasion was rare, but not completely unexpected, given

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<sup>10</sup> [Trump elogia operativo militar en Venezuela y dice que más países "deberían cooperar" | CNN](#)

the history of territorial disputes and Russian expansionist policies. In this sense, the conflict could be read as a pink flamingo: surprising, but not as categorically unforeseeable as a black swan, and legible within its geopolitical context. One can only hope that the 2022 iteration does not expand into something so catastrophic that it begins to resemble a true black swan.

### **The “Pink Flamingo”: Between the Improbable and the Predictable**

Geopolitics is shaped by actors, situations, geography, and history—variables multiply when it comes to exploiting adversaries’ vulnerabilities. Identifying gray rhinos and turning them into strategic opportunities, protecting oneself against pink flamingos, or thinking boldly to detect potential black swans can broaden the scope of geopolitical strategies and visions.

Among these variables is China, which represents the principal challenge to the liberal international order. Its approach combines economic expansion, technological projection, and a growing military presence, even if it has not displayed an overtly offensive posture comparable to that of the United States. In Africa, Beijing has become a key economic partner; in the Middle East, it pursues a strategy centered on energy stability. In the Ukrainian conflict, it has adopted an ambiguous stance, seeking strategic benefits while avoiding direct costs.

The United States remains the central actor in the international system. Its new National Security Strategy reflects a clear shift toward great-power competition, with China identified as the primary challenge and Russia as the immediate threat.<sup>11</sup> Washington aims to strengthen alliances, reallocate resources, and prioritize the Indo-Pacific, without abandoning other critical theaters.

Another key variable is the technological factor, particularly the development of artificial intelligence (AI), which has the potential to transform the analysis of global geopolitics. Through advanced AI models, large volumes of unstructured information—such as news and media content—can be processed to produce more precise, near-real-time analyses of international conflicts.<sup>12</sup> Efforts to anticipate and classify geopolitical events may bear

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<sup>11</sup> [Nueva estrategia de seguridad nacional de Trump fomenta la resistencia dentro de Europa y un nuevo rol de EE.UU. en Occidente | CNN](#)

<sup>12</sup> ORTIZ, Álvaro y RODRIGO, Tomasa. Análisis de la geopolítica mundial mediante inteligencia artificial (IA) y big data. IEEE 01/2025 Analysis Paper.

fruit and become widely accessible; however, algorithms are likely to fail when identifying black swans. Creativity and imagination still cannot be reliably programmed.

While news monitoring and geolocation can improve speed, they remain far removed from the complexity of geopolitical dynamics. This gap is especially evident in efforts to anticipate future events and to formulate global policies and strategies based on a deeper analysis of international developments.

## **Conclusions**

Contemporary geopolitics is characterized by an environment of growing complexity and uncertainty. Context prevails, even though foresight exercises remain necessary despite their inherent imperfections. The use of the strategic framework described here is not intended to eliminate uncertainty. It aims to offer an analytical framework for a more rigorous interpretation and to avoid decision-making paralysis. Strategic thinking, more than precise prediction, requires judgment, contextual awareness, and a willingness to act.

The African scenario—particularly the Sahel—exemplifies the primacy of gray rhinos: known threats that advance gradually and are persistently ignored. The combination of rapid demographic growth, environmental degradation, and armed violence generates constant structural pressure that facilitates the expansion of non-state armed actors. These are not unexpected dynamics; they are foreseeable consequences of decades of institutional neglect and fragmented responses. The resulting instability goes beyond the regional sphere, directly affecting European security, migration routes, and global supply chains. The problem is not the absence of warning signs, but their normalization.

In the Middle East, risk follows a different logic, dominated by the potential emergence of black swans. Strategic interaction between actors such as Iran and Israel—based on indirect deterrence and covert confrontation—carries a high escalation potential, particularly given the nuclear dimension. A miscalculation, an internal crisis, or a disproportionate response could trigger immediate systemic effects on regional stability, energy markets, and international trade. In this context, the black swan does not arise from a lack of information, but from the accumulation of unresolved latent tensions.

Added to these scenarios is a transversal element: the intensification of competition among powers for influence, resources, and legitimacy. Africa, the Middle East, and even

Eastern Europe must be understood as interconnected spaces within a single international system, where partial withdrawal or lack of coordination by traditional actors has opened space for others with more pragmatic approaches. This reconfiguration does not imply greater stability, but rather a more fluid order, with broader gray zones and ever-narrower margins for error. What happens in one area reverberates in the others; everything is connected.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine introduces an intermediate logic, represented by pink flamingos. It is neither an extreme surprise nor an ignored threat; rather, it signals a gradual shift that heralds a new strategic phase. The possibility of a conditional peace or a frozen conflict under international supervision could reduce direct violence. Nevertheless, it would not resolve the structural causes of the confrontation. The post-conflict transition, though necessary, would remain fragile and highly uncertain.

Taken together, these scenarios confirm that the strategic future does not unfold uniformly. Equilibria are unstable, solutions are partial, and strategic fatigue often produces pauses rather than lasting peace. International presence and military deployments can help generate confidence and facilitate negotiation processes, but they are insufficient if not accompanied by sustained efforts in reconstruction, institutional strengthening, and social legitimacy.

Understanding whether a threat advances like a gray rhino, erupts like a black swan, or announces itself as a pink flamingo provides essential analytical value—not to eliminate uncertainty or to justify action, but to anticipate more clearly, reduce margins of error, and avoid purely reactive responses in an increasingly volatile international environment.

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