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## International Order and Security. Historical Transformations and Current Tensions

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**Abstract:**

*This opinion paper analyses the evolution of the concept of security in International Relations through its interrelationship with the transformations of world order since 1945. Its central argument holds that dominant conceptions of security are neither stable nor neutral categories, but historical constructions shaped by the distribution of power, perceived threats and the ideological agendas that legitimise each international order. From this perspective, the Cold War consolidated a state-centred and military understanding of security; the post-Cold War period favoured its broadening towards political, economic, social, environmental and individual dimensions; and the first decades of the twenty-first century reveal a new reordering marked by great-power competition, geoeconomics and contemporary forms of coercion. The text argues that this evolution does not follow a linear logic, but rather a pendular one, in which traditional, broadened and critical approaches coexist under shifting hierarchies that influence the political priorities of states.*

**Keywords:**

*International security; world order; balance of power; geopolitics; geoeconomics.*

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## Introduction. Security and the Structure of the International System

The concept of security occupies a central place in the discipline of International Relations. Yet, despite its long theoretical trajectory, it can hardly be regarded as a stable or closed notion.<sup>1</sup> ideas, culture and perceptions of reality, the term security acquires a different value<sup>1</sup>. In any case, its meaning has evolved in close connection with the transformations of world order and, particularly visibly, with the variations in the balance of power that have shaped history since 1945. In other words, that order rests on certain values and ideologies and, on that basis, a specific form of security is deemed legitimate.

The starting point of this text is that there is a clear correlation between the dominant configurations of the international system and the conceptions of security that tend to prevail in each historical period. During the Cold War, the bipolar order favoured a restrictive conception of security, centred on the state and with a marked military component. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, by contrast, the concept broadened towards political, economic, social, environmental and even individual dimensions. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, this landscape had begun to change once again. The erosion of liberal primacy and the return of competition between powers appear to be driving a new redefinition of security which, in certain areas, takes the form of a retreat towards approaches closer to those of the twentieth century.

The central argument is developed along two lines. On the one hand, it adopts a historical-period approach –the Cold War, the post-Cold War period and the first two and a half decades of the twenty-first century– which makes it possible to place these changes in temporal perspective. On the other, in each period, it observes how the structure of the international order delimits what is perceived as an existential threat as opposed to what is regarded as a manageable risk. At the same time, different theoretical traditions – realism in its various forms, liberal institutionalism or constructivism– offer divergent interpretations of the concept of security and, in doing so, shape political responses in different ways.

However, this relationship between order and international security cannot be understood

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<sup>1</sup> LABORIE IGLESIAS, Mario A. 2011. La evolución del concepto de seguridad. Documento Marco 5/2011. Madrid: Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, Ministerio de Defensa.

in strictly deterministic terms. Conceptions of security do not emerge automatically from the structure of the international system, but are consolidated through political, institutional and also narrative processes. Even when a given notion acquires relative predominance, it rarely does so in an exclusive manner. Alternative approaches, forms of resistance and reinterpretations persist, manifesting themselves both nationally and internationally, thereby introducing a greater degree of complexity into the object of study.

## **The Cold War and Security as State Survival**

### ***Bipolar Order and Structural Stability***

The international order that emerged after the Second World War was organised around a bipolar structure defined by the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. The division of the world into two major blocs, which were at once ideological, economic, military and strategic, shaped a landscape in which the dominant concern for states –especially in Europe and in those regions turned into indirect arenas of competition– revolved around survival in the face of a threat perceived as existential. Nuclear deterrence and the logic of the balance of terror introduced a peculiar form of stability. Direct war between the superpowers became unlikely, but the possibility of an escalation with catastrophic consequences always remained on the horizon.

In that context, security tended to be defined in relatively limited terms. It was associated, above all, with the defence of territory, the accumulation of military capabilities and membership of alliances<sup>2</sup>. The very stability of bipolarity –its predictability and clarity in the hierarchy of threats and risks– helped to consolidate this restricted agenda. When the adversary is clearly identified and conflict is interpreted in terms close to a zero-sum logic, security ultimately comes to be measured in terms of deterrence and credibility in the use of force. This does not mean that other security dimensions disappeared altogether, but they were subordinated to the dominant logic that structured the perception of danger and the definition of states' political priorities.

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<sup>2</sup> NATO is undoubtedly the most significant example. Its creation in 1949 responded to an undeniable strategic logic, linked to the perception of the Soviet threat; but what distinguishes it is not only its origin, but also the degree of institutionalisation it achieved and the configuration of an integrated military structure. Through the institutionalisation of so-called Collective Defence, a group of countries with a similar ideology confronted the common threat represented by the USSR.

### ***Classical Realism and Neorealism. Security and the Accumulation of Power***

During the Cold War, realism shaped the main framework for interpreting international politics, largely because it offered a reading consistent with the structure of the system itself. In the work of Hans Morgenthau, international politics is defined as a struggle for power, of which security is a direct derivative. Protecting the national interest in a competitive environment requires, above all, the resources needed to sustain that position, which places power at the centre of the analysis<sup>3</sup>.

Even within theoretical realism, Waltz's structural reformulation introduces a significant variation. Insecurity is no longer explained by the intentions of states but comes to be understood as a product of anarchy<sup>4</sup> and of the distribution of military capabilities. In that situation, "self-help" is not a choice made by nations, but the logical consequence of the absence of a higher authority to which they may turn if necessary. The accumulation of power thus becomes a mechanism of survival, although it does not always guarantee stable or predictable<sup>5</sup> outcomes and may lead to the security dilemma<sup>6</sup>.

The figure of Kissinger, situated between theoretical reflection and political practice, brings new terms to the debate. His conception of security is closely linked to the balance of power, not so much as an abstract formula, but as an instrument for containing strategic uncertainty and channelling competition between great powers. Order, in this sense, does not eliminate conflict, but it does seek to make it manageable<sup>7</sup>.

Despite their differences, these realist authors share the assumption that security is, ultimately, a problem of power politics in which the military dimension –including the

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<sup>3</sup> MORGENTHAU, Hans J. 1948. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

<sup>4</sup> "As there is no world government, dynamics arise that incentivise self-help –or self-defence– and the self-interest of collective actors in pursuing their objectives in the international sphere." JORDÁN, Javier. 2013. "Enfoques teóricos de los estudios estratégicos." En *Manual de Estudios Estratégicos y Seguridad Internacional*, coordinado por Javier Jordán. Madrid: Plaza y Valdés.

<sup>5</sup> WALTZ, Kenneth N. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

<sup>6</sup> The security dilemma describes the structural situation characteristic of an anarchic international system in which the measures adopted by a state to increase its security –such as military strengthening, doctrinal modernisation or the formation of alliances– are perceived by others as potentially threatening, inducing them to respond in a similar manner. The result may be mistrust, competition and unintended escalation, even when none of the parties pursues offensive aims. JERVIS, Robert. 1978. "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma." *World Politics* 30 (2): 167–214.

<sup>7</sup> KISSINGER, Henry. 1957. *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812–1822*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin // KISSINGER, Henry. 1994. *Diplomacy*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

nuclear dimension— acts as the ultimate reference point for the state's credibility when defending its national interests. This framework gives rise to a restrictive conception of security, centred on states and oriented fundamentally towards the management of military threats. Countries rely on military power to counter those threats that arise from the armed force of other states<sup>8</sup>.

In this way, security is identified with the preservation of sovereignty against external coercion, while other dimensions, such as the economic or the social, remain subordinated. They do not disappear from the analysis, but they tend to be interpreted as instruments in the service of hard power. This conceptual pre-eminence of the military and of national defence clearly responded to an international environment that prioritised threats in terms compatible with that approach.

At this point, it is necessary to note that the creation of the United Nations represented a partial move beyond the traditional notion of national security by incorporating non-military aspects into its agenda, giving rise to the concept of collective security. In addition to prohibiting the use of force as a means of protecting national interests, the UN calls for respect for international law, promotes long-term economic and social development and safeguards fundamental rights. In this sense, since its foundation, the UN has adopted a broadened security agenda that seeks to guarantee world peace and stability through the use of a wide range of instruments.

## **The End of the Cold War and the Expansion of the Concept of Security**

### ***Unipolarity, Globalisation and the Reordering of Priorities***

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent disappearance of the Soviet Union profoundly altered the structure of the international system and opened a period characterised by American unipolar hegemony. The evident imbalance of global power in favour of the West was accompanied by expectations of a supposed “end of history” and of convergence towards a global liberal order which, over time, proved far more problematic than had initially been assumed.

In this new strategic context, the possibility of a war between states that might place the

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<sup>8</sup> Laborie, 2011, Op. Cit.

world order at risk appeared to diminish considerably, allowing for both a political and a theoretical shift in the way the main threats were identified. Without disappearing, the classic security dilemma lost much of its prominence, enabling other risks, of a different nature, to gain visibility.

Thus, vulnerabilities that did not fit within the strategic framework of previous decades began to acquire relevance. The fragility of certain states, internal conflicts, nuclear proliferation, organised crime and health crises, together with factors such as inequality and environmental degradation, became part of the security framework. This change was not merely empirical; it also involved a conceptual transformation that shifted the focus from national defence towards the stability of countries' internal order and the management of interdependencies which, as a consequence of the acceleration of globalisation, became increasingly complex.

### ***Liberal Institutionalism, Multilateralism and Cooperative Security***

Liberal institutionalism helped to provide theoretical coherence to this broadening of the concept of security. Against the idea that anarchy imposes an inevitable logic of competition between powers, authors such as Keohane stressed that cooperation can be sustained through institutions, norms and regimes that reduce uncertainty and facilitate coordination between states<sup>9</sup>. For Ikenberry, international institutions, created as instruments of multilateralism, seek to establish globally accepted rules for relations and for the resolution of political, economic or security conflicts<sup>10</sup>.

With the idea of complex interdependence, the exclusive primacy of the military began to be questioned. Vulnerability was no longer understood solely in terms of direct threat, but also as the result of countries' growing inclusion in economic, technological and financial networks that generate new forms of interrelationship. In this way, power depends not only on force, but also on the capacity to manage asymmetries of dependence and to influence the rules and institutions that organise international cooperation<sup>11</sup>.

In practice, this approach translated into the expansion in the number and scope of

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<sup>9</sup> KEOHANE, Robert O. 1984. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>10</sup> IKENBERRY, G. J. May/June 2011. *The future of the Liberal World Order*. *Foreign Affairs*.

<sup>11</sup> KEOHANE, Robert O., and Joseph S. NYE. 1977. *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*. Boston: Little, Brown.

peacekeeping operations, the development of frameworks of cooperative security<sup>12</sup>, the consolidation of multilateralism<sup>13</sup> and the strengthening of the global governance agenda. Although coercion<sup>14</sup> and traditional instruments of power did not disappear, this approach pointed towards a broadening and deepening of the notion of security that included the ordering and management of an increasingly interconnected and more complex international environment.

### ***The Copenhagen School, Constructivism and Human Security***

The broadening of the concept of security found a more prominent formulation in the Copenhagen School, which proposed studying security by paying attention to the way in which certain issues come to be presented as threats to states. In this way, “securitisation” may be understood as the process through which a problem is placed within the realm of exception, making possible responses that would be more difficult to accept under normal conditions<sup>15</sup>. In the same vein, “desecuritisation” refers to the opposite process, that is, the return of those issues to the sphere of ordinary politics, where they can be discussed and managed without constant recourse to extraordinary measures<sup>16 17</sup>.

In parallel, peace studies underwent significant development and contributed to deepening the meaning of security by insisting that it should not be understood only as the absence of war, but also as the creation of social and political conditions capable of sustaining a more stable and lasting peace, along lines close to Johan Galtung’s well-known distinction between negative peace and positive peace<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Cooperative security is understood as an approach to international security that seeks to reduce mistrust and prevent conflicts through transparency, mutual confidence, shared norms and institutionalised cooperation between states, based on the premise that the security of some can strengthen that of others through reciprocal and inclusive mechanisms. CARTER, Ashton B., William J. PERRY, and John D. STEINBRUNER. 1992. *A New Concept of Cooperative Security*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

<sup>13</sup> Multilateralism entails “respect for a shared system of norms and values” that “facilitate cooperation in principle”. United Nations. 2018. “International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace”.

<sup>14</sup> Coercion may be regarded as a specific type of strategy in which the intention is to use threats to pressure another actor into doing something against its will –active coercion, or *compellence*– or into refraining from doing something it had planned to do –*deterrence*–. FREEDMAN, Lawrence, and Srinath RAGHAVAN. 2008. “Coercion.” In *Security Studies: An Introduction*, edited by Paul D. Williams, 206–20. London: Routledge.

<sup>15</sup> WÆVER, Ole. 1995. “Securitization and Desecuritization.” In *On Security*, edited by Ronnie D. Lipschutz, 46–87. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>16</sup> BUZAN, Barry, Ole WÆVER, and Jaap de WILDE. 1998. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

<sup>17</sup> HANSEN, Lene. 2012. “Reconstructing Desecuritisation: The Normative-Political in the Copenhagen School and Directions for How to Apply It.” *Review of International Studies* 38 (3): 525–46.

<sup>18</sup> Negative peace is the absence of direct violence, such as war. Positive peace goes further; it entails social

In that same context, human security introduced an essential transformation by placing individuals, and not only the state, at the centre of the analysis, thereby broadening the concept towards issues related to social vulnerability, economic precariousness and living conditions. This evolution was ultimately reflected in international political practice, as shown by the formulation of the principle of the Responsibility to Protect<sup>19</sup>.

This can be situated within the broader expansion of social constructivist theories which argue that security does not depend solely on material factors or on the distribution of power, but also on ideas, norms, identities and shared meanings. From its classical perspective, security appears as a socially constructed reality and, for that very reason, one that is susceptible to transformation if the perceptions, expectations and practices of actors change<sup>20</sup>. For Soriano, “constructivism has proved useful for analysing contemporary international politics, especially in contexts marked by disputes over values, identities and narratives”<sup>21</sup>.

However, despite the favourable environment, neither (de)securitisation, nor human security, nor constructivism succeeded in fully replacing more traditional conceptions of security. From their earliest formulations, these perspectives raised objections within the field of security studies itself, especially among authors close to traditional approaches, who warned of the risk of diluting the concept to the point of making it more difficult to identify priority threats<sup>22</sup>. At root, the problem was that the further the idea of security is stretched, the more difficult it becomes to distinguish which dangers should genuinely be considered objects of national security. This tension remains present today. Broadening the concept makes it possible to reflect more accurately the complexity of the international environment, but it also requires decisions about which issues demand preferential

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justice, rights, equality and decent living conditions. The absence of armed conflict is not enough; the underlying causes of violence must also disappear. GALTUNG, Johan. 1969. “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research.” *Journal of Peace Research* 6 (3): 167–91.

<sup>19</sup> Principle according to which each state must protect its population from grave crimes, such as genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. If it is unable or unwilling to do so, the international community may act, preferably through diplomatic and humanitarian means and, ultimately, coercive measures. United Nations Development Programme. 1994. *Human Development Report 1994*. New York: Oxford University Press for the United Nations Development Programme /// International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty. 2001. *The Responsibility to Protect*. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre.

<sup>20</sup> WENDT, Alexander. 1992. “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics.” *International Organization* 46 (2): 391–425.

<sup>21</sup> SORIANO GATICA, Juan Pablo. 2025. *Teorías de relaciones internacionales en la era de la competencia global*. En G. Palomares & M. Laborie (coord.) *Manual de seguridad internacional*. Tecnos. Madrid.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Stephen M. WALT warned that broadening security to include phenomena such as disease, drugs or environmental risks could “destroy the intellectual coherence” of the field of security studies. “The Renaissance of Security Studies.” *International Studies Quarterly* 35 (2): 211–39.

attention and which should remain outside that framework.

### ***The First Decade of the Twenty-First Century. “New” Risks and the Hybridisation of Security***

The attacks of 11 September 2001 marked a new turning point in the conception of security. Not because they introduced new forms of violence, but because they relocated organised violence at the centre of the security agenda, albeit in registers very different from those of classical war between states. Transnational terrorism, the military responses subsequently deployed, and the strengthening of internal security apparatuses revealed a certain ambivalence.

On the one hand, the security agenda broadened once again towards issues that had until then occupied a secondary place –for example, illicit finance, processes of radicalisation or dangers that escaped the control of states. At the same time, political practice continued to activate well-known coercive responses. In this way, security came to be configured as a hybrid terrain, in which global counter-terrorism measures, approaches linked to international cooperation and the idea of placing the human being as the main referent of security coexisted, not always coherently. State-building operations<sup>23</sup>, which attempted to integrate these three levels of action, ultimately ended in clear failure.

In parallel, globalisation revealed its most unfavourable dimension with greater clarity. The global financial crisis (2007–2010), disruptions in supply chains and the growing impact of climate change contributed to consolidating the perception that risk could no longer be understood solely in state or military terms. In these circumstances, the need to adopt a comprehensive concept of security became consolidated as a narrative that made it possible to describe structural challenges of global scope.

However, as destabilising dynamics intensified, social and political contestation

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<sup>23</sup> These are interventions aimed at rebuilding or strengthening the basic institutions of a state when it is weak, has collapsed or is emerging from armed conflict. They are linked to the recovery of minimum state capacities: the provision of security, administrative authority, the delivery of public goods, the functioning of the judicial system and the consolidation of legitimate political authority. Their objective is not limited to stabilising the territory but seeks to create an authority capable of maintaining order, enforcing the law, providing essential services and governing in a minimally stable manner. These operations usually include administrative, judicial, police and political reforms, as well as programmes for security sector reform and the strengthening of the rule of law, although it should be noted that such processes raise persistent dilemmas of legitimacy, external dependence, institutional sequencing and local ownership. FUKUYAMA, F. (2004). *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*. Cornell University Press.

surrounding their effects also grew. As a result, globalisation began to be questioned in the West, where certain social strata felt –and still feel– harmed by the liberalising processes inherent in the globalisation of markets and finance.

This added a new source of tension to the way in which security threats were interpreted and managed by different countries. For this reason, the ideological orientation of governments came to play a fundamental role in the way they defined and promoted their foreign policy actions. In other words, the traditional line separating domestic politics from foreign policy began to blur under the pressure of domestic ideological polarisation.

## **The Return of Geopolitics and the Reconfiguration of Security**

### ***Transformations in the Balance of Power and the Erosion of the Liberal Order***

From the 2010s onwards, it became increasingly evident that the unipolar moment of the United States was showing clear signs of exhaustion. The rise of China, Russia's revisionist behaviour and the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific reintroduced strategic competition as a fundamental axis of the international system. This transition did not occur abruptly, but it was sufficiently evident to call into question some of the premises that had dominated the post-Cold War period.

The economic and financial crisis at the end of that decade contributed decisively to this process. Not only because of its depth –the greatest in almost a century– but because it revealed the systemic fragility of global capitalism, which until then had apparently remained hidden. The system's inability to manage risk, the deterioration of trust in international institutions and the widespread impact on the strength of states, with the eurozone on the brink of rupture, shaped a scenario that went beyond a merely conjunctural disturbance. "Seen in perspective, this crisis undermined the foundations of global capitalism, revealed the inability of banks to manage risk, diminished confidence in international institutions, weakened all states without exception and almost broke the eurozone. In addition, it played a fundamental role in the misnamed Arab Springs, the conflict in Ukraine, Brexit and the [first] election of Donald Trump as president of the United States"<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> LABORIE IGLESIAS, Mario A. 2020. Desglobalización y pandemia global. Documento de Opinión 28/2020.

The system of relations underpinned by the West, which had dominated international affairs for the last seven decades, began to fragment under the pressure of structural economic tensions, the growth of political tribalism and nationalism, and a general loss of confidence in international and national institutions; in other words, “the liberal world order established after the Second World War may be coming to an end”<sup>25</sup>.

In this way, the unipolarity of the United States gradually weakened, favouring the emergence of an increasingly multipolar international system. In this context, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 showed that Moscow no longer felt constrained, as it had years earlier, by American deterrent capacity. All this reflects a new change in the balance of global power, marked by the relative decline of the United States and by the greater role of other powers in international politics.

This strategic scenario is clearly reflected in the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) of the United States, published during Donald Trump’s first presidency. The document explicitly assumed that the international context was changing and that competition between great powers was once again occupying a central place. In this regard, it stated that the challenges facing the United States were not temporary, but enduring and interconnected problems that required constant attention and sustained national commitment. Moreover, the strategy identified China and Russia as the United States’ main competitors, considering that both countries challenged its power, its influence and its interests. In other words, the 2017 NSS presented those two countries as rival powers seeking to advance an international order contrary to American values and objectives<sup>26</sup>. Multipolarity had returned.

In the mid-2010s, Kissinger<sup>27</sup> interpreted the evolution of international order as a far-reaching transition marked by growing interdependence between actors and, at the same time, by weaker political cohesion among them. The old Western balance was no longer sufficient to order global politics. Within that analytical lens, the rise of China had to be interpreted in a dual dimension: first, as a strategic challenge to the existing order, and second, as the return of a civilisation historically accustomed to seeing itself as the centre

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Madrid: Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, Ministerio de Defensa.

<sup>25</sup> KAGAN, Robert. 2017. “The Twilight of the Liberal World Order.” Brookings, January 24.

<sup>26</sup> The White House. 2017. National Security Strategy of the United States of America. Washington, DC: The White House.

<sup>27</sup> KISSINGER, Henry. 2016. Orden mundial. Reflexiones sobre el carácter de las naciones y el curso de la historia. Barcelona. Debate.

of a hierarchical order. Stability on a global scale required a balance of power, flexible diplomacy and respect for the different historical conceptions of order, avoiding the imposition of supposedly universal models<sup>28</sup>.

### ***The Current World Order. Geopolitics and the Disillusionment of Western Liberalism***

The withdrawal of the United States and its allies from Afghanistan in 2021 had a significant geopolitical impact, as it symbolised the failure of a prolonged Western interventionist project aimed at nation/state-building. It also revealed the limits of military power in creating a stable political order and reinforced the perception that Washington intended to focus on competition between great powers while disengaging, as far as possible, from secondary theatres. In addition, it made clear Europe's enormous strategic dependence on the United States and opened up greater room for manoeuvre for regional actors such as Russia, China and even Iran<sup>29</sup>.

From a diplomatic point of view, the possibility of articulating a strengthened multilateralism –anchored in the European space through the enlargement of the European Union and the consolidation of NATO– was, however, partially weakened by the re-emergence of nationalism. These conditions were reflected both in states linked to the former Soviet orbit –such as the Balkans, Hungary or Slovakia– and in various regions of Western Europe –Catalonia, Scotland or Piedmont– to which must be added, on a different but convergent level, the rupture represented by Brexit. Bruno Tertrais described this evolution as the “revenge of history”. By this he referred to the identity-based retreat experienced by numerous societies as a reaction to the disillusionment of broad sectors with the effects of modernisation and to the resentment generated by globalisation<sup>30</sup>.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 introduced, in the European case, a decisive element of geostrategic acceleration. High-intensity conventional warfare reappeared with a violence that many had considered unlikely, while security priorities

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<sup>28</sup> The 2020 Munich Security Report had already diagnosed that the world was moving towards a progressive de-Westernisation, insofar as the relative power of the West was declining and its liberal values were losing internal cohesion and capacity for external projection. Democracy, human rights and the rule of law do not disappear, but they cease to operate as undisputed universal principles and begin to compete with other models of political and international order. Munich Security Report 2020. Westlessness. Munich Security Conference.

<sup>29</sup> ZIEGLER, Charles E. 2024. “Filling the Void Left by Great-Power Retrenchment: Russia, Central Asia, and the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan.” *Texas National Security Review* 7 (4).

<sup>30</sup> TERTRAIS, Bruno. 2015. “The Revenge of History.” *The Washington Quarterly* 38 (4): 7–18.

were once again reorganised around deterrence, defence and strategic resilience<sup>31</sup>.

Against this backdrop, the 2025 National Security Strategy of the United States<sup>32</sup> (NSS) raises several issues of interest. More than a simple programmatic update, it reflects a shift in the way in which the principal power in the international system understands its position and its interests. The United States, traditionally identified with the promotion of the rules-based liberal order, adopts a more explicitly geopolitical orientation, introducing a certain discontinuity with previous stages and administrations, even those of the same political persuasion.

The latest American security strategy recentres competition for power at the heart of external policy and formulates, more or less explicitly, a critique of previous orientations. It questions attachment to certain international institutions and agreements and points to the negative impact that some transnational and globalist approaches are said to have had on state sovereignty. Without needing to accept this diagnosis in full, it is difficult to ignore that it points to a redefinition of priorities that extends beyond the American case.

Against this backdrop, the European Union has relaunched its sought-after “strategic autonomy” and revived the debate on the “Defence Union”, having recognised that the European environment has become more insecure and that its dependence on American capabilities constitutes an essential vulnerability. Brussels insists on strengthening its capacity for decision-making, its technological and industrial base and its military preparedness, although, at least for the time being, as a complement to, and not a substitute for, NATO<sup>33</sup>.

Consequently, the present moment can hardly be reduced to a passing crisis. Rather, it suggests the opening of a process of structural transformation, in which the liberal normative order ceases to function as an unquestioned framework of reference. Actors such as China and Russia, together with the United States itself, appear less interested in protecting that order than in reinterpreting it or, in certain respects, contesting it<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> GENINI, Davide. 2025. “How the War in Ukraine Has Transformed the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy.” *Yearbook of European Law*.

<sup>32</sup> The White House. 2025. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, DC: The White House.

<sup>33</sup> European Commission. 2025. *White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030*. Brussels: European Commission.

<sup>34</sup> The Munich Security Report 2026 interprets this evolution as a phase of demolition politics, in which the post-1945 international order, built under American leadership, ceases to be the object of gradual reform and instead

Thus, multilateralism loses part of its universal vocation and tends to adopt a more hegemonic form, limited to those actors willing to accept the terms set by the great powers. This is cooperation under dominant leadership structures, whose effectiveness lies in transforming power into rules. Nonetheless, the weakening of international governance has favoured the emergence of more fragmented and competitive institutional arrangements, such as the G7, BRICS+ and the G20, which increasingly function as informal forums for coordination among powers<sup>35</sup>.

It should be noted that, although the present analysis focuses on the Euro-Atlantic experience –for evident historical reasons– this does not imply assuming homogeneous trajectories at the global level. In other regions, conceptions of security have followed different rhythms and directions, even though they have been conditioned, to a greater or lesser extent, by the prolonged centrality of the West<sup>36</sup>.

From a perspective close to offensive realism, the reappearance of competition between great powers is hardly surprising. Rather, it would confirm that the international system continues to incentivise the accumulation of power and the pursuit of relative advantages. In this sense, expectations of liberal stabilisation after the end of the Cold War would have underestimated the persistence of competitive dynamics and the conflictual character of international anarchy<sup>37</sup>.

### ***A Conceptual Retrenchment?***

In view of the situation described in the previous section, the broadening and deepening of the concept of security, evident since the end of the last century, could be interpreted more as the product of a specific historical moment, marked by American hegemony, than as an irreversible evolution.

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comes to be challenged from within and from without. The result is not an orderly replacement of the existing system, but a more transactional, less normative scenario, more exposed to regional spheres of influence, where universal rules give way to power agreements among great powers. Munich Security Report 2026. Munich Security Conference, 2026.

<sup>35</sup> STEPHEN, M. D. 2025. The Diffusion of Global Power and the Decline of Global Governance. *Ethics & International Affairs* 39, n.2.

<sup>36</sup> From the perspective of the People's Republic of China, international security is understood as a stable order that must protect national interests, sovereignty, the security of the party-state and the continuity of economic development. All this is oriented towards ensuring an international environment favourable to so-called national rejuvenation, through the combined use of diplomatic, technological, economic and military instruments within a conception of comprehensive security and common security. LABORIE IGLESIAS, Mario. 2025. *La visión estratégica de la República Popular China en la nueva era: análisis del Libro Blanco sobre Seguridad Nacional* (2025). Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (IEEE). Oct 6..

<sup>37</sup> MEARSHEIMER, John J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton.

In this way, the central question would not be whether security is returning to its more restricted meaning, but rather to what extent the new international context is altering the hierarchy of priorities among issues. Everything seems to indicate that certain dimensions –particularly the military, technological and economic– are regaining centrality, without this implying the disappearance of broader approaches.

In other words, this possible conceptual and political retrenchment does not mean a linear return to the Cold War paradigm. Rather, it is taking shape as a process of reshaping in which different dimensions of security coexist, albeit with changing relative weight. The key would lie in the way their relevance is redefined according to perceptions of risk that are, ultimately, historically, politically and culturally accepted.

In an environment characterised by technological competition, tensions in supply chains and a much more assertive strategic rivalry, security tends to be articulated around three developments that advance at different speeds. On the one hand, there is a recentring of defence and deterrence; on the other, a growing securitisation of economic and technological interdependencies; and, finally, a selective subordination of broadened security agendas to geopolitical priorities. Nevertheless, the scope and stability of this process remain the subject of debate –and of ideological struggle.

The war in Ukraine has acted, in many respects, as a kind of corrective to the assumptions that dominated the unipolar period in Europe. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept does not introduce this inflection abruptly, but it does clearly establish it by returning deterrence and collective defence to the core of the Alliance's mandate. Although the document maintains references to cross-cutting threats, such as terrorism, what is relevant is that it once again places military security in a central position<sup>38</sup>. In parallel, a significant part of the recent literature on the evolution of the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy agrees in pointing out that the Russian invasion has reactivated dynamics closer to the logic of power, with visible effects both on roles and on the instruments available<sup>39</sup>. In this way, the Ukrainian case does not close the broadened security framework, but it does reorder its priorities, restoring a "harder" substratum on which the remaining dimensions

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<sup>38</sup> NATO. 2022. NATO 2022 Strategic Concept. Brussels: NATO.

<sup>39</sup> OP. Cit. Genini, 2025 // KARJALAINEN, Tyyne, and Marco SIDDI. 2025. "From Role Change to Policy Change: EU Member States and Change in EU Foreign Policy after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine." *Journal of European Integration*.

rest.

This readjustment is not limited to the strictly military plane. It can also be seen in the way interdependence has come to be conceived as a vector of vulnerability and, at the same time, as a potential instrument of power. The notion of weaponised interdependence is particularly useful for capturing this change<sup>40</sup>. The most recent developments of this approach, especially those incorporating the growing technological bipolarisation –the struggle between the United States and China for dominance over emerging and disruptive technologies<sup>41</sup>– point to a broader trend towards the politicisation of the architecture of globalisation<sup>42</sup>. Without this implying a return to Cold War patterns, there is nevertheless a perceptible move towards a more restricted logic of security, in which autonomy, control and resilience acquire a meaning closer to that of conditions for strategic survival.

One of the areas in which this transformation becomes most visible is that of so-called economic security and geoeconomics<sup>43</sup>, whose weight in the European agenda has increased in recent years. The European Parliament has begun to develop specific analytical lens to assess the strategy promoted by the Commission in response to risks associated with critical dependencies, dual-use technologies and practices of economic coercion<sup>44</sup>. Similarly, some analysts suggest greater determination on the part of the Union to protect key sectors and to manage vulnerabilities in supply chains<sup>45</sup>. This movement does not imply an abandonment of the normative dimension that has

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<sup>40</sup> Farrell and Newman conceptualise weaponised interdependence as the capacity of states that control nodes in global networks to convert structural asymmetries of dependence into mechanisms of surveillance and coercion, thereby transforming economic connectivity into a resource of strategic power. FARRELL, Henry, and Abraham L. NEWMAN. 2019. "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion." *International Security* 44 (1): 42–79.

<sup>41</sup> In the field of security and defence, reference is frequently made to emerging and disruptive technologies to denote those innovations –artificial intelligence, quantum computing or autonomous systems– that have the potential to transform military capabilities profoundly. LABORIE IGLESIAS, Mario A. 2026. "Tecnologías emergentes y poder militar. Ambiciones estratégicas para la defensa de España". En G. Palomares (Dir) *Nuevas tecnologías: seguridad, defensa y ambiciones estratégicas*. Madrid: Dykinson. Pg. 225

<sup>42</sup> LEHDONVIRTA, Vili, Boxi WÜ, and Zoe HAWKINS. 2025. "Weaponised Interdependence in a Bipolar World: How Economic Forces and Security Interests Shape the Global Reach of US and Chinese Cloud Data Centres." *Review of International Political Economy* 32 (5): 1442–67.

<sup>43</sup> Geoeconomics refers to the deliberate use of economic, financial and technological instruments as tools of state power aimed at achieving geopolitical objectives, altering the strategic calculations of third parties and strengthening relative positions of power without the need to resort to the direct use of military force. BLACKWILL, Robert D., and Jennifer M. HARRIS. 2016. *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>44</sup> European Parliament. 2024. *European Economic Security: Current Practices and Further Development*. Brussels: Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, Policy Department.

<sup>45</sup> GARCÍA-BERCERO, Ignacio, and Niclas Poitiers. 2025. "From Strategy to Doctrine: The Next Steps for European Economic Security." *Bruegel Policy Brief* 32/2025, December 2.

traditionally characterised the EU, but it does introduce a shift, insofar as security is once again articulated around capabilities, technology, strategic sectors and dynamics of competition.

For its part, the aforementioned 2025 NSS moves further in this same direction by placing the economy at the centre of American national security, no longer as a sectoral sphere, but as one of the foundations of power as a whole. The strategy deliberately combines reindustrialisation objectives with trade instruments aimed at reducing strategic dependencies, among which the use of tariffs, the relocation of productive capabilities and the strengthening of the defence industrial base stand out. This is accompanied by a conception of energy as an essential instrument of power, supported both by hydrocarbons and nuclear energy, as well as a sustained emphasis on the primacy of the financial system and capital markets as vectors of strategic influence<sup>46</sup>.

From this perspective, the American intervention in Venezuela in early 2026 may be interpreted, at least in part, in relation to the strategic value of its energy resources, particularly in a context in which the relationship between security, economic power and control of resources is acquiring renewed relevance.

Similarly, the current conflict around Iran<sup>47</sup>, with its multiple facets and levels of interpretation, can also be analysed as an attempt by the United States to reinforce its capacity to control global hydrocarbon flows. In this circumstance, China's position becomes especially relevant given its high energy dependence on imports from the Middle East –including significant volumes of Iranian crude. This situation places the conflict beyond the regional level, positioning it at the centre of strategic competition between superpowers. Thus, the tension must be situated within a logic of dispute over access to, regulation of and security in the energy markets that condition the international order<sup>48</sup>.

However, this partial retrenchment of the concept of security does not eliminate the presence of threats associated with the broadened agenda –climate change, terrorism,

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<sup>46</sup> The White House. 2025. National Security Strategy of the United States of America. Washington, DC: The White House.

<sup>47</sup> On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched a surprise attack against Iran. At the time of concluding this analysis, almost 100 days after the start of the conflict, the ceasefire agreed on 8 April 2026 between the United States and Iran shows clear signs of fragility.

<sup>48</sup> GARCÍA-HERRERO, Alicia. 2026. "¿Romperá la guerra en Irán el modelo chino? Los peores escenarios para Xi Jinping." *Le Grand Continent*, March 17.

health, organised crime or inequalities, among others— although it does appear to modify their relative position. When these dimensions come into friction with the dynamics of great-power rivalry, they tend to be subordinated. The reconfiguration of European energy policy since 2022 provides an example, insofar as energy reappears as a security problem linked to sovereignty and national resilience, and not only as a question of environmental transition and the “green agenda”. Some recent proposals point, in this regard, to the need to combine energy sovereignty and solidarity as axes of a security reordered by geopolitical imperatives<sup>49</sup>. Rather than a denial of the environmental dimension, what can be observed is its reassessment within a logic in which power and state fragility regain prominence.

From this perspective, the aforementioned security retrenchment cannot simply be understood as a return to limited conceptions of security, but rather as a structural process of reorganising priorities in a transforming international order. Security once again focuses more explicitly on what is perceived as existential, although the threshold of what is truly critical has broadened to include elements such as technological capabilities, geoeconomic positioning, control of critical infrastructures and access to strategic resources, among others.

The key question, from a theoretical point of view, would lie in determining whether the broadened concept should be preserved while also avoiding its complete analytical hollowing-out. When certain issues can be securitised in the name of geostrategic competition, the concept risks narrowing through coercion; when, by contrast, it expands without hierarchies, it may become diluted to the point of losing analytical capacity.

## Conclusions

The analysis carried out in the preceding pages has sought to show that security has evolved in close relationship with changes in the international order. The text proposes an integrative view that connects three central vectors of the current international system. First, the transformations of world order itself; second, new security priorities; and third, the dynamics of geoeconomics and the various forms of coercion.

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<sup>49</sup> LABELLE, Michael Carnegie. 2024. “Breaking the Era of Energy Interdependence in Europe: A Multidimensional Reframing of Energy Security, Sovereignty, and Solidarity.” *Energy Strategy Reviews* 52.

This is not, however, a linear evolution from a narrow concept towards a broader one –or vice versa– but rather a pendular movement conditioned by the distribution of power and by dominant threats and risks. The bipolarity of the Cold War consolidated a form of security centred on the state and the military; unipolarity, together with globalisation, favoured a broadening towards non-state actors and domains; the current transition, marked by competition between great powers and by the growing politicisation of interdependencies, is reordering priorities and restoring prominence to the traditional military dimension of security.

The problem lies in not confusing this reshaping of priorities with a simple return to the past. The broadened understanding of security does not disappear, insofar as global risks persist, although its political weight is conditioned by a context in which systemic rivalry introduces other urgencies and preferences.

Hence, the underlying question lies in how to articulate a theory capable of explaining the coexistence of the different logics of our time. Ultimately, security remains a reflection of the international order. When the structure changes, hierarchies are reconfigured and, with them, the practical meaning of what it means to “be secure”.

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