

Introduction

According to Hans Morgenthau, the political power refers to «the mutual relation of control among the holders of public authority and between the latter and the people at large»¹. When political power is not enough to achieve the desired aims by a power, it can resort to violence, that is, to military power, which is the physical embodiment of political power². This way, countries are in a constant struggle among their political objects, which can aim towards keeping the *statu quo*, increasing their power (imperialistic policy) or demonstrating power³. In this sense, international relations are characterized by the struggle in the relations among sovereign states, existing a constant competition in which each country searches for its own national interest.

Following these premises, during the thirties in the last century, Germany pursued an imperialistic policy. Its main objective was the integration of the german-speaking communities, recovering the lost territories after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles (1919) and ensuring what was known as «vital space»⁴. To do so, it developed a military doctrine adapted to its expansionist aims, that is, it befitted military strategy and doctrine to policy.

As for the United Kingdom, it started the thirties with a stagnated military doctrine and an obsolete army, resulted from budgetary constraints and the costly maintenance of its empire. This way, a «limited liability» policy was favoured, by which, taking advantage of its geographical advantage and the supremacy of its Navy, it tried to restrict its military intervention and impose an attrition war on Germany, which would allow its collapse and a change in the balance of power⁵. Therefore, the United Kingdom followed a policy of *statu quo* based on the acknowledgement of its military inferiority in undertaking a continental war.

Both the United Kingdom and Germany aligned their political aims with their military strategy and doctrine. Nonetheless, it cannot be said the same about the United States

¹ MORGENTHAU, Hans (1948). *Politics among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York: Alfred A. Kopf, p. 13.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

⁴ POSEN, Barry (1984). *The Sources of Military Doctrine. France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars*, London: Cornell University Press, p. 180.

⁵ LIDDELL HART, Basil H. (1967). *Strategy. The Indirect Approach*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, p. 335.

almost a century later. In a world drifting towards a multipolar world⁶, the United States has changed from exerting its unipolarity after the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) to facing the appearance of other sources of power (China and Russia), which defy the established global order. The United States wants to keep its «unrivalled soft power»⁷ to guarantee the maintenance of its global hegemony, though its current foreign policy is undermining its ability to exert its power over other countries, resorting to military power, for instance in Venezuela or Iran.

This paper contains a comparative analysis between British foreign policy during the thirties and the American one in the present day with the Iranian War as its background. Starting from the theories of balance of power and limited liability, it will be posed that, contrary to the United Kingdom back then, the United States are following a policy and applying a military doctrine that are not aligned with its national interests, ending up in the detriment of its capability to exert global power.

Limited liability and balance of power: the theories of Fuller and Liddell Hart

In his work *On War*, the Prussian general Karl von Clausewitz studied the elements of strategy along the political aims of a state. He stated that victories in wars had to be deemed as means for strategy and, in the end, to get peace, which is the ultimate goal of a conflict⁸. In this sense, he explained that “politics form the matrix where war is waged», justifying his most notorious quote: «war is just a mere continuation of politics by other means»⁹. Once the conflict started, he rejected its limited nature, asserting that «war is an act of force, and there is not a limit for its application»¹⁰.

The interwar period brought with it a deep doctrinal discussion within the armies. Added to this discussion was a technological revolution, marked by the appearance of the tank, military airplanes or chemical warfare. This discussion was defined by the confrontation among advocates for a deep change, those who had a moderate view and conservatives, who opted for going on trusting on horse cavalry and infantry. In this regard, armies faced

⁶ FRÍAS SÁNCHEZ, Carlos J. (2025). «El futuro de la disuasión nuclear: análisis de las estrategias de las grandes potencias nucleares». *Panorama nuclear global*. Cuadernos de Estrategia IEEE. Madrid: Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, p. 42. Available on: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/cuaderno-de-estrategia-229>

NOTE: All the links were active when this paper was published.

⁷ THE WHITE HOUSE (2025). *National Security Strategy of the United States*. Washington, p. 4. Available on: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

⁸ CLAUSEWITZ, Karl (1831). *De la Guerra*, Librodot, pp. 68-69.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18 y 74.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

the complex situation of carrying out a radical change or keeping their traditional doctrines. Change usually implies a slow process and involves certain resistance, given that it leaves armies in uncertainty and vulnerability during it¹¹.

In this context, military strategy began to be studied from a scientific-revisionist perspective, which led to the theorization of new integration models with politics and economy. British officer John F. C. Fuller must be singled out for being a pioneer in this area in his country. On one hand, from the early twenties on he appealed to the mechanization and motorization of the army. On the other hand, he tried to create a theory of war framed in political, social, moral and economical aspects, which was written down on two essential works: *The Reformation of War* (1923) and *The Foundations of Science of War* (1926).

In his first work he stressed the importance of the economy in a war, asserting that military expenses during peace was the safeguard of a country against defeat in a conflict. As a result, the figure of the «grand strategist» had to calculate the financial and commercial position of his country¹². Nevertheless, he also stressed the importance of the «moral energy», that is, the will of a country to fight and its permeability when transmitting or receiving ideals from other nations. In this sense, Fuller considered the civilian population as the bulwark of moral will and a main objective in a confrontation between two powers¹³. In *Foundations of the Science of War*, he explained that ethics, politics and economy added up to the power of a nation. Achieving superiority in these spheres of power was crucial to the survival of a state¹⁴.

However, not only did Fuller consider a key factor the establishment of political aims in a war between powers, but also in the conditions to set both victory and peace. In this regard, he expressed that policy in a war had to aim to get a «better peace» than the existing one before the start of hostilities. Otherwise, war would have been fought in vain. He stressed that devastating the enemy country and reducing it to a state of anarchy was the seed of future wars, so it was preferable «the conquest of the will of the hostile nation». In that conflict between the wills of two or more nations, Fuller warned about the international and total dimension that war would have in the future and predicted that «the

¹¹ POSEN: *The Sources of Military Doctrine. France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars*. Op. Cit., p. 59.

¹² FULLER, John F. C. (1923). *The Reformation of War*. London: Hutchinson & Co, p. 218.

¹³ *Ibíd.*, p. 219.

¹⁴ FULLER, John F. C. (1926). *The Foundations of the Science of War*. London, Hutchinson & Co, p. 69.

victor in a great war will, in the peace which follows, exert a higher influence on civilization than the vanquished»¹⁵, implicitly speculating about the theory of balance of power.

For its part, from the thirties on, captain Basil H. Liddell Hart started to influence on British military literature. His theory of indirect approach appeared for the first time in 1929 in his work *The Decisive Wars of History* and was perfected in 1941 in *The Strategy of Indirect Approach*. This view defended achieving the aims, whether they were political or military, following the line of least resistance¹⁶. In politics, diplomacy, deterrence or commercial relations could be tools to get this. In military strategy, the employment of agile forces and envelopments, aimed to dislocate the enemy command structure, led to victory, a ceasefire and a minimal expense of forces.

The foundation of this concept was useful to defend the theory of limited liability from the middle thirties on, favoured by the specific conditions of the United Kingdom during the interwar period. Liddell Hart started from the same basis as Fuller, emphasizing the importance of the political aim, which dictates the course of war and defines and change the objectives according to governmental necessities. In this sense, he considered paramount that the means were perfectly aligned with the objectives, since laying too much importance on the former could end up in the unnecessary extension of the conflict. According to Hart, the perfect strategy would cause decisive situations without serious fighting. Even better, in the case of a country looking for keeping its security, the object was accomplished if the enemy was discouraged, that is, through an effective deterrence¹⁷.

Liddell Hart shared Fuller's view regarding the object of war and achieving a beneficial peace. He warned about the danger of wars focused on victory, given that they could end up in unfavourable peace treaties that were the seed of future conflicts. Following the principles of the indirect approach, he stated that suppressing other nations' differences could lead to a prejudicial situation. In this regard, he stressed that «the kind of peace that makes progress possible is best assured by the mutual checks created by a balance of forces, alike in the sphere of internal politics and of international relations»¹⁸. As a result, the indirect approach rejected aggression as continuation of politics, with the

¹⁵ *Ibíd.*, pp. 71 y 72-73 respectively.

¹⁶ DANCHEV, Alex (1999). «Liddell Hart and the Indirect Approach». *The Journal of Military History*, núm. 2, p. 315.

¹⁷ LIDDELL HART: *Strategy. The Indirect Approach. Op. cit.*, pp. 334, 226 y 338.

¹⁸ *Ibíd.*, p. 367.

premise that the more brutal were the employed methods, the tougher the enemy resistance would be¹⁹.

Both Liddell Hart and Fuller developed in their essays some fundamental aspects of the theory of balance of power defined later by Morgenthau. Precisely, limited liability nourished itself from elements of it. Morgenthau stressed that aiming at increasing your power or keeping the international order led to a context of balance of power. In this framework, each power, in pursuit of objectives which allow them to increase or keep their power, reaches a situation in which their mechanisms and relations are neutralised, getting stability²⁰.

Nonetheless, stability can be disrupted in the case that imperialistic or revolutionary powers decided to impose their will to others, trying to change the rules of the international order. In this sense, Waltz explained that adjustments and adaptations suffered by the powers do not follow a regular pattern, but they are based on adaptations made by other agents that take part in the system of balance of power²¹. One of those adjustments within the system is determined by the application of military doctrine that, according to Posen, will be effective as long as it is aligned with the political aims of the country. Otherwise, it would lead to a situation of «disintegrated grand strategy» and a likely defeat in a hypothetical armed conflict²².

The power of a nation, according to Morgenthau, is obtained by following eight main factors: geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, military readiness, population, national character, moral and quality of diplomacy. In this aspect, both national character, that is, the appreciation of certain permanent qualities by a nation, and moral, were essential aspects that Liddell Hart and Fuller considered fundamental to impose your will to another state. Hence, Morgenthau defined moral as «the degree of determination with which a nation supports the foreign policies of its government in peace or war»²³. As well as Fuller and Hart, he stated that, without moral, national power is simply brute force²⁴.

¹⁹ *Ibíd.*, pp. 366, 367 y 370.

²⁰ MORGENTHAU. *Politics among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace. Op. cit.*, pp. 125-131.

²¹ WALTZ, Kenneth N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Nueva York: McGraw-Hill, p. 113.

²² POSEN. *The Sources of Military Doctrine. France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars. Op. Cit.*, p. 24-25.

²³ MORGENTHAU. *Politics among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace. Op. cit.*, p. 100.

²⁴ *Ibíd.*, p. 104.

Military readiness was one of the main aspects that defined the policy of limited intervention in the United Kingdom. Through the twenties, the trauma caused by the First World War and peace prospects led the country to considerably reduce its military expenses. The act known as *Ten Year Rule*, enacted in 1919, stated that, not expecting a major war in the next decade, having an expeditionary force was not necessary. Winston Churchill renewed in 1928, though in 1932 the British government decided to cancel it²⁵. It was not until the mid-thirties when it was decided to start a rearm programme in light of the growing European tension. Nevertheless, the number of British divisions and its equipment were simply inferior to those in Germany. Considering this situation, Hart highlighted the growing value of the defence, motivated by technological progress, and he began to be deemed as the main defender of limited liability²⁶.

Another point worth being taken into account is the geographical factor. Liddell Hart stressed that the British strategic position was favourable for a protracted defence. Added to this was naval supremacy, which traditionally allowed the United Kingdom to defend its interests and exert economical pressure through amphibious operations without major attrition in a continental level, aspect that Fuller stressed too²⁷. In this sense, the British involvement in the First World War meant such a level of attrition that led to its loss of worldwide supremacy²⁸. Peace of the Treaty of Versailles was tried to be kept through the League of Nations, while the United Kingdom pursued a policy of *statu quo* that failed in its main object: the deterrence of Germany to prevent it from following an imperialistic policy which tried to change the established order.

The result was that during the thirties the British government failed in both the application of its foreign policy and its military doctrine. The downsizing of its land forces was justified by using air and naval power to protect the islands. Given that France was considered an ally able to resist a German attack, air superiority and naval blockades would be enough to obtain the necessary time to prepare an effective expeditionary continental force. In this aspect, several parallelisms to the present situation can be noted.

²⁵ BOND, Brian (1977). *Liddell Hart. A Study of his Military Thought*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, pp. 65-66.

²⁶ BOND, Brian y ALEXANDER, Martin (1986). «Liddell Hart and De Gaulle: The Doctrines of Limited Liability and Mobile Defense». In PARET, Peter (ed.). *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 612.

²⁷ LIDDELL HART, Basil H. (1965). *The Liddell Hart Memoirs*. Nueva York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, pp. 280-281; FULLER. *The Foundations of the Science of War*. *Op. cit.*, pp. 79 y 111.

²⁸ LIDDELL HART. *The Liddell Hart Memoirs*. *Op. cit.*, pp. 281-283.

However, the refinement of the German mechanized warfare thwarted the French defensive methodical doctrine. This preference for the offensive can be explained following the theory of organization, stating that in general armies prefer offensive doctrines on the grounds that they reduce uncertainty in the battlefield, given that they impose their organizational scheme and deny the enemy's at the same time²⁹. In any case, the failure of the indirect approach and limited liability meant that the United Kingdom did not take the initiative back in the Second World War at least until summer 1944.

The American interventionist strategy

So far, it can be noted that limited liability has similarities with the policy of *statu quo*. Liddell Hart applied the former to different scenarios, including offensive ones, though in this case the failure of the theory materialized during the Second World War. Nevertheless, in regard of the indirect approach, the premise of achieving a decisive action avoiding or limiting fighting matches with the concept of keeping the *statu quo*, since it allows the maintenance of political power through the least harmful approach possible, even not reaching the armed conflict.

In this sense, the appearance of competitors (China and Russia) has forced the United States to face a world leading towards multipolarity, that is, to try to apply a policy of keeping the established order. This is stated in its November 2025 national security strategy: «we want the continued survival and safety of the United States as an independent, sovereign republic [...] The United States cannot allow any nation to become so dominant that it could threaten our interests». To achieve this, it is based on several principles, such as peace through deterrence, predisposition to non-intervention policy, the primacy of the independence of states or respect, defending relations with other countries «without imposing on them democratic or other social change that differs widely from their traditions and History»³⁰.

The principle of states' sovereignty was enshrined in the article 2.1 of the United Nations Charter (UN)³¹. From the fall of the USSR on, the United States rose as the victorious

²⁹ POSEN. *The Sources of Military Doctrine. France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars*. Op. Cit., pp. 47-48.

³⁰ THE WHITE HOUSE. *National Security Strategy of the United States (2025)*. Op. Cit., pp. 3, 9 and 10.

³¹ Available on: <https://www.un.org/es/about-us/un-charter/full-text>.

power guarantor of the new international order. However, as explained by Professor Pérez Gil, it tried to impose its political power and, though its hegemony was not perfect, it started to undermine the same rules that it had helped to set in long conflicts such as Yugoslavia (1999), Afghanistan (2001) or Iraq (2003)³².

For Kissinger, the idiosyncrasy of the United States obliges it to perfection its democratic system to act as a «spotlight» for the rest of the world. This universalist approach based on the values of the revolution of 1776 permeates the American foreign policy and force it to impose them as if it was a crusade: «if the world truly desires peace, it will have to apply the moral prescriptions that America defends»³³. These values are identified with Fuller's ethics of national power and Morgenthau's moral and national character, examined before.

In this aspect, states coordinate their objectives with the means available through foreign policy, which form the national power: «nations must rely upon the quality of their diplomacy to act as a catalyst for the different factors which constitute their power»³⁴. One of these means is society through its identification with the national aims, that is, its moral. This way, Fuller stated that the power of armed forces was based on the nation itself and, hence, on all the activities which form the basic triad of economy, politics and ethics³⁵. Liddell Hart highlighted that in victory the population's condition must be better than before the conflict³⁶.

The existence of multiple sources of power with comparable forces implies the acceptance of the balance of power, due to the fact that the system always tends to stability. Given this, Russia or China are carrying out actions to change the established order because it does not correspond to their national interests³⁷. By doing that they try to generate adjustments within the system, while essentially the United States rejects the drift towards multipolarity and tries to keep its position as *hegemon* at all costs³⁸.

³² PÉREZ GIL, Luis V. (2026). La derogación definitiva de la prohibición del uso de la fuerza en las relaciones internacionales. *Documento de Análisis IEEE 25/2026*, pp. 7-8. Available on: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee-2026-derogacion-uso-fuerza-relaciones-internacionales-analisis25>.

³³ KISSINGER, Henry (1996). *Diplomacia*. Barcelona: Ediciones B, p. 4.

³⁴ MORGENTHAU. *Politics among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace*. *Op. cit.*, p. 107.

³⁵ FULLER. *The Foundations of the Science of War*. *Op. cit.*, p. 61.

³⁶ LIDDELL HART, *Strategy. The Indirect Approach*. *Op. cit.*, p. 370.

³⁷ PÉREZ GIL. La derogación definitiva de la prohibición del uso de la fuerza en las relaciones internacionales. *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.

³⁸ KISSINGER. *Diplomacia*. *Op. Cit.*, p. 5.

The war of United States and Israel against Iran must be understood in this context. First of all, it contradicts the principles of the United Nations charter and the American national security strategy itself. From a realistic approach (*Realpolitik*), the current needs of the country (wellbeing of its citizenry, the survival of the republic and economic prosperity) are not being fulfilled with this conflict. As Waltz stated, success is the proof of the soundness of a country's policy³⁹. Following Hart too, the blind pursuit of victory can cloud the path towards the truly aim of conflicts, which is getting a better situation than the existing one before the outbreak of the war.

On the other hand, it reveals inconsistency in the American foreign policy. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 answers to a perception of a growing threat to its security, which was condemned by the United States as a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty. However, before the progressive loss of its international role, it answers with military power where not even its vital interests were on the line.

In the end, American military strategy has proved to be a mistake. According to John Mearsheimer, the United States started the war believing that it could end the Iranian regime by beheading its leader⁴⁰. For its part, Iran devoted itself in the last years to improve its military capacity against a hypothetical aggression of Israel or the United States. For this purpose, it produced great amounts of loitering munitions and short and middle range ballistic missiles. Furthermore, it set a system of replacement of its main political and military figures in case of death or capture, aiming with this to guarantee the continuation of the regime. As a result, the main object of the American strategy of neutralizing the Ayatollah regime has not been accomplished.

Despite the detractors of the regime, Iran counts with the general support of its society, which tends to consider the conflict as a struggle for survival. On the contrary, there are increasingly more critic sectors in the United States that question the necessity of the conflict and reject an action that does not align neither with the country's interests nor with Trump's political programme at the beginning of his term. This discussion is linked to the total war scale that conflicts have again, which involves war economy to satisfy the

³⁹ WALTZ. *Theory of international politics*. Op. Cit., p. 117.

⁴⁰ Interview by Glenn Diesen on Youtube, 28th March 2026. Available on:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBOVT0UdHXg&t=1100s>.

vast amounts of resources needed to sustain the war effort⁴¹, with the subsequent impact it has on societies.

At the strategic level means that the longer it takes the United States to impose its will in Iran, the more harmful it will be for its national power and, therefore, for its ability to keep the international order, because the high cost of the war undermines progressively its capability to answer to future challenges, which in the end will compromise its national security. It must be recalled that obtaining military victory does not always mean achieving the objectives, but sometimes it becomes the end, instead of being the mean. United States has opted for an offensive strategy to get the initiative against Iran, with the object of denying freedom of action and imposing its condition. Nonetheless, the Persian country acknowledges its complex geographical position and its relatively obsolete technology and applies a military defensive doctrine consistent with its main political aim, which is survival, showing an unexpected level of resiliency against an aggression of a more powerful power.

What's more, contrary to other conflicts like Afghanistan or Iraq, the Atlantic Alliance (NATO) is not taking part in the war. In this sense, Kissinger explained that when «each country sees its dangers from its own national perspective those societies that took shelter under American protection will feel driven to take greater responsibilities for its own security»⁴². Hence, most of the members of the Alliance see the conflict as an obstacle for its political aims and consequently do not align with American foreign policy.

In this context, in a multipolar world, countries have more freedom of action, given that the responsibility from its behaviour does not rely on a specific actor (this concept is called «buck-passing»)⁴³. During the Cold War, these actors were the United States or the USSR in a bipolar system which limited the options of joining one block or the other.

Nowadays, the UN Security Council constituted as worldwide directory has the responsibility of keeping international peace and security, and all states are compelled to

⁴¹ PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José (2025). «La guerra ha vuelto con fuerza a la geopolítica». En *Panorama Estratégico 2025*. Madrid: IEEE, pp. 63-64. Available on: https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/panorama-estrategico-2025?p_i_back_url=%2Fweb%2Fceseden%2Fbusqueda%3Fq%3DPANORAMA%2BESTRAT%25C3%2589GICO%2B2025&p_i_back_url_title=Busqueda.

⁴² KISSINGER. *Diplomacia*. Op. Cit., p. 8.

⁴³ See POSEN. *The Sources of Military Doctrine. France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars*. Op. Cit., p. 63.

accept its resolutions⁴⁴. However, the great powers think that the system no longer favours their national interests and carry out actions that go against International Law in a framework in which «with each country constrained to take care of itself, no one can take care of the system»⁴⁵.

All things considered, the growing instability of the system and the absence of a hegemonic power push the rest to follow policies that make them less dependent and more resilient, since the context they are in is progressively more competitive and violent. Both American and the rest of the western countries must be understood from this perspective.

Conclusion

The limited liability proved to be a mistake for British during the thirties. This miscalculation resulted in a drift towards a war of attrition and a defeat from the perspective of the indirect approach, since it was left in a clearly inferior position after the Second World War. Nonetheless, it put effort in developing a doctrine which answered the premises of its national interests, which were then effective deterrence and the survival of its empire. Its doctrine, though mistaken, was aligned with its policy.

The limited liability adjusts better to *statu quo* policies, given that it involves minimizing military action in favour of an effective deterrence. In the American case, it pursues the same goals of *statu quo* as the United Kingdom one century ago. However, the main difference lays on its interventionism which, far from being limited, is unfathomable.

The failure of American diplomacy and military interventionism is proving to be an obstacle for its policy. As a result, the United States has developed an offensive military doctrine which does not favour the fulfilment of its objectives. When these are not aligned with both means and military doctrine, the result is incoherence, so its national interests are being undermined. If the object of nations is survival, they are assisting in their own strategic suicide.

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⁴⁴ Articles 24.1 and 25 of the UN Charter.

⁴⁵ WALTZ. *Theory of international politics. Op. Cit.*, p. 109.