



## Initial geopolitical considerations

The recent debate regarding the Trump administration's claims on Greenland, whether through a possible purchase, a political agreement or even through instruments of pressure, cannot be dismissed as a mere personal eccentricity or as a strictly circumstantial episode. Rather, it should be interpreted as a visible symptom of a more far-reaching strategic shift in US foreign policy: an explicit return to a logic of hard power, to the primacy of national interest and to a conception of international relations firmly anchored on classical realism.

This approach contrasts sharply with the image that the United States projected after 1945. At the end of the Second World War, Washington presented itself as the architect and guarantor of a liberal international order based on institutions, rules and alliances. Bretton Woods, the creation of the IMF and the World Bank<sup>1</sup>, as well as the promotion of a relatively open trading system, symbolizing this project. For decades, this leadership was legitimized by a narrative that combined material power and normative values, giving the United States a unique position in the governance of the international system.

This liberal narrative was consolidated during the Cold War as the axis of bipolar competition with the USSR, endured in the unilateral hegemony of the 1990s after the Soviet implosion, and continued in the military interventions of the post-9/11 "global war on terror". Even the Biden administration maintained this rhetoric until recently, framing the rivalry with Russia and China as a dualism between open democracies and coercive autocracies.

*"The world is now at an inflection point. We face a choice between competing visions of the future: one grounded in democracy, openness, and the rule of law, and the other in authoritarianism, coercion, and repression<sup>2</sup>".*

During that period, the US always maintained the will and intention to defend the values of a liberal order and a leadership that was sinking into "the city on the hill", interpreted as a symbol of the United States' vocation to be a moral and political model for other

---

<sup>1</sup> The Peace of Westphalia enshrined the birth of nation states and the principle of sovereignty, inviolability and non-interference in the territories of other states, while Bretton Woods created an open, institutionalised international economic system (IMF, World Bank, GATT) based on rules to promote free trade and multilateral cooperation.

<sup>2</sup> The White House (2022). National Security Strategy of the United States of America. Washington, D.C.

nations<sup>3</sup>, even though on more than a few occasions it displayed attitudes that diverged from this discourse, frequently violating international law and the discursive morality it advocated, as some authors have already empirically demonstrated. Thus, Lindsey O'Rourke empirically documents 64 covert attempts at regime change during the Cold War (1947-1989), of which 25 were successful<sup>4</sup>, highlighting a gap between discourse and action. Even so, this discrepancy never completely eroded the liberal narrative as a guiding principle.

Spain offers a privileged historical case study to illuminate this mutation. The Spanish-American War of 1898 left a painful defeat in national pride, with the loss of the last overseas possessions (Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines) after a *casus belli* fabricated for that purpose: the explosion of the USS Maine in Havana. That conflict violated the international status quo and the law of nations through a combination of naval pressure, media manipulation and moral legitimization of the intervention as anti-colonial liberation. Multilateral norms gave way to US strategic primacy in the Caribbean and the Pacific<sup>5</sup>.

Greenland reproduces identical geopolitical features in the 21st century. The justification does not invoke international law, Danish consent or Inuit self-determination, but rather the urgent need to exclude systemic competitors—China and Russia—from an Arctic space vital to US national security. The Pituffik (Thule) base, with its early warning radars, rare earths and new thawing sea routes, makes the island a non-negotiable defense perimeter, evoking the Monroe Doctrine's logic of excluding third parties from the American "strategic neighborhood"<sup>6</sup>.

The current Trump administration is much closer to the United States of 1898 than to that of 1945. In 1898, the Monroe Doctrine evolved into an operational regional hegemony: America as a sphere of exclusive influence, and that is where Spain represented an intolerable anomaly<sup>7</sup>. That geopolitical logic demanded its expulsion from the Caribbean and, by extension, from the Pacific, which was carried out through a combination of

---

<sup>3</sup> This idealistic aspiration, deeply rooted in the American self-perception as a "city upon a hill," an expression from John Winthrop's Puritan sermon in 1630, is reinterpreted as a global moral vocation.

<sup>4</sup> Lindsey A. O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> American visual imperialism in the islands intervened in the Antilles in 1898. <https://estudiosamericanos.revistas.csic.es/index.php/estudiosamericanos/article/view/1044>

<sup>6</sup> [Trump says the United States will take Greenland "by force" if it cannot do so peacefully | CNN](https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/14/politics/trump-greenland-peaceful/index.html). Last accessed 18 January 2026.

<sup>7</sup> Spanish-Cuban-American War – The Empire of Caliban <https://norbertobarreto.blog/category/guerra-hispano-cubano-estadounidense/>

military pressure, the construction of the aforementioned *casus belli*, and the moral legitimization of intervention<sup>8</sup>. After 1945, however, Washington articulated a unique synthesis between material power and normative values, intervening against Nazism and communism not only out of immediate interest, but as the guarantor of a global institutional order.

However, the distance between the two models has irreversibly widened. Today, the Trump administration shows little willingness to invoke liberal idealism as the basis for its foreign policy. Instead, it is reviving strategic anticipation, preventive coercion and Carl Schmitt's logic of *Großräume* or 'spheres of influence' – large, exclusive geopolitical spaces led by a guiding power that rejects liberal universalist interference<sup>9</sup>.

The Greenlandic claim is therefore not an isolated anomaly, but rather explicit confirmation that Washington today recognizes itself in the Monroeist tradition of 1898 – naked power, instrumental *casus belli* and rival exclusion – rather than in the liberal rules-based order that it helped to build and sustain during the 20th century. This transformation forces us to rethink the geopolitical significance of Greenland in the emerging Arctic and, above all, the place of Europe and its traditional allies in an international system where the language of power regains brutal pre-eminence over the language of law.

### **Cuba and the Philippines in 1898: the founding precedent of US imperialism**

The Spanish-American War of 1898 is often presented as a brief and 'colonial' conflict on the periphery of the international system. However, for the strategic history of the United States, it was something more decisive: a turning point that consolidated its transition from a continental power to an imperial and oceanic power, capable of converting military force into permanent geopolitical gains.

Thus, before the war in Cuba took place, the 19th century witnessed the territorial expansion of the United States, which combined purchases, annexations and cessions

---

<sup>8</sup> Hyman G. Rickover (1976). *How the Battleship Maine Was Destroyed*. Washington D.C.: Naval History Division, Department of the Navy.

<sup>9</sup> Carl Schmitt's theory of open spaces (*Großraum*) argues that the international order is organised into large geopolitical spaces dominated by a leading power, which excludes interference from external actors. In contrast to liberal universalism, Schmitt legitimises a plurality of regional orders based on power relations, political affinities and sovereign decision-making.

resulting from the war, consolidating continental control from the Mississippi to the Pacific. Key milestones were the Louisiana Purchase from France (1803), which almost doubled the size of the country, the cession of Florida by Spain (Adams-Onís Treaty, 1819/1821), the annexation of Texas (1845) and the great Mexican Cession after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which incorporated California and much of the Southwest. Added to this were the agreement with the United Kingdom over Oregon (1846), the Purchase of La Mesilla (1853) and the Purchase of Alaska from Russia (1867), closing the territorial arc that underpinned "Manifest Destiny" and the subsequent leap to the Pacific<sup>10</sup>. Translated into terms of strategic culture, 1898 would normalize a logic of power and control of critical spaces, based on an expansive reading of the Monroe Doctrine and on the perception that the Caribbean and access to the Atlantic constitute a non-negotiable security perimeter.

Originally formulated in 1823 as a political declaration against new European colonization in the Western Hemisphere, the Monroe Doctrine had evolved by the end of the 19th century into an operational principle of regional hegemony. America – and in particular the Caribbean – came to be conceived as a space subject to US primacy, in which the presence of other powers had to be contained. From the perspective of classical realism, the doctrine functioned as an instrument for delimiting spheres of influence, aimed at preventing external actors from altering the balance of power in the United States' immediate strategic neighborhood.

In this geopolitical framework, Spain's presence in Cuba and its control of Puerto Rico were not perceived in Washington as mere imperial remnants, but as a potential strategic vulnerability. From the American point of view, these positions could directly affect maritime routes, ocean access and naval projection capacity in the Caribbean and the western Atlantic, an intuition that would be systematically formulated shortly afterwards by Alfred Thayer Mahan in his reflection on maritime power<sup>11</sup>.

The explosion of the USS Maine in the port of Havana on 15 February 1898 thus served a clear function of domestic and external legitimization of the war. Strategic historiography agrees that the Maine acted as a political catalyst for a conflict for which geopolitical

---

<sup>10</sup> G. R. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 159–210.

<sup>11</sup> A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1890, pp. 25–89.

incentives, internal pressures and a favorable strategic framework already existed. The episode alone does not explain the war, but it did make it politically viable. Although subsequent research maintains the technical controversy over its causes—making it impossible to conclusively attribute Spanish aggression—its function was narrative and political: public commotion, *yellow journalism*, and strategic opportunity authorized an intervention that permanently reconfigured the Atlantic and Pacific balance.

This episode highlights how, even in democratic regimes, the construction of narratives of threat can be decisive in overcoming social resistance and accelerating political decision-making. In 1898, the combination of public commotion, media pressure and strategic opportunity turned the Maine into a veritable mechanism of authorization for an operation whose final outcome would permanently reconfigure the balance of power in both the Atlantic and the Pacific<sup>12</sup>.

From this perspective, 1898 is not a closed episode, but a clear operational precedent. It represents an early example of how a rising power combines a legitimizing narrative, a catalytic event turned *casus belli*, and a subsequent legal arrangement to transform military intervention into lasting geopolitical gain. Precisely for this reason, this episode is particularly useful as a case study for analyzing contemporary situations which, although different in form and context, fall within a very similar conceptual framework within American geostrategic thinking associated with the Monroe Doctrine, such as the United States' attempt to appropriate or strategically control Greenland. Although we will delve deeper into the current repercussions and reinterpretation of this doctrine later on, the contemporary reading of the Monroe Doctrine as a recurring pattern in US foreign policy towards its immediate environment continues to be analyzed in the Hispanic and Latin American sphere, with its imperial and unilateral dimension being consistently highlighted<sup>13</sup>.

---

<sup>12</sup> D. Reiter, "Democracy, Deception, and Entry into War," *Security Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 594–623, 2012 (see especially p. 595).

<sup>13</sup> R. de los Reyes Ramírez, "Trump, Colombia, and Venezuela: The Return of the Monroe Doctrine?", *Digital Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE)*, 5 Nov. 2025.

## Greenland as the 'Arctic Cuba': the new preventive *casus belli*

If 1898 illustrates how the United States built political and social legitimacy to reorder the Caribbean through a specific *casus belli*. The contemporary case of Greenland shows an adaptation of that same mechanism to the logic of competition between great powers and the Arctic theatre. The central difference lies not so much in the nature of the space—insular then, polar today—as in the transformation of *the casus belli*, since a spectacular physical event such as the Maine is no longer necessary, but rather the construction of a narrative of future threat capable of turning a geographical issue into a national security necessity. From this perspective, Greenland is presented as a "vital" space, Haushofer's contemporary *Lebensraum*<sup>14</sup>, whose eventual loss of control would alter maritime routes, national defence capabilities and the strategic balance with China and Russia, reproducing a preventive logic that shifts the traditional threshold of war.

This process can be accurately interpreted using the securitization theory of the so-called Copenhagen School (Buzan, Wæver, de Wilde), according to which an issue becomes a "security" issue when it is framed as an existential threat in such a way that it enables extraordinary measures outside the ordinary political framework<sup>15</sup>. Thus, the Trump administration has explicitly framed Greenland as an Arctic deterrence imperative, making its acquisition/control a national priority. Analytically, the decisive leap does not require concrete aggression, but rather the expectation of future loss: if Washington does not act, Beijing and Moscow will<sup>16</sup>. This reasoning fits with Mearsheimer's structural realism about the propensity of great powers to act pre-emptively in the face of unfavorable balances, even before the threat fully materializes<sup>17</sup>.

The effectiveness of this narrative is supported by real strategic elements. Greenland is home to key US defense infrastructure, in particular the Pituffik base (formerly Thule), which is part of the early warning and space surveillance systems and occupies a central position in the defense of *the US homeland* against Arctic vectors. Added to this are documented concerns about Chinese investment in critical infrastructure, access to

---

<sup>14</sup> The concept of *Lebensraum*, developed in German geopolitics by Karl Haushofer, argues that states need a "living space" commensurate with their demographic, economic, and strategic power, legitimizing territorial expansion as a requirement for the survival and projection of the nation.

<sup>15</sup> B. Buzan, O. Wæver, and J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/trump-advisers-discussing-options-acquiring-greenland-us-military-is-always-an-2026-01-06/>. Last accessed 18 January 2026

<sup>17</sup> J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2001, pp. 29–54.

strategic mineral resources—including rare earths—and the progressive militarization of the Arctic, factors that have been extensively analyzed in strategic literature and official US and allied documents<sup>18</sup>. In addition, Greenland is becoming a key location following the accelerated melting of the Arctic ice cap associated with climate change, which is gradually opening up new maritime routes—in particular the *Northern Sea Route* and the *Transpolar Sea Route*—significantly reducing transit times between Asia, Europe and North America, increasing the strategic value of controlling access points, bottlenecks and critical nodes in the region<sup>19</sup>. The United States, as an Arctic state and member of the Arctic Council, would expand the US Exclusive Economic Zone within the Arctic Circle by controlling Greenland, thereby securing energy/mineral resources and geostrategic primacy<sup>20</sup>.

The geopolitical leap of converting structural risks into territorial justification constitutes the discursive operation that generates a preventive *casus belli*. The analogy with Cuba in 1898 operates on four levels: the US's need for living space; the narrative of threat; extraordinary measures enabled; and subsequent normalization of reconfigured power as a security necessity. International law, Danish will and multilateral frameworks are subordinated to a logic of power that presents strategic expansion as an unavoidable imperative.

Greenland thus emerges as an 'Arctic Cuba': not the trigger for immediate war, but the setting for a *casus belli* constructed preventively through securitization, anticipating a return to the policy of spheres of influence in an openly geopolitical key.

### **From the Monroe Doctrine to "DONROE": the sphere of influence as an explicit doctrine in the new NSS**

The parallel between Cuba (1898) and Greenland becomes fully evident when observing the formalized, no longer implicit, reappearance of the Monroe Doctrine in strategic documents such as the recent US *National Security Strategy* (NSS). This NSS marks a

---

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Department of Defence, *Department of Defence Arctic Strategy*. Washington, D.C., 2024; and M. Conley et al., "Strategic Competition in the Arctic," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of Defence, *Department of Defence Arctic Strategy*, Washington, D.C., 2024; and L. Pizzolato et al., "The Arctic shipping potential: Routes, resources and geopolitics," *Marine Policy*, vol. 75, pp. 235–244, 2017

<sup>20</sup> Arctic Council, *Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment*, Tromsø, 2009; and R. Huebert et al., "Climate change and geopolitics in the Arctic," *Foreign Policy*, no. 163, pp. 36–43, 2007.

doctrinal turning point by explicitly reviving language of regional primacy, *homeland* defence and exclusion of systemic competitors (China, Russia) from vital spaces. What is relevant is not only the return of Monroeism, but its adaptation to an environment of open rivalry, projected beyond the classic hemisphere towards expanded geostrategic theatres such as the Arctic. This operational mutation is what has come to be known as Donroe, that is, a Monroe 2.0 that combines updated regional hegemony with preventive coercion and competition between great powers.

The novelty lies in the fact that this logic transcends the historical background to be stated in the main US guiding document. Recent analyses highlight how the NSS prioritizes *homeland* defence and the restoration of pre-eminence in the Western Hemisphere<sup>21</sup>, linking Monroe to modern tools of security, economic coercion and political pressure. The "Donroe Doctrine" thus legitimizes hemispheric dominance in the face of Chinese-Russian penetration, with an expansive interpretation of vital spaces that incorporates Greenland as a functional extension of the American security perimeter.

From this perspective, Greenland acquires a specific doctrinal value. Although located outside the classic American hemisphere, its centrality, as already mentioned in , in Arctic defence, new maritime routes and competition for critical infrastructure and resources makes it a functional extension of the American security perimeter. Greenland thus acts as a strategic "hinge": geographically Arctic, politically linked to Europe and militarily integrated into the American defence architecture. Its inclusion in US strategic discourse illustrates how the Donroe is not limited to 'America for Americans', but is transforming into a doctrine of exclusion of rivals in any space considered essential to US security and primacy.

This shift fits with classical and structural realist readings of international relations, which emphasize the tendency of dominant powers to consolidate spheres of influence in order to reduce strategic uncertainty and preserve their relative advantage. At the same time, it implies a practical erosion of the liberal rules-based order, insofar as the primacy of law and institutions is subordinated to criteria of priority, interest and balance of power. As recent analyses have pointed out, this explicit reappearance of Monroe reflects not so

---

<sup>21</sup> F. Márquez, "The return of the Monroe Doctrine in US foreign policy," *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, 2024/2025

G. Colom Piella, "From liberal hegemony to strategic primacy: the United States and the return of spheres of influence", *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, 2024.

much a Trumpian anomaly as the reactivation of a historical strategic repertoire that reappears when systemic competition intensifies and the normative architecture of the international order is no longer perceived as functional in sustaining US primacy<sup>22</sup>. In this sense, the Donroe does not inaugurate a new doctrine, but rather updates an old pattern, adapting it to a world of open rivalry, expanded strategic spaces and the return of spheres of influence as the organizing principle of the international system.

### **The abandonment of the liberal order in favour of offensive realism**

The Greenland controversy and the revival of the Monroe Doctrine transcend tactical decisions or personalist leadership by revealing a profound shift in the theoretical and cultural foundations of US foreign policy. From an international relations perspective, this shift places the United States today closer to the actor of 1898—where power preceded law and anticipation legitimized coercion—than to the post-1945 liberal architect.

During the 20th century, especially after 1945, Washington combined material primacy with a normative project based on multilateral institutions, stable alliances and international regimes. Ikenberry's liberal school explains this order by US strategic self-restraint, 'tying its hands' through rules that generated legitimacy, stability and predictability, assuming extraordinary human, economic and political costs<sup>23</sup>.

However, as the realist tradition has persistently reminded us, that historical moment was exceptional. American internationalist liberalism did not eliminate anarchy from the international system, but temporarily cushioned it under conditions of unchallenged hegemony. As that hegemony erodes and the system becomes more competitive, the classic assumptions of realism resurface: structural uncertainty, mistrust of others' intentions, and the primacy of relative survival. In this context, foreign policy tends to be reformulated in terms of interest, power, and strategic anticipation, displacing the normative emphasis that characterized the liberal stage<sup>24</sup>.

---

<sup>22</sup> G. Colom Piella, "From liberal hegemony to strategic primacy: the United States and the return of spheres of influence," *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, 2024.

<sup>23</sup> G. J. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> R. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

The current shift embodies Mearsheimer's offensive realism: great powers maximize relative power in the face of uncertain rival intentions, normalizing preventive action, strategic denial and spheres of influence<sup>25</sup>. The logical consequence of this reasoning is that preventive action, the denial of strategic advantages to rivals and the consolidation of spheres of influence are no longer perceived as anomalies but are now considered rational behavior. Greenland is not territory per se, but a piece to prevent Chinese-Russian disruptions in the emerging Arctic—the American perception, considering Russian attrition in Ukraine and Chinese strategic tradition<sup>26</sup>.

The contrast with 1944-1945 illustrates the dissolution of values and interests. The anti-Nazi intervention was universally legitimized as a defence of freedom, consolidating the US as the ultimate guarantor of the international order, even beyond its immediate interests, as Mazower pointed out<sup>27</sup>. However, even then, the commitment to values coincided with a clear strategic calculation: to prevent the collapse of Europe and the emergence of a balance hostile to American power.

The essential difference with the present lies in the fact that this coincidence between values and interests has dissolved. Contemporary strategic discourse no longer appeals primarily to normative leadership or moral exceptionalism, but rather to the need to reduce vulnerabilities, prioritize homeland defence and reaffirm primacy in areas considered vital. As Stephen M. Walt anticipated, American liberalism has always coexisted with realist impulses, but these tend to prevail when the international environment hardens and relative advantages are perceived as fragile<sup>28</sup>.

This theoretical shift has direct consequences for the role of international law. In the liberal framework, law functioned simultaneously as a limit and a source of legitimacy; in the resurgent realist logic, it becomes a selective instrument. Sovereignty, self-determination and multilateral norms do not disappear from the discourse, but they are subordinated to the US definition of vital interest. As Stephen D. Krasner has already warned, sovereignty

---

<sup>25</sup> J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2001

<sup>26</sup> V. M. Bados Nieto, "Neither Enemy nor Vassal: Reflections on Spain's Strategic Vision in the Face of Rivalry between the United States and China," *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, December 2025.

<sup>27</sup> M. Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> S. M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.

has historically operated as an 'organized hypocrisy', respected or violated depending on the underlying power relations<sup>29</sup>.

In this sense, the debate over Greenland reveals something deeper than a specific territorial dispute: it shows the United States' willingness to unambiguously abandon the language of rules-based order when it comes into tension with the logic of competition between great powers. As recent analyses have pointed out, this explicit resurgence of the language of primacy reflects less a temporary anomaly than the reactivation of historical strategic thinking, which reappears when systemic competition intensifies and the normative architecture of the international order is no longer perceived as functional in sustaining US primacy<sup>30</sup>.

Greenland thus reveals Washington's willingness to abandon the rules-based order when it comes into conflict with competition between major powers. Spanish studies<sup>31</sup> confirm this not as a temporary anomaly, but as a historical revival in the face of intensified systemic competition. In systemic transitions, even architects of the liberal order resort to classical realism to preserve their relative position<sup>32</sup>.

### **Spain, Europe and NATO. The strategic lesson for allies in a world of hierarchies**

The parallels between 1898 and Greenland transcend the United States to offer fundamental strategic lessons to Spain, Europe and the Atlantic allies. Denmark — a NATO ally, not an adversary — faces a logic of power that relegates legal and liberal considerations when Washington defines vital interests. The Spanish experience of 1898 demonstrated early on that international legality and historical rights offer little protection against an emerging power determined to impose strategic primacy<sup>33</sup>.

That historical precedent takes on renewed analytical value today. The debate over Greenland reveals that ally status does not eliminate asymmetry, nor does it guarantee that the legal and multilateral framework will act as an effective shield when areas

---

<sup>29</sup> S. M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Guillén Colom Piella, 'From Liberal Hegemony to Strategic Primacy: The United States and the Return of Spheres of Influence', *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Francisco José Márquez, "The United States and the reactivation of the Monroe Doctrine in the context of competition between great powers", *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, 2025.

<sup>32</sup> J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2001.

<sup>33</sup> May, E. R. (1961). *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power*. Harcourt, Brace & World.

considered critical to the hegemon's security come into play. Denmark—a NATO member and close partner of Washington—has been confronted with a logic of power that transcends shared laws and norms. The implicit message is clear: in contexts of systemic rivalry, hierarchy and vital interests outweigh alliance.

From the realm of strategic thinking, it has been pointed out that the international system is undergoing a phase of historical reset, in analogy to Fukuyama's expression, characterized by the weakening of multilateralism, the erosion of the liberal order and the return of an openly Hobbesian logic. In the absence of a higher authority capable of imposing effective rules, the international system is once again operating according to its classic assumptions: anarchy, structural distrust and the primacy of security. In this context, Hobbes has returned, not as an abstract philosophical reference, but as an empirical description of the actual functioning of the contemporary international system<sup>34</sup>.

This dynamic has been addressed by the realist theory of international relations. From the perspective of offensive realism, John J. Mearsheimer argues that alliances are contingent instruments, useful as long as they serve the strategic interests of the great power, but dispensable if they become an obstacle to the maximization of power and relative security<sup>35</sup>. Complementarily, Stephen M. Walt recalls that small and medium-sized states are structurally dependent on the hegemon, and that their margin of autonomy is drastically reduced when the international environment hardens<sup>36</sup>. Spain's historical experience and Denmark's current situation clearly illustrate this structural asymmetry.

For Europe and its allies within NATO, the implications are profound. For decades, European integration and US strategic tutelage within the Alliance have served to cushion the classic logic of the balance of power. However, the liberal order only works as long as the hegemon is willing to self-restrain, because when that willingness disappears, the rules cease to be a reliable mechanism of protection for secondary actors<sup>37</sup>. The debate over Greenland suggests that such self-restraint can no longer be taken for granted.

---

<sup>34</sup> Bados, V. (2025). *The Restart of History. The Return of the First Man*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE).

<sup>35</sup> Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W. W. Norton.

<sup>36</sup> Walt, S. M. (1987). *The Origins of Alliances*. Cornell University Press.

<sup>37</sup> Ikenberry, G. J. (2011). *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*. Princeton University Press.

For Spain, the lesson is twofold. On the one hand, it confirms that multilateralism and alliances remain necessary, but are not sufficient. On the other, it underlines the importance of strengthening strategic autonomy, the capacity for anticipation and a realistic reading of the international environment.

In short, Greenland serves as a contemporary mirror of 1898, showing that in times of systemic transition, even allies can be relegated to a subordinate position when interests defined as vital by the dominant power come into play. This episode confirms that, under strategic pressure, international politics tends to be reorganised around implicit power hierarchies rather than shared universal norms. As Henry Kissinger warned, in a statement that is once again highly relevant today:

*"No international order can be sustained solely on moral principles; it must ultimately rest on a balance of interests and power<sup>38</sup> ."*

*G.B. Víctor Bados Nieto\**  
Director of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies

---

<sup>38</sup> Kissinger, H. (2014). World Order. Penguin Press.