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AMERICA'S GRAND STRATEGY IN THE MAKING: IMPACT ON THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

This article explores changes in US grand strategy triggered by systemic transformations of international politics. On the one hand, global balance of power has shifted in recent years bringing about changes in structure of international system. On the other hand, the current world order is eroding. Once built around Western institutions, regimes, and norms, it is facing growing revisionism, while the West seems no longer able to sustain it.

Together these processes create a completely different strategic environment for international actors and, in particular, for the US. According to neorealism and other structural theories, a success of a state in its foreign and security policy is determined by its ability to correctly assess systemic parameters of international politics. Thus, understanding those parameters is not only of academic, but also political importance. The current American administration suggests a specific strategic response to a changing international environment, focused on countering China, cutting US external commitments and 'making America great again'. Such a strategy needs to be examined closely, since it is going to have an impact on the whole structure of international security. Besides, it will have a direct impact on the Russian-Ukrainian war, which, in many ways, is an important point of reference in remaking the world order.

Thus, three questions emerge. The first is about global transformations in the international system which help understand why the US grand strategy is changing. The second is about how exactly it is changing and which new elements in American approach to international politics can be identified. And the third one is about how these changes are impacting the Russian-Ukrainian war. These questions are addressed here by utilizing hegemonic stability theory to assess the decline of hegemony and its effects; applying power transitions theory to current international political and security developments; and relying on a more general neorealist approach in assessing foreign policy and security options of states.

Key words: international system, world order, hegemony, US grand strategy, security architecture, Russian-Ukrainian war.

Statement of the problem: There are fundamental changes taking place in international system and world order. The global distribution of power is shifting, bringing about new regional wars, strategic uncertainty and security dilemmas. International norms and institutions are losing power, and the world is becoming less secure. That sets a stage for a revision of American grand strategy along the lines of restraint and

neo-isolationism. These transformations, it turn, will have further impact on international security and, in particular, on the dynamics of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Interconnection of these developments requires deeper examination.

The purpose of the article is to identify key ways in which international system is transforming; demonstrate how these changes are reflected in American strategic thinking and are implemented into the US grand strategy; and assess the impact of these developments on the dynamics and perspectives of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Analysis of previous studies. American grand strategy has traditionally been in the focus of international security research. A systemic view based on comparative analysis of various models has been presented by Posen and Ross (Posen, Ross, 1997) in a paper which contributed into the debates about fundamentals of American strategy. Among other issues, a strategy of neo-isolationism has been explored back in early 1990-ies, with the label 'America First' being used by Buchanan (Buchanan, 1990), to mark a long-lasting tradition. A broader assessment of evolution of American grand strategy can be found in Layne's research (Layne, 2006). Declining American power and the crisis of a liberal grand strategy has been addressed by Posen (Posen, 2014) and Walt (Walt, 2018). Posen also suggested an alternative grand strategy of restraint, examined extensively by Priebe, Schuessler, Rooney and Castillo (Priebe, Schuessler, Rooney, Castillo, 2024).

Global transition of power and reshaping of international system have been addressed by Lind (Lind, 2024) with a specific focus on emerging bipolar competition between the US and China; and Mearsheimer (Mearsheimer, 2025).

Presentation of the main material.

The international system is undergoing profound transformations. They are driven by structural changes, shifting power dynamics, and evolving norms. These developments mark a transition from the post-Cold War unipolarity moment to a more fragmented and contested international order (Mearsheimer, 2025). Key drivers of this transformation include the rise of non-Western powers, challenges to the liberal international order, and the growing importance of regional dynamics.

The end of the Cold War heralded an era of unipolarity, with the United States as the predominant global power. This period saw the expansion of liberal democratic values, the globalization of markets, and the dominance of Western-led institutions. However, the unipolar moment is waning due to the relative decline of American power and the rise of other actors. The US remains a pivotal player, but its ability to unilaterally shape global norms and enforce international rules has diminished.

The causes of such a decline are numerous; one of the perspectives is provided by the hegemonic stability theory (Ikenberry, Nexon, 2019). According to it, a hegemon is depleting its power over time because of a free-rider effect: other powers, including competitors, learn to take advantage of norms, regimes and institutions, sustained by a hegemon, without paying for them. That gradually leads to a strategic overreach, which, in American case has probably started more than two decades ago during the war in Iraq.

Decline of American leadership has been accompanied by the rise of competitors and their growing revisionism. Emerging powers such as China, Russia, and India are challenging the existing international order in various ways. China's Belt and

Road Initiative (BRI) exemplifies its ambition to reshape global economic networks and establish itself as a central node in international trade. In addition to BRI, a number of initiatives (the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative) have been put forward by Beijing in recent years with the view to expand China's new global role (Schuman, Fulton, Gering, 2023). The world's largest economy if measured by purchasing power parity, China is looking for ways to convert its economic dominance into political power.

Russia is taking momentum of the West's relative decline to revise the geopolitical outcomes of the Cold War. Moscow's revisionism is manifested in its actions in Ukraine, but also in broader efforts to undermine Western cohesion through hybrid warfare and cyber operations. Moscow's strategy seeks to dismantle elements of the post-Cold War order it perceives as dangerous to its interests, including NATO and EU expansion.

India is asserting itself as a major global player. Its participation in forums, such as the QUAD, and its emphasis on strategic autonomy reflect a nuanced approach to navigating the evolving order. India's focus on technological innovation and economic growth positions it as a key actor in shaping regional and global dynamics.

Besides revisionism, the international system is increasingly characterized by fragmentation, with multilateral institutions facing crises of legitimacy and lack of efficiency. The United Nations, a pillar of a post-World War II order, has faced criticism for its inability to address pressing issues, from climate change to military conflicts. The OSCE has long ago lost any significant leverage in handling current military conflicts. Threats to non-proliferation regime, another pillar of international stability at times of the Cold War, are multiplying. Arms control regimes are significantly weakened. More recently, global trade regime started to face unexpected challenges as well. International security seems to become increasingly badly managed.

Regionalism is emerging as a counterweight to the stagnation of global governance. Organizations such as the African Union, ASEAN, and Mercosur are gaining prominence, reflecting a trend toward localized solutions to global challenges. However, regionalism is not a panacea; it often exacerbates fragmentation by creating competing spheres of influence, particularly when major powers seek to dominate these regional frameworks.

The liberal international order, founded on democratic values, free markets, and multilateralism, is under strain. Populist movements in Europe and the Americas have weakened democratic institutions, while the 2008 financial crisis exposed the vulnerabilities of global capitalism. Furthermore, the rise of political regimes with alternative governance models challenges the universality of liberal values. China's promotion of its development model has gained traction in parts of the Global South, where governments prioritize economic growth and stability over political liberalization.

Non-state actors, including multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations, and transnational advocacy networks, are playing an increasingly prominent role in the international system. These actors influence policy, shape public opinion, and provide critical services, often stepping in where states fail – and challenging traditional state authority. Simultaneously, non-state threats such

as terrorism, organized crime, and pandemics highlight the interconnectedness of contemporary challenges. Addressing these threats requires innovative approaches that transcend state-centric frameworks. The current transformations of the international system reflect a complex interplay of structural changes, power shifts, and normative debates. As unipolarity gives way to a more contested order, the future of international security will depend on the ability of states and institutions to adapt to new realities.

On top of this, the international system is increasingly exhibiting traits of bipolarity, marked by the intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China (Lind, 2024). Bipolarity reflects not just a division of power but a broader struggle over the future of the international order. The US continues to lead alliances such as NATO and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, such as QUAD and AUKUS, aimed to contain China's growing influence. Conversely, China leverages initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to build a parallel framework of influence, especially across the Global South.

Today's bipolarity is deeply rooted in economic interdependence. The US and China are critical trade partners, yet their rivalry manifests in supply chain realignments and decoupling efforts in strategic sectors. Technologically, the competition for supremacy in fields such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and 5G infrastructure underscores the emerging duality. There is also an ideological dimension of bipolarity with China and US relying on and suggesting different governance models (Washington consensus vs. Beijing consensus), sets of values, and ways of managing global order.

The shift toward bipolarity has significant implications for global stability. On one hand, it creates clearer alignments and strategic priorities, potentially reducing uncertainty. On the other hand, it carries risks of intensified polarization and proxy conflicts. The lack of robust global governance mechanisms to mediate this rivalry further exacerbates the risks.

These changes in strategic environment are pushing Washington to revisit the grand strategy America has been implementing for decades (Posen, Ross, 1997). That grand strategy has been conditioned by geopolitical realities of the rise of American power, the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union, and the proliferation of the nuclear weapons (Gavin, 2015). It implied a turn from isolationism, typical stance for the most part of American history, towards liberal interventionism, with its emphasis on alliances, democratic values, and active engagement.

That strategic choice has enabled American triumph in the Cold War and geopolitical successes afterwards. However, developments described above, have made this approach very much outdated. It needs revision, and that revision is likely to be carried out along the lines of a more restrained strategy, often referred to as 'neo-isolationism'.

Under Biden administration, a cornerstone of the American grand strategy has been the strengthening of alliances and partnerships, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and Europe (National Security Strategy, 2022). Recognizing the challenge posed by China's rise, the United States has revitalized alliances such as NATO and fostered closer ties with regional partners. These frameworks aimed to counterbalance China's growing influence by ensuring a robust military and strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific. In Europe, US has pivoted back to collective security, especially in re-

sponse to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. By combining military assistance to Ukraine with broader economic and diplomatic measures, Washington sought to reinforce a rules-based order.

However, Trump's approach is different. His main focus is also on China, but instead of relying on allies, he seems to be focused on sharing burden with them and strengthening America itself.

Here lies a strategic challenge. The American leadership has been steadily declining in recent two plus decades. At the same time, competitors have been on the rise, most notably China. The Global South, seeking to rewrite international order, consolidated. As a result, combined economic potential of the G7 countries has been exceeded by that of the BRICS in early 2020-ies. China is rapidly closing the gap to the US in military capabilities, and in diplomatic outreach. Global power transition seems to be underway, and Washington doesn't have much to do about it.

A possible strategic response can be referred to by the notion of 'restraint' (Posen, 2014). It aims at handling/lowering risks generated by the strategy of liberal hegemony and implies reducing America's commitments and involvements. In other words, it suggests concentrating US limited power projection capabilities on the most pivotal issues, in particular on securing decisive advantage in the space, air and at sea, while cutting those commitments which imply American forces on the ground. This would entail a significant recalibration of American global engagements. Restraint emphasizes reducing military commitments, prioritizing national over global security interests, and encouraging regional powers to shoulder greater responsibilities for their security. While this approach offers potential benefits, it also carries profound strategic implications for international security.

The diffusion of power in the international system is likely to accelerate. By scaling back its military presence and alliances, the US. would create space for regional powers, which would increase risks of regional rivalries and arms races. In particular, in Europe a reduced US engagement could weaken deterrence against Russian aggression.

Another key element of a new grand strategy is burden sharing (Sandler, Hartley, 2001). If American administration insists on increased defence spendings, like it did within NATO, US alliance networks could undergo substantial changes. Allies heavily reliant on American security guarantees might feel compelled to pursue more independent defence policies, including the development of nuclear weapons. This proliferation risk could undermine global non-proliferation efforts and destabilize regions where security dynamics are already fragile. A strategy of restraint might also reduce American influence in international organizations.

While restraint could lower the likelihood of American involvement in costly conflicts, it might increase risks of regional instability. The absence of a dominant security provider could embolden regional powers to pursue aggressive policies. Conversely, restraint could incentivize greater cooperation among American allies, leading to the development of regional security architectures that promote stability without direct US involvement.

As the US grapples with the emerging bipolarity, its grand strategy reflects a nuanced understanding of the global order's complexities. Rather than attempting to recreate unipolar dominance, Washington focuses on shaping a stable and inclu-

sive order where American interests and values can thrive. This involves leveraging alliances, enhancing resilience, and competing strategically while remaining open to selective cooperation.

Strategic changes in US foreign and security policy will have a far-reaching effect, including on the Russian-Ukrainian war. There are at least three ways in which that effect can be seen.

First, America's new grand strategy will assume a different role for Russia. It may still be defined as a threat or strategic adversary, but the perception of Moscow will become more instrumental, with the focus being on deterring China. If Washington wants to maximize its chances for success against China, it could seek opportunities to reach agreements with Moscow on points of mutual interests without paying much attention to ideological constraints. That, in turn, would expand Russia's diplomatic opportunities and signal an end to Moscow's 'half-isolation' in global politics.

Second, bringing the Russian-Ukrainian war to an end will become a priority for Washington. Within a new strategic approach, investing in Ukraine's victory might seem too costly and risky for the US. Thus, Washington may seek a peace agreement on any terms. That will create a space for a mediation mission; however, it is going to face considerable difficulties, given the conflict is now ripe enough for the settlement.

Third, the structure of European security is about to change with increased investment of European powers, most importantly Germany, France, the UK and Italy, into hard security. Weakening of American security commitments may lead to fragmentation of European security and its eventual deterioration.

Conclusions. The transformations in the international system and the world order are reshaping the global strategic environment, with profound implications for U.S. grand strategy and international security.

The global distribution of power is increasingly challenging for US. The US-China strategic rivalry marks a transition from unipolarity to a more contested and fragmented order, requiring the United States to reconsider its long-standing approach of liberal hegemony.

Erosion of the liberal international order—once founded on Western-led institutions, democratic values, and multilateralism—calls into question the ability of existing norms and institutions to address global challenges. The declining legitimacy and efficiency of multilateral frameworks like the United Nations and arms control regimes underscore the growing fragmentation of global governance.

American response to these systemic transformations reflects a reorientation of its grand strategy. A shift towards restraint and burden-sharing has emerged, emphasizing selective engagement and encouraging regional powers to take greater responsibility for their security. This approach seeks to address the overextension of commitments while prioritizing strategic competition with China and managing other regional threats. However, this recalibration carries risks, including regional instability, weakened alliances, and challenges to global non-proliferation efforts.

Finally, the implications of these strategic changes are evident in the Russian-Ukrainian war, a critical arena for shaping the evolving world order. American focus on countering China may lead to a more instrumental approach to Russia. Washington's recalibrated strategy could prioritize ending the war through mediation,

potentially at the cost of Ukraine's strategic goals, while also shifting the burden of European security onto regional powers.

In conclusion, the American grand strategy is at a pivotal juncture, shaped by the interplay of systemic transformations, the decline of unipolarity, and emerging bipolarity. Navigating these challenges requires balancing competition and cooperation, strengthening alliances, and ensuring adaptability in an increasingly complex international system. The outcomes of these strategic choices will significantly impact the structure of global security and the future of the international order.

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АМЕРИКАНСЬКА ВЕЛИКА СТРАТЕГІЯ В ПРОЦЕСІ ЗМІН: ВПЛИВ НА РОСІЙСЬКО-УКРАЇНСЬКУ ВІЙНУ

Резюме

Ця стаття досліджує зміни у великій стратегії США, викликані системними трансформаціями міжнародної політики. З одного боку, глобальний баланс сил за останні роки змінився, що спричинило зміни у структурі міжнародної системи. З іншого боку, сучасний світовий порядок зазнає ерозії. Свого часу побудований навколо західних інститутів, режимів і норм, він стикається з дедалі більшим ревізіонізмом, тоді як Захід, здається, вже не в змозі його підтримувати.

Ці процеси разом створюють абсолютно нове стратегічне середовище для міжнародних акторів, зокрема для США. Відповідно до неореалізму та інших структурних теорій, успіх держави у зовнішній політиці та сфері безпеки визначається її здатністю правильно оцінювати системні параметри міжнародної політики. Таким чином, розуміння цих параметрів має не лише академічне, але й політичне значення.

Нинішня адміністрація США пропонує конкретну стратегічну відповідь на зміну міжнародного середовища, яка зосереджується на протидії Китаю, скороченні зовнішніх зобов'язань США та «відновленні величі Америки». Така стратегія потребує детального аналізу, оскільки вона впливатиме на всю структуру міжнародної безпеки. Крім того, вона матиме безпосередній вплив на російсько-українську війну, яка багато в чому є важливим орієнтиром у перебудові світового порядку.

Виникають три запитання. Перше стосується глобальних трансформацій у міжнародній системі, що допомагають зрозуміти, чому змінюється велика стратегія США. Друге стосується того, як саме вона змінюється та які нові елементи можна ідентифікувати в американському підході до міжнародної політики. І третє запитання стосується того, як ці зміни впливають на російсько-українську війну. Ці питання розглядаються через використання теорії гегемоністської стабільності для оцінки занепаду гегемонії та її наслідків; застосування теорії переходу влади до сучасних міжнародних політичних і безпекових процесів; а також опору на загальний неореалістичний підхід у аналізі зовнішньої політики та варіантів безпеки держав.

Ключові слова: міжнародна система, світовий порядок, гегемонія, велика стратегія США, архітектура безпеки, російсько-українська війна.