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Twilight of Atlanticism?

America's shifting approaches to Europe

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*Paul van Hooff is no longer an employee of HCSS. His co-authorship is recognised here due to the material inputs to this project while still on staff.

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1. Introduction

1.1. A changing transatlantic space

The transatlantic relationship is less vigorous than it once was, renewing fears that NATO will be brought down. The questions we ask ourselves here are: is there indeed a notable decline that will continue, and if so, how steep and definitive is it and what does it mean for European defence and security? The issue is not just Trump; while Trump in his new administration, as in his previous, will act like a lightning rod on a variety of foreign policy and defence issues, his style is underpinned by longer threads running through American foreign policy thought.

American foreign policy is less stable because both the structure of the international system and the domestic political order is in flux. First, the rise of China and the closely associated relative decline of the United States over the past twenty-five years has changed the international structural context for American policymaking.¹ Even if the US government remains devoted to European security, it must now split financial, military, diplomatic, and intellectual resources between Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

This need for prioritising is in tension with the long-running trend in U.S. strategy of attempting to maintain 'global primacy', or predominant military and economic power everywhere. We have seen this reality during the Biden administration, despite the biggest war in Europe since the end of the Second World War and President Biden's own Atlanticist inclinations. Second, domestic resentments have been building, enabled by decades of polarisation and political dysfunction. Europe is also affected by these long-term demographic and cultural shifts within the United States that have made Europe less relevant to Washington than it was during the 20th century.

The structural changes in the international system and the domestic shifts are not independent but interact with each other. The domestic turbulence is the focus of this paper, rather than the changing distribution of material capabilities between the United States and China, the course of the war Russian war against Ukraine or the dynamics of the Israel-Gaza war.

This paper looks at American foreign policy thinking amongst elites, the American public (as expressed in opinion polls) and the security studies scholars. Based on our reading of the scholarship and our expertise, reinforced by a series of interviews with US experts, we identify the following four major approaches in U.S. foreign policy thinking towards Europe during the current (2016 onwards) era: liberal internationalists, prioritisers, restrainers, and 'MAGA / America First' national-populists.

Chapter 2 covers the domestic drivers of American foreign policy, to ground the subsequent discussions in the specific American political framework. Chapter 3 reviews the evolution of a consensus, elite-level politics of U.S. foreign policy after the end of the Cold War, drawing largely from the then contemporary scholarly debates about the post-Cold War direction of

¹ Michael J. Mazarr et al., 'The Fates of Nations: Varieties of Success and Failure for Great Powers in Long-Term Rivalries' (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 10 April 2024), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2611-2.html.

foreign policy. This chapter further discusses the four major approaches mentioned above. Chapter 4 covers where US political approaches to Europe stand at the time of writing and considers the results of the 2024 presidential election. The final Chapter 5 then discusses the implications for European foreign and defence policy.

1.2. The key message up front

Based on evidence from interviews, polling, policy documents and the intra-party discussions in the U.S., we believe that a breakdown in transatlantic relations is looming. We do not mean the complete withdrawal of the United States from Europe, but significant pressures both externally and internally that push and pull the United States towards the Indo-Pacific and away from Europe.

The end of the transatlantic relationship has been predicted before – many times in fact. The transatlantic relationship can be argued to be one of perpetual crises: the “great debate” on deploying U.S. forces to Europe in the early 1950s, the Suez Crisis in 1956, the departure of France from the integrated NATO command in 1966, the fears of West German Ostpolitik spelling the beginning of neutrality in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Euromissile Crisis starting in 1979, the failure to act in former Yugoslavia during the mid-1990s; the 2002-2003 clash between the United States and the UK on the one hand, and France and Germany on the other hand, over Iraq and WMD inspections; differences over Libya in 2011 and since and the AUKUS deal in 2022.² Moreover, from the earliest inception of NATO, American complaints about European allies insufficiently sharing in the costs of maintaining security for their own continent in favour of domestic priorities, whether rebuilding a war-torn Europe in the wake of the Second World War, or investing in welfare states. NATO's history is one of near perpetual dissension, rather than unwavering solidarity.

However, we believe this time is different³ because of the long-term structural shifts abroad and at home. China is not the Soviet Union. China is “an increasingly wealthy and technologically advanced country capable of engaging...in sustained, sophisticated competition.”⁴ Unless China implodes – which is both unlikely and beyond the scope of this paper – or the United States finds a domestic constituency that supports strongly increasing defence expenditures and deployments *everywhere*, limited resources will either be spread over multiple competing priorities across the globe or be concentrated in specific regions. That region is unlikely to be Europe.

Should this time indeed be different and signal the end of the deep U.S. commitment to Europe, there will be significant consequences for European security and defence policy, whether in the NATO context, the EU context or the minilateral or national context. The consequences range across issues: the relationship between NATO and the EU; defence industry; nuclear deterrence; and regional prioritisation between the Euro-Atlantic, the Middle East and North Africa and the Indo-Pacific.

2 Michael Cox, ‘The Transatlantic Crisis: The Wolf Is at the Door’, *European Political Science* 5, no. 1 (2006): 34–40; Stephen M. Walt, ‘The Ties That Fray: Why Europe and America Are Drifting Apart’, *The National Interest*, no. 54 (1998): 3–11.

3 Christopher Layne, ‘This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana’, *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012): 203–13.

4 Brendan Rittenhouse Green et al., ‘The Limits of Damage Limitation’, *International Security* 42, no. 1 (1 July 2017): 205, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_c_00279.

A breakdown in
transatlantic
relations is looming

2. Domestic sources and drivers of US foreign policy

The 1992 Bill Clinton campaign strategist James Carville's slogan that the election was about "the economy, stupid," remains an apt baseline for connecting U.S. domestic political pressures to foreign policy preferences and behaviour. The most consistent priority amongst voters, according to polls, is the health of the economy. In a 2024 survey of American voters, the top two "very big problems" selected were first inflation and second the affordability of healthcare. Both were closely followed by the erosion of bipartisanship in Congress, drug addiction, and gun violence. Nowhere does foreign policy appear in this list, except for "international terrorism," which represented only a small minority of respondents.⁵

There is a long history of assessing U.S. foreign policy behaviour from the domestic economic perspective. Beginning in the first half of the 20th century, historians affiliated with the University of Wisconsin developed a school of thought that economic/commercial reasons, and the desire for increased markets abroad, were the driver behind much of American foreign policy, rather than any philosophical commitment to 'spreading freedom'. This argument criticises the US proclivity to use force and interfere in the domestic affairs of other states to increase commercial opportunities and support the economy at home.⁶

This connection between economic and foreign policy logics is hardly novel, and the Wisconsin School and its descendants have a wealth of evidence to draw upon.⁷ In the 1970s, debates about reducing troop numbers in Europe was as dominated by discussions on economic prosperity and a balance of payments crisis as they were an analysis of Soviet capabilities.⁸ In 1990, in reference to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker argued that "a primary reason the United States must confront Iraq is to save American jobs."⁹ More recently, the Trump and Biden administration policies turning against foreign trade and imposing export restrictions against China has been tied to a policy of domestic economic renewal and to ensuring China's economy does not eclipse that of the

5 Reem Nadeem, '2. Top Problems Facing the U.S.', *Pew Research Center* (blog), 23 May 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/05/23/top-problems-facing-the-u-s/>.

6 William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: WW Norton, 1959), <https://www.norton.com/books/The-Tragedy-of-American-Diplomacy/>; Walter F. LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home & Abroad 1750 to the Present* (New York: WW Norton, 1989).

7 Jeanne Morefield, *Empires Without Imperialism: Anglo-American Decline and the Politics of Deflection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Macmillan, 2020).

8 Francis J. Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958-1971* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

9 Thomas L. Friedman, 'Mideast Tensions: U.S. Jobs at Stake in Gulf, Baker Says', *The New York Times*, 14 November 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/11/14/world/mideast-tensions-us-jobs-at-stake-in-gulf-baker-says.html>.

United States.¹⁰ Public perceptions, perceptions that translate into votes, certainly reflect this motivation over a more nebulous pursuit of engagement or isolation.

When foreign policy does appear in surveys, such as in an April 2024 Pew poll, the results are unsurprising. Terrorist attacks, drug trafficking, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, the maintenance of U.S. military primacy and the prevention of pandemics hold the plurality of votes when respondents were asked to rank order priority problems. Countering Russia, China, Iran and North Korea fall low on this list, with Russia only being listed as a priority by 50% of respondents.¹¹ Even the importance of “maintaining U.S. military primacy” can best be understood as a reflection of Americans’ consistent high level of support for the military, rather than some recognition of an actual foreign threat. The U.S. public prioritises domestic issues over foreign policy, a consistent theme for decades.

This does not translate to hostility towards Europe, however. Repeat polling has found majorities of Americans hold positive opinions of the UK (70%), France (64%), and Germany (64%), while majorities of both Democrats and Republicans believe the U.S. benefits from NATO membership to some degree (81% of Democrats, 51% of Republicans). This is balanced, however, with a belief that European states should increase their defence spending, with 47% of voters polled agreeing with this sentiment.¹² This arguably fits within the broader narrative of economic drivers of foreign policy, with a sense of an unbalanced financial burden within NATO being felt by voters.

What about America’s elites? It is difficult to gain a real perspective on elite opinions given the research challenges of asking senior officials opinions on sensitive issues related to foreign policy. Further ‘elite’ is a very broad term. There are of course the elected and appointed officials, civil servants, and the military officials that make up government. But there is also a myriad of scholars, think tank employees, lobbyists and interest groups, businesspeople and workers’ organisations that are working to shape and drive foreign policy.

Firstly, elite perception of public preferences has been increasingly found to be faulty at best. A study led by Harvard University professor Joshua Kertzer found that elites systematically assess that the US public is more isolationist and conservative than it is. This is as apparent in foreign policy as it is domestic. Kertzer and his colleagues found that elites grossly underestimate public support for the UN, international trade and NATO, while vastly overestimate public hostility to immigration, climate policy and international courts.¹³ Research in this area has attributed this mismatch to elites holding stereotypes about the public, over-weighting their own preferences or their unequal exposure to special interest groups.¹⁴ These findings have real meaning when applied to the actual democratic shaping of foreign and defence policy, with elite driven policy pulling against public preferences despite evidence. Further, it also

10 Laura von Daniels, ‘Economy and National Security: US Foreign Economic Policy under Trump and Biden’ (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2024), https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2024RP11_USForeignEconomicPolicy.pdf.

11 Jacob Poushter and Laura Clancy, ‘What Are Americans’ Top Foreign Policy Priorities?’ (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 23 April 2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/04/23/what-are-americans-top-foreign-policy-priorities/>.

12 Richard Wike et al., ‘Growing Partisan Divisions Over NATO and Ukraine’ (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 8 May 2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/05/08/growing-partisan-divisions-over-na-to-and-ukraine/>.

13 Joshua D. Kertzer et al., ‘Elite Misperceptions in Foreign Policy’ (Cambridge, MA, 4 August 2023), 9, https://jkertzer.sites.fas.harvard.edu/Research_files/NATO-Misperceptions-Web.pdf.

14 Ian Ward, ‘How Elites Misread Public Opinion’, POLITICO, 17 June 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/06/17/elites-kertzer-renshon-political-science-00039943>.

The US public prioritises domestic issues over foreign policy

shows that public affinity, person-to-person contacts and a general friendliness in the Atlantic community does not necessarily safeguard the U.S.-European relationship.

William Burns, the current director of the CIA and former president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Deputy Secretary of State, has raised this issue of elite-public preference divergences when it comes to foreign policy. In a study commissioned while at Carnegie, Burns and his team found “little appetite for a new, all-consuming cold war with China, or a cosmic struggle pitting democracies against authoritarian states.” This is certainly divergent from elite preferences. Focusing only on the most recent U.S. administrations, Trump and Biden, there has been an accelerating commitment both to a sustained rivalry with China and to a “democracy vs. authoritarianism” framing of foreign policy.¹⁵ Returning to the polling before, there is a broader public consensus on maintaining U.S. involvement in some international organisations while equalising the financial burden of doing so. This is far from a wider acceptance of the narrative described above of a new Cold War.

The Biden administration has attempted to square this divergence through its “foreign policy for the middle class” approach launched in 2021. Summarised by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan at the Brookings Institute in 2023, this approach is a policy of economic renewal couched in terms of resiliency and global cooperation. It is based on four primary pillars: (1) a modern industrial strategy; (2) cooperation with partners across the globe (explicitly not limited to ‘advanced economies’); (3) moving beyond trade deals to “innovative new international economic partnerships”; and (4) mobilising trillions of investments into emerging economies.¹⁶ By liking domestic investments in the wake of COVID to global influence, the administration seemingly took account of public/elite divergences. A study from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found that this resonated well with wider attitudes, with respondents agreeing that investing in public education, strengthening democracy at home and maintaining U.S. economic power are the three most important factors underpinning US influence.¹⁷

It should be noted that these divergences are issue specific and often more nuanced than any one question can cover. Vital to consider are severe partisan splits amongst voters. For example, on support for Ukraine, the general divide is a plurality of Democrats support US aide to Ukraine and see it as helping U.S. national security, while the reverse is the case for Republicans, who across age groups believe the US is doing too much. On NATO, a strong majority of Democrats view NATO positively, while Republicans, especially younger ones, hold negative views of the alliance, with right-leaning support largely coming from aging ‘Reagan Republicans’. As already stated, an area of bipartisan convergence is that Europeans need to spend more on defence and take more responsibility for their own defence, a view that holds pluralities across all age groups across the entire political spectrum.¹⁸

Splits amongst elites have also become more noticeable, particularly on foreign policy. On the right, support for Ukraine is hotly contested, with more conservative elites who are already

15 William Burns, ‘The Blob Meets the Heartland’, *The Atlantic*, 24 September 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/09/the-blob-meets-the-heartland?lang=en>.

16 Jake Sullivan, ‘Remarks by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on Renewing American Economic Leadership at the Brookings Institution’, The White House, 27 April 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/04/27/remarks-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-on-renewing-american-economic-leadership-at-the-brookings-institution/>.

17 Ivo Daalder et al., ‘A Foreign Policy for the Middle Class—What Americans Think’ (Chicago: The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, October 2021), https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/ccs2021_fpmc_0.pdf.

18 Wike et al., ‘Growing Partisan Divisions Over NATO and Ukraine’.

An area of bipartisan convergence is that Europeans need to spend more on defence

predisposed to limit foreign aid looking to cut military support.¹⁹ This can in some cases be explained by a desire to shift resources towards the Pacific, with a very specific narrative of countering Chinese communism. In other cases, the lack of support for Ukraine on the right comes from a cultural/political affinity for Russia, with agreement in some corners that Moscow is the vanguard protector of a global Christian conservative movement.²⁰ On the left, the dividing line is primarily over Israel-Palestine. Older, more conservative Democrats are much more hesitant to criticise Israeli actions in the West Bank or Gaza and frequently tout close relations with Israel. Younger, more progressive Democrats are starkly opposed to this view, and are far more willing to strongly criticise Israeli behaviour broadly and the actions of the Netanyahu government in particular.²¹ As seen in disputes over a funding bill in early 2024, partisans on all sides are willing to treat issues such as military aid to Ukraine, military supplies to Israel, and border funding as interchangeable pieces on the Congressional game-board, each of which is considered expendable.²²

Much of American foreign policy is driven by a domestic, economic logic. This can be understood in the context of a more limited public interest in foreign policy matters, and what interest there is informed by economic logic, i.e. burden-sharing within NATO. On issues, however, especially where there is a partisan divide, political elites perceive the American public as more actively isolationist than they really are, due likely in part to the relatively closed-off elite environment explored by Burns above. Generalising then, the domestic sources of American foreign policy essentially stem from elite-driven perceptions and calculations of the U.S. economy and its place within the broader global political economy. As will be seen in the subsequent sections, this background understanding underpins the various typologies of elite approaches to US grand strategy towards Europe. Where one can be found on issues of political economy, one can largely be mapped onto issues of trade relations, alliance issues and even NATO itself.

19 Bernd Debusmann Jr., 'Why Are Some Republicans Opposing More Aid for Ukraine?', BBC News, 7 December 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-67649497>.

20 Ksenia Luchenko, 'Conservatism by Decree: Putin as a Figurehead for the Global Far-Right' (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 1 March 2024), <https://ecfr.eu/article/conservatism-by-decree-putin-as-a-figurehead-for-the-global-far-right/>.

21 'Sympathy Grows for Palestinians But Majority Still Sympathize More With Israelis; Generational Divide Widens On View Of Israel' (Hamden, CT: Quinnipiac University National Poll, 16 November 2023), <https://poll.qu.edu/poll-release?releaseid=3884>.

22 Patricia Zengerle, Makini Brice, and Richard Cowan, 'US Senate Defeats Border Deal, but Ukraine, Israel Aid May Survive | Reuters', Reuters, 8 February 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/bipartisan-border-ukraine-deal-looks-set-fail-us-senate-2024-02-07/>.

3. The evolution of the American grand strategy consensus

3.1. Grand strategies

Grand strategy is the highest level of national statecraft that establishes how elites prioritise and mobilise which military, diplomatic, political, economic and other sources of power to ensure what they perceive as their interests;²³ a “political-military, means-ends chain, a state’s theory about how it can best ‘cause’ security for itself.”²⁴ Critics of the concept of grand strategy note that the focus on ‘interests’ within debates often reduces down to narrow conceptions of security – national survival, battlefield victory or global power position.²⁵ American political scientist Barry Posen, for example, argued that “grand strategy is ultimately about fighting, a costly and bloody business.”²⁶ This idea, that grand strategy is ultimately about fighting, is a core debate between different political camps on strategy. In general, however, there is a dominant perspective in elite opinion that grand strategy is about using military means to build security.

During the Cold War, the United States pursued in Europe what the historian John Lewis Gaddis referred to as grand strategies of containment.²⁷ This involved a focus on NATO and its strategies, the place of (West) Germany in Europe and economic measures such as the Marshall Plan. At the same time, the United States looked to prevent perceived and actual communist challenges in the Western Hemisphere, the Persian Gulf and Asia, where the Cold War became hot. The US was involved in wars in East Asia and Southeast Asia – the 1950-1953 Korean War and the 1955-1975 Vietnam War and supported violent campaigns against civilians in Indonesia, the Philippines and Cambodia. Moreover, it pursued covert actions elsewhere, particularly through supporting coups and strongmen governments across Latin America.²⁸ A degree of this involvement was argued based on maintaining a nebulous image of American credibility, with the fear being that losing this credibility in Asia or Latin America

23 Paul Van Hooff, *Grand Strategy* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

24 Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Cornell University Press, 1984), 1.

25 Van Jackson, *Grand Strategies of the Left: The Foreign Policy of Progressive Worldmaking* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 12.

26 Posen, *Restraint*, pg. 1.

27 John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

28 Vincent Bevins, *The Jakarta Method: Washington's Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program That Shaped Our World* (London: Hachette Book Group, 2019).

could invite a Soviet attack in Europe. This was an elite consensus view between 1949 and 1989, though less stable at the time than in hindsight.

Grand strategy is multi-dimensional, as the Cold War example shows. It reflects an elite consensus on a long-term vision about how best to spend resources, which regions to focus on and what kind of military means would work best. Within that broader vision, policies may differ which weapons best deter, which allies are most reliable, whether to use covert action and other tools of statecraft can vary. Broader grand strategies can be grouped into archetypal categories, according to their preferences along several dimensions: (1) the key underlying logic of the strategy, what it seeks to achieve or prevent and how; (2) key threats; (3) key regions; (4) role of military force; (5) role of alliances (or their absence); and (6) approaches to a variety of issues. U.S. administrations tend to lean towards one archetype more than others, with a broad sense of principles and behaviour; but without implying that all members of an administration share the same views or share them to the same extent. We take the view that policymakers and states can have grand strategies whether they are explicitly articulate them or not.²⁹

Scholarship from the post-Cold War period would generally organize the different schools of thought along the lines of primacy, deep engagement, selective engagement and restraint or isolation.³⁰ Table 1 moves beyond this conception to a wider grouping: (1) liberal internationalists; (2) prioritisers; (3) libertarian restrainers; (4) progressive restrainers; and (5) "MAGA/America First". This broader take can better accommodate a range of perspectives and political ideologies. Further, it directly incorporates the MAGA/America First element as a distinct strategic outlook steeped in ideological terms.

29 Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century CE to the Third* (JHU Press, 2016).

30 Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, 'Competing Visions for US Grand Strategy', *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996): 5–53; Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, 'Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation', *International Security* 21, no. 4 (1997): 5–48; Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to US Primacy* (WW Norton & Company, 2006); Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, 'Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment', 2012; Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Cornell University Press, 2013); Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2014); Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Paul van Hoof, 'All-In or All-Out: Why Insularity Pushes and Pulls American Grand Strategy to Extremes', *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (7 August 2020): 701–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1811461>.

Table 1. Varieties of American grand strategic approaches



	Liberal Internationalists	Prioritisers	Restrainers; libertarian	Restrainers; progressive	“MAGA / America First”
Logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain U.S. primacy Prevent rise of hostile great powers, specifically China Consolidate democracies and free markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain U.S. primacy Prevent rise of hostile great powers China is the only credible threat to American power Occasionally prioritises Iran 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid counterbalancing coalitions, American power causes insecurity Lower government expenditures Reduce the size of the military and other security services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid involvement in geopolitical rivalries that could cause war Refocus government expenditures on domestic topics Reduce the size of the military and other security services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain U.S. primacy Pursue US interests in zero-sum, ‘we win, the lose’ fashion Transactionalism is more effective than commitments or shared political characteristics
Ideologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classical liberalism Neoconservatism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nationalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Libertarians 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progressive Democrats; Socialists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ethno-nationalism/populism
Major threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China Russia Iran North Korea 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China is primary threat Russia is distant second Iran a major threat for some 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. dragged into war by allies Instability in Western Hemisphere Financial insolvency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. dragged into war by allies National security state Climate change Nuclear risk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China is a primary threat Iran a major threat
Alliances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preference for multilateralism, but often bilateral or mini-lateral in practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limit assurances to key allies in Asia; privileged relations with Taiwan, Australia, Israel and the UK 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid alliances entirely Withdraw from existing alliances Stop aide to Ukraine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ally only with democracies Limit military aide to democratic states only Draw down forward deployments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transactional, regardless of past relations or regime type Preference to align with dictatorships
NATO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Crucial, Europeans are key allies NATO a major asset to retain U.S. influence in Europe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> European responsibility Bare minimum US troop presence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. withdrawal from NATO 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reform Europe’s security architecture to reduce reliance on the U.S. Reduce U.S. footprint in Europe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the threat of withdrawing from NATO as a stick to gain concessions from Europe across policy areas
Trade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free markets, with strong American control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free markets, with strong American control Prioritises economic warfare with China 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free markets, very limited state interference in international corporate activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sceptical of free trade agreements and market-style arrangements Trade agreements need built in workers protection and union input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong protectionism Seek to isolate China economically
Political supporters	Joseph Biden; Kamala Harris; Marco Rubio; Anthony Blinken; Jake Sullivan; Tim Kaine;	Elbridge Colby; Matthew Pottinger; John Bolton; John Moolenaar; Robb Wittmann; Raja Krishnamoorthi	Rand Paul; Mike Lee; David Stockman; Peter Thiel	Bernie Sanders; Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez; Elizabeth Warren; Chris Murphy; Julian Castro; Ilhan Omar; Ayanna Presley; Rashida Tlaib	Donald Trump; JD Vance; Robert O’Brien; Dan Negrea; Richard Grenell; Bill Hagerty; Josh Hawley; Tom Cotton

3.2. The 'primacy' question

Before turning to each approach in turn, this section briefly unpacks the concept of 'primacy'. Primacy is an ambitious logic underpinning much strategic thinking in the U.S., particularly in the period after the Cold War. While primacy can be separated out as a distinct strategy, as Posen does, this neglects to address how other approaches are underpinned by the same logic. Liberal internationalist, prioritising and MAGA/American First strategists each rely on a fundamental presumption of maintained American reach and influence, albeit exercised in different ways once in power.

Primacy's premise is to maintain U.S. pre-eminence in global military, economic and political affairs, its advocates adhering to the underlying belief that only a United States that was dominant could ensure that no threats would emerge, and its interests be pursued without challenge. Primacy's core aim has been to prevent, simultaneously, the rise of competing great powers in Europe, East Asia and the Persian Gulf, while maintaining US economic dominance. It has focused on state threats, as states were the only actors that could muster sufficient capabilities to challenge or harm the United States. Primacists have looked to prevent any and all rivals from emerging in the post-Cold War era in any major geopolitical region, including Western Europe, which was explicitly included in a draft 1992 Defense Planning Guidance, developed by the George H.W. Bush administration.³¹ Within this paradigm, the United States maintains a military presence in all key regions of the planet, alongside partnerships and alliances, with a preference for bilateral and minilateral arrangements, particularly with other, often eager Anglophone powers (like the UK or Australia) rather than multilateral frameworks, as this better facilitates unilateral use of American power.

Europe was included among regions where great powers should be prevented from emerging. This was not entirely surprising given the premises of this logic: post-Cold War Western Europe had two nuclear-armed states, was well-armed in the aftermath of the Cold War, had a reunified Germany as an economic powerhouse and had a market economy that was further integrating through the European Union. European strategic autonomy was and remains unwelcome from the primacist perspective. In this perspective, NATO must be maintained and enlarged because NATO acts as a tool to ensure that the United States can continue to play a dominating role in European affairs. French proposals for alternative European security architectures were unwelcome, whether the *Eurocorps* with Germany or the British-French initiative to create the European Security and Defence policy within the EU. The latter followed the failed European attempts to act in the wars in former Yugoslavia, a failure which only reinforced the primacist view that American military power was indispensable.

Primacists made their influence felt through the post-Cold War period. In the 1990s, advocates proposed maintaining a U.S. military that was unchallengeable, or 'full spectrum dominant', and could fight and win simultaneously across many regions. Primacists had little compunction about the use of military force but were reticent about intervening in regional crises where no American interests were at stake and where there was little risk of other great powers gaining, such as in the Balkans or Somalia. Critics, especially from the left, have argued that any strategy predicated on this presumption of American power, be it latent or more actively pursued, is imperialist and undermines the sovereignty of states in which

³¹ Zalmay Khalilzad, 'Defense Planning: Guidance FY 1994-1999 (Draft)' (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 16 April 1992).

Primacy's premise is to maintain US pre-eminence in global military, economic and political affairs

American power is exercised.³² From the right, it is criticised as a resource wasting logic that assumes the right of the U.S. to play 'global policeman' and use violence at will.³³ With this understanding of primacy as a recurrent logic across approaches, this study now turns to the five grand strategies approaches enumerated in Table 1 above.

3.3. Liberal internationalism

Liberal internationalism is an approach to grand strategy predicated on a continuously deep engagement of American military economic power across most regions of the world. Steeped in a primacist logic, this style of internationalism found strong support across a variety of Democratic administrations, with an initial conceptualisation seen in the foreign policy of the Clinton administration in the 1990s and a renewal under Obama. Arguably, liberal internationalism and neoconservatism are drawn from the same well, with the only major difference being a neoconservative emphasis on executive authority and 'traditional values' in government.³⁴

The core tenets of internationalism, both in its liberal and neoconservative forms, include a theory of history driven by fears of appeasing an adversary (including frequent references to the Munich Agreement and WWII)³⁵, a belief that US military power "must never come home" and a certain degree of perpetual, near crisis being the state of world affairs.³⁶ There is a certain exceptionalism to this core logic, which posits a few of American military and economic strength as essentially benign and "by invitation".³⁷ This leads to deep military engagement across the world, close involvement and commitment to alliances (though not always to NATO as an institution) and a drive for free trade agreements with friendly states, within the context of American economic predominance.

The liberal internationalist strategy approach to grand strategy is a self-admitted attempt to maintain post-Cold War continuity. Before the 2020 election, Joe Biden had published a Foreign Affairs article on his foreign policy ambitions "Why America Must Lead Again"³⁸ an on-the-nose play on the Trump-era slogan. When the Biden administration came into office after the 2020 elections, it looked to restore a friendlier tone about alliances and other forms of cooperation, as well as reaffirm military and extended deterrent commitments that were put under stress during the Trump administration. Andrea Kendall-Taylor of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) describes it as "principled pragmatism", where the adherents see themselves as "upholders of the current international order".³⁹ For Elbridge Colby, a frequent critic of the Biden Administration and a former Trump administration official who co-authored the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS), Democrats are "soft liberal

32 Jackson, *Grand Strategies of the Left: The Foreign Policy of Progressive Worldmaking*, 72–73.

33 Barbara Conry, 'U.S. "Global Leadership": A Euphemism for World Policeman' (Washington, D.C.: CATO Institute, 5 February 1997), <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/us-global-leadership-euphemism-world-policeman>.

34 Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 73–87.

35 Elizabeth D. Samet, *Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Picador, 2021).

36 Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*, 73; Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018).

37 Geir Lundestad, 'Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952', *Journal of Peace Research* 23, no. 3 (1986): 263–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234338602300305>.

38 Joseph R. Biden Jr, 'Why American Must Lead Again: Recusing US Foreign Policy after Trump', *Foreign Aff.* 99 (2020): 64.

39 Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Interview with authors, May 2024.

primacists” and considers Biden’s approach to be “the Indian summer of the blob”.⁴⁰ From a progressive perspective, Matt Duss, a former advisor to Bernie Sanders, believes that the current grouping that supports continuity is largely made up of “liberal internationalists with elements of primacy, depending on which flavour they are”, which is located “largely within the Democratic Party, with some refugees from the Republican establishment.”⁴¹ Conservative commentator Peter Rough at the Hudson Institute argues that even in the current approach, “neoconservatives are pretty down and out. I don’t think democracy promotion has much currency.”⁴² This is perhaps unsurprising when returning to the first section of this study, in which the wider American electorate has turned against the adventurism of the early 2000s.

Liberal internationalism has experienced an evolution in economic policy in particular, with a downturn in support for free trade noticeable since approximately 2016.⁴³ Though Biden looked to reinvigorate past approaches, as Peter Rough notes, there is actually a “fair amount of continuity” between Trump and Biden on trade.⁴⁴ In that sense, Democrats have looked to address the disenchantment felt in the wake of the Iraq War and the financial crisis, and that the Biden administration’s “policy for the middle class” was an “attempt to get out to the country and to listen to Americans to see what they perceived as their foreign policy”.⁴⁵ However, the administration considers China “the most existential challenge” for the United States faces and “key to the economy”.⁴⁶ This is also a recognition of political reality, wherein treaty-based diplomacy, including new trade deals, is effectively unworkable due to the Congressional polarisation making treaty ratification near impossible.⁴⁷

Part of this internationalism is the aforementioned logic of deep engagement, directed at preventing the rise of competing great powers in Europe, East Asia and Gulf. However, deep engagement is ambitious in other ways, as it also looks to the United States to create a world more conducive for democracy and free markets. The argument is that freedom, prosperity and security are mutually reinforcing, creating a virtuous circle. Arguably, the Bill Clinton presidency was clearest example of this. As the 1995 National Security Strategy (NSS) noted, it was “based on enlarging the community of market democracies while deterring and containing a range of threats to our nation, our allies and our interests. The more that democracy and political and economic liberalization take hold in the world, particularly in countries of geostrategic importance to us, the safer our nation is likely to be and the more our people are likely to prosper.”⁴⁸ In the post-2016 domestic and international environment, the Biden administration was an attempt to continue this, as mentioned above. To accomplish these ambitious objectives, deep engagement also relies on the primacy logic of U.S. military dominance in key regions and the maintenance of alliances that the United States leads. Liberal internationalist proponents of deep engagement were and are more likely to accept multilateralist institutions, at least rhetorically, and look to work with and through allies to achieve U.S. interests. Neoconservative advocates are historically far more sceptical, as seen during the

40 Elbridge Colby, Interview with authors, May 2024.

41 Matthew Duss, Interview with authors, May 2024.

42 Peter Rough, Interview with the authors, June 2024.

43 Emma Ashford argues that the Democrats have shifted on trade, but everything else is pretty consistent. Emma Ashford, Interview with authors, May 2024.

44 Rough, Interview with the authors.

45 Duss, Interview with authors. Andrea Kendall-Taylor makes a similar point. Kendall-Taylor, Interview with authors.

46 Kendall-Taylor, Interview with authors.

47 Jeffrey S. Peake, *Dysfunctional Diplomacy: The Politics of International Agreements in an Era of Partisan Polarization* (New York: Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003347422>.

48 William J. Clinton, ‘National Security Strategy 1995’ (Washington D.C.: White House, 1 February 1995), 2, <http://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-1995/>.

Bush administration and the War on Terror, with the view that such institutions are an unnecessary hindrance to the exercise of executive power.⁴⁹

When it came to Europe, deep engagement advocates were in favour of NATO continuation and enlargement. The logic here was that NATO and the EU as institutions could ensure stability in post-Cold War Europe, which had to find a place for a reunified Germany and the post-Communist states of Central and Eastern Europe. NATO allowed the United States to provide leadership on these efforts, and NATO provided the United States with the means to facilitate force projection into zones of instability while adding a veneer of legitimacy to its efforts.⁵⁰ A Europe that was more strategically autonomous was still not welcome, as it undermined the ability of the United States to lead in Europe. Moreover, the United States as a 'European power' needed to act as the security provider and pacifier for a continent that some in Washington believed was otherwise prone to go to war against itself.⁵¹

Deep engagement is more explicitly liberal and therefore would see more space for humanitarian intervention. Many of the liberal internationalist critics of US hesitation in the early 1990s to act in the regional conflicts in Europe and Africa supported US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, it would be a mistake to associate this grand strategy during the 1991-2016 period with the Democrats; prominent Republicans, colloquially referred to as neoconservatives, argued in favour of the invasion of Iraq based on an ideological preference for the democratisation and capitalisation of the Middle East. Robust and proactive liberal internationalism, backed by military force,⁵² enjoyed bipartisan support. For example, Bush II may have (in)famously spoken about the "axis of evil",⁵³ but the Clinton-era had equally focused on Iraq, Iran and North Korea (alongside Libya) as key threats to prepare for. The 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review had noted that the US armed forces should prepare for fighting and winning wars in the Persian Gulf and East Asia simultaneously.⁵⁴

Liberal internationalism and neoconservatism, encompassing the logics of primacy and deep engagement, can be considered two sides of same coin; Posen refers to them as liberal hegemony, which captures the two strands together.⁵⁵ The internal logic of each is different and rhetorically they emphasise different pieces. However, in terms of observable plans and behaviour, the two variants are difficult to distinguish. Both have aimed to maintain U.S. military superiority and alliances after the Cold War and maintained if not expanded U.S. presence in multiple regions: Europe, East Asia (and later Indo-Pacific) and Gulf (and the wider Middle East and North Africa).

49 Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

50 Paul Van Hooft, 'Land Rush: American Grand Strategy, NATO Enlargement, and European Fragmentation', *International Politics* 57 (2020): 530–53; Sara Bjerg Moller, 'Twenty Years after: Assessing the Consequences of Enlargement for the NATO Military Alliance', *International Politics*, no. 57 (2020): 1–21; Theo Farrell and Sten Rynning, 'NATO's Transformation Gaps: Transatlantic Differences and the War in Afghanistan', *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 5 (2010): 673–99.

51 The 1995 NSS draws explicit parallels: "American leadership in the world has never been more important, for there is a simple truth about this new world: the same idea that was under attack three times in this Century — first by imperialism and then by fascism and communism — remains under attack today, but on many fronts at once." Clinton, 'National Security Strategy 1995', 1–2.

52 Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Cornell University Press, 2007), chap. conclusions.

53 Andrew Glass, 'President Bush Cites "Axis of Evil," Jan. 29, 2002', POLITICO, 29 January 2019, <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/01/29/bush-axis-of-evil-2002-1127725>.

54 'Quadrennial Defense Review', accessed 1 February 2018, <http://history.defense.gov/Historical-Sources/Quadrennial-Defense-Review/>; Jim Mitre, 'A Eulogy for the Two-War Construct', *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2018): 7–30.

55 Posen, *Restraint*.

The United States as a 'European power' needed to act as the security provider and pacifier for a continent that some in Washington believed was otherwise prone to go to war against itself

3.4. Prioritisers

Prioritisers advocate fully focusing U.S. grand strategy on specific regions or tasks, with this prioritisation occasionally shifting over time. Similar in its basis on American primacy, prioritisation as a strategy eschews the concept of total, global primacy for one that maintains the latent capacity for global military operations and economic influence but uses such power in a focused way. The approach draws both from proponents of the idea of selective engagement proponents, those who look to carefully match U.S. ambitions to its resources based on prioritised threats and erstwhile primacists who want U.S. hegemony to survive but do not believe that the United States has the resources to survive global competition if U.S. forces are not focused.

For a significant portion of the early 21st-century, and for a select minority at the time of writing, this prioritisation took the form of a focus on Iran. This can be seen in the example of the D.C.-based organisation The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), which argues that “the Islamic Republic of Iran poses the most serious and urgent set of security challenges to the United States and its allies.”⁵⁶ WINEP has particular influence in Washington, counting amongst its board of advisors former General John Allen, former Senator Evan Bayh, scholar and former State Department Counselor Eliot Cohen, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former NATO SACEUR James Stavridis. For this organisation and many of its supporters, the priority is combatting Iran and supporting Israel.

Other groups, of course, prioritise different states. The largest contingent of prioritisers in Washington today is centred on China, aiming to prevent a rising China from supplanting American power. This group is epitomised by former Trump defence official Elbridge Colby, co-founder of the Marathon Initiative which aims to help American policymakers “deal with the deep and difficult problems of great power competition.” For Colby, this competition is unequivocally focused on China. In Colby’s view, current US grand strategic approaches can be divided between primacists (whether of the hard-edged or liberal variant) who continue to want to play “basically global policeman, global hegemon” and the restrainers, where he envisions himself “in the middle”.⁵⁷ He, along with other prioritisers such as Marathon’s Matthew Pottinger, Congressmen John Moolenaar and Robb Wittmann and the Atlantic Council’s Matthew Kroenig, would see a laser-like focus of US defence policy directed against China.

Critics, such as the Hudson Institute’s Peter Rough, consider the prioritisers “closet isolationists” who simply do not want to support Taiwan in the event of war with China.⁵⁸ Like Rough, Hal Brands has written that the logic of prioritisation is essentially isolationism, and would be to “dissipate American influence, to court heightened insecurity and instability and to expose the United States to greater long-range risks and costs.”⁵⁹ Others, such as scholar Van Jackson, argue that such a strategy is still steeped in the logic of primacy, and therefore does not actually do anything to shift military footprints or economic influence in practice. Yet others have argued that because the United States is an extra-regional power in each of the regions it operates in, there is an inherent asymmetry in interests between it and the

56 ‘Viterbi Program on Iran and U.S. Policy | The Washington Institute’, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, accessed 6 November 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/about/research-programs/viterbi-program-iran-and-us-policy>.

57 Colby, Interview with authors.

58 Rough, Interview with the authors.

59 Hal Brands, ‘The Limits of Offshore Balancing’ (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, September 2015), 12, <http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/download.cfm?q=1291>.

adversaries it is seeking to deter. Consequently, attempts to selectively engage are quickly pulled towards internationalist deep engagement.⁶⁰

Several post-Cold War presidents arguably attempted prioritisation as a strategy but ended up with more ambitious strategies than they originally intended. President George HW Bush was reticent about using American military force to dislodge Iraqi forces from Kuwait, as he feared another Vietnam. Bill Clinton was elected against George HW Bush, who had been very popular the previous year in the wake of the victory in the 1991 Gulf War, by arguing it “was the economy, stupid.” Clinton ended up overseeing the completion of the ambitious strategy of NATO enlargement and intervened in former Yugoslavia. George W. Bush campaigned in 2000 on “nation building at home” but presided over what was the largest and most ambitious strategy, namely, to forcibly democratise the Middle East beginning in Iraq. Barack Obama was elected by an American public weary of the failures of Iraq and the financial crisis. President Obama arguably came closest to selective engagement, by arguing for “no dumb shit”.⁶¹ However, he was unable to truly draw the United States out of the Middle East and rebalance towards the Indo-Pacific. The Obama administration ended up involved in the NATO mission that toppled the Gaddafi regime in Libya – albeit “leading it from behind” – as well as in Syria and northern Iraq against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and re-committed to Europe in the wake of Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea. Commitment problems across multiple regions and institutional inertia made strategic adaptation difficult.

Thus, prioritisation is extremely difficult to achieve in practice. Returning to the beginning of this paper, a large number of factors have to be in play in order for such a reordering to succeed. Importantly, those officials who would seek prioritisation would have to assume the risks that such a strategy entails, including that of blowback or negative outcomes. The US withdrawals from Vietnam and Afghanistan are such examples, where the Nixon and Biden administrations accepted that the total collapse of their erstwhile allies was a serious possibility. Informative for American allies, is the lesson that the decisions were taken anyway.

3.5. Restrainers, both Libertarian and Progressive

The most limited U.S. strategy is often referred to as neo-isolationism by its critics, or restraint by its proponents.⁶² In this, the United States would leave the Middle East and Europe in this strategy, arguing that the US presence enables “free riding” and that these countries can defend themselves. Others argue that the US presence worsens the security situation of these regions by near-guaranteeing other states will react aggressively to American policy. Proponents have disagreed on whether the United States should also limit its involvement in Asia. Scholars Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer have argued that balancing China presents a core security interest for the United States, and that regional states like Japan, South Korea, Australia and India are incapable of singlehandedly balancing China without onshore U.S. military assistance.⁶³

60 Hooft, ‘All-In or All-Out’.

61 Jeffrey Goldberg, ‘The Obama Doctrine’, *The Atlantic* 316, no. 3 (2016): 70–90.

62 Posen, *Restraint*; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, ‘The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior US Grand Strategy’, *Foreign Aff.* 95 (2016): 70; Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*.

63 Mearsheimer and Walt, ‘The Case for Offshore Balancing’. For the differences in regional priorities, see: Hooft, ‘All-In or All-Out’.

Prioritisation is extremely difficult to achieve in practice

Isolationism is often used as a pejorative analogy by critics of restraint to compare such policies to the failures of the United States to help states in Europe and Asia resist the aggression of the Axis powers in the 1930s, until Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor drew the United States into the war. Yet it is a misnomer; during its so-called isolationist period before and between the world wars, the United States had consolidated control over the continent, asserted dominance over the Caribbean (colonising and intervening in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti and elsewhere), ensured European powers would stay out of the Western Hemisphere through the Monroe Doctrine and colonised much of the Pacific (Hawaii, the Philippines, Guam, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands).⁶⁴

Through most of the post-Cold War period, restraint had few actual adherents in American politics. Significant factions of the U.S. government were committed to maintaining a U.S. role in NATO, if not always a forward presence, routinely approved troop increases in Iraq and Afghanistan while expanding the War on Terror globally and pushed for a pivot to Asia which saw a strong orientation towards China. Restraint faces obstacles to policy influence, coming against the influence and lobbying efforts of defence industry, the armed forces, foreign governments and Congressional districts with significant contracts on the line. The cutting of commitments has both a strategic and financial trade-off.

Some visions of restraint would see the option for the United States to come back, where in the event of an emergency U.S. troops could be quickly surged into a region or at the very least air and/or naval power projected. Others see a more categorical form of restraint, backed by a reduction in formal commitments and to permanently reduce the ability of the armed forces to project themselves. Further, this school also looks to tie the hands of the U.S. president in sending troops without Congressional approval. Each version sees at the very least a drastically scaled down forward presence by the U.S. military, primarily in the Middle East and/or Europe, with the former's poor democratic record being the reason for reducing ties and the latter being Europe's economic and (latent) military power.⁶⁵

Amongst progressive restrainers, debate often centres around the actual origins of insecurity around the world, the militarisation of foreign policy and whether revisionist powers will always stay that way (or are actually revisionist for that matter). Further, a common theme is that centring discussions on militarised questions distracts from more existential challenges such as climate change or political threats such as far-right extremist governments. Van Jackson has synthesised the progressive posture as being grounded in commitments to economic equality, solidarity and anti-authoritarianism, stressing working-level rather than elite politics. Desired policy outcomes include nuclear restraint, arms control, investment in climate adaptation, joining the ICC, reforming the international financial system and limiting treaty commitments to democracies exclusively.⁶⁶

Restrainers defined by a more libertarian politics argue that militarised foreign policy, the security state tied to it and the economic investments in defence industry represent an undemocratic state overreach into national affairs. Surveillance laws, security clearances and taxes to support higher spending on defence are deemed oppressive and necessitating a large, powerful government. Advocates, such as Justin Logan at the Cato Institute, argue

64 Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*.

65 Jackson, *Grand Strategies of the Left: The Foreign Policy of Progressive Worldmaking*, 188–91.

66 Jackson, 180–91.

for an “insular, maritime republic” that eschews alliance commitments in favour of homeland defence by a reduced security establishment.⁶⁷

Many restrainers share a disdain for “national security elites” in the Pentagon, State Department, CIA and elsewhere that are argued to unnecessarily hype security threats out of a combination of ideological fervour, institutional interests and short-sightedness. Quoting Cato’s Logan, “Most information about foreign threats comes to Americans directly from the bureaucrats tasked with defending against them.”⁶⁸ Progressives share this view, with Van Jackson, himself an Air Force veteran and former Pentagon official, arguing that “The elitist and secretive nature of national security is thus bound up with it being a force against democracy.”⁶⁹ This sceptical view of government is widely shared by the US public, with recurrent polling showing a lack of confidence in career government employees, political appointees and state institutions in general.⁷⁰ This aspect of restraint, is thus arguably more democratically representative of Americans themselves, perhaps unsurprising in the light of the decades-long War on Terror, revelations about domestic spying and seemingly unresponsive policymakers.

Restrainers remain a small group within American foreign policy circles. However, the approach(es) should not be overlooked as many younger Americans are drawn to an approach that focuses more resources at home. As Matt Duss, foreign policy advisor for Bernie Sanders, notes, “inequality is a huge problem; we have more rich people than anywhere in the world. We have more poor people than any developing country.”⁷¹ Discontent over largely unconditional US support for Israel is further fuelling protests within the Democratic Party and arguably played a role in Biden’s decision not to seek re-election during the summer of 2024.⁷² On the conservative side, libertarians support similar, more minimal foreign policy approaches, though their stake is to diminish the size of government and lower taxes rather than redirecting the resources to infrastructure, healthcare, or education, as progressive supporters of restraint would prefer.⁷³

Much of the restraint approach’s elite representation is in Congress, with a strong minority within the Democratic Party in particular calling for an end of the U.S. “qualitative military edge” policy towards Israel⁷⁴, towards a greater role for arms control over nuclear modernisation, of stopping the further expansion of security commitments through NATO or elsewhere, and to reduce the power of the executive’s war powers. Libertarian restrainers are also largely in Congress, with the focus again being on reducing the perceived coercive power of the state and to actively tie the hands of government to ensure a reduction in both size and ambition.

67 Justin Logan, ‘Liberty at Home, Restraint Abroad: A Realist Approach to Foreign Policy’ (Washington, D.C.: CATO Institute, Summer 2024), <https://www.cato.org/free-society/summer-2024/liberty-home-restraint-abroad-realist-approach-foreign-policy>.

68 Justin Logan, ‘Liberty at Home, Restraint Abroad: A Realist Approach to Foreign Policy’ (Washington, D.C.: CATO Institute, Summer 2024), <https://www.cato.org/free-society/summer-2024/liberty-home-restraint-abroad-realist-approach-foreign-policy>.

69 Van Jackson, *Grand Strategies of the Left: The Foreign Policy of Progressive Worldmaking* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 36.

70 ‘Americans’ Views of Government: Decades of Distrust, Enduring Support for Its Role’ (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 6 June 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/americans-views-of-government-decades-of-distrust-enduring-support-for-its-role/>.

71 Duss, Interview with authors.

72 Rachel Leingang, “Uncommitted” Movement Pressuring Biden over Gaza Brings in Half a Million Dollars’, *The Guardian*, 17 April 2024, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/apr/17/uncommitted-movement-biden-gaza>.

73 Christopher Preble, ‘Libertarians and Foreign Policy: The Individual, the State, and War’, *The Independent Review* 21, no. 2 (2016): 167–79.

74 A law which requires US administrations to ensure an Israeli military edge against its neighbours.

Many younger Americans are drawn to an approach that focuses more resources at home

It is quite possible that with further generational changes, within the Democratic Party in particular, restraint could take a stronger hold.

3.6. “MAGA / America First”

Trump captured many strains of the discontent that followed the so-called Global War on Terror, as well as the sense of U.S. relative decline relative to other powers from the peaks of the earlier era, in the “Make America Great Again” slogan. Part of Trump’s attraction to the Republican base (and outside) was that he was “the first serious Republican politician of any kind who said the Iraq War was a mistake.”⁷⁵ By doing that, Trump “transformed the debate” during the 2016 primary. As Matt Duss notes, when Trump said the Iraq War was “a terrible idea” Republicans and Democrats alike agreed “that’s right.”⁷⁶

Trump remains difficult to categorise. It could be argued that the MAGA/America First movement should not be seen as a distinct grand strategic approach, as it borrows elements from the other approaches in unpredictable ways. Though Trump has been on the scene since 2016 and is now returning to power, few elements have congealed yet into a coherent approach. Such is his deliberate style and much of his appeal to supporters. The lack of consistency perceived from abroad is understood amongst Trump supporters as effective pragmatism that is focused on getting a “good deal” for Americans, first and only. When it comes to military force, Trump has been contradictory and embraced both military force and acquiescence, which makes him difficult to predict. Hudson’s Rough notes that it is “unfair to call [Trump] isolationist, though he has pullback tendencies or worldviews, but he’s personally hyper-aggressive.”⁷⁷ Multiple interviewees mentioned as an illustration of these contradictory impulses how the Trump administration declined to forcibly respond to the 2019 Iranian attacks on the Saudi oilfields of Abqaiq-Khuras. Arguably, this is exactly what Saudi Arabia expected from its ties with the United States and this lack of response triggered Saudi Arabia into a more assertive policy, including on nuclear power. In contrast, the Trump administration was willing to take the risky policy of openly assassinating Iranian general Qassem Soleimani.⁷⁸

In one aspect, Trump’s view on foreign policy, allies and other policies since the 1980s has been consistent,⁷⁹ namely that both domestically and abroad “the system is rigged” and that allies are bleeding the US financially.⁸⁰ However, there is little consensus about how this translates into Trump’s foreign policy preferences. Andrea Kendall-Taylor would argue that “Trump is not an isolationist... but, as it pertains to Ukraine and transatlantic relations, it’s just so volatile and unpredictable.”⁸¹ Kori Schake, a former Bush administration official and Republican defence intellectual, notes that “Trump doesn’t really believe in anything. Other than personal vendettas, he doesn’t have guiding principles. Everybody’s going to be scrambling to be

⁷⁵ Colby, Interview with authors.

⁷⁶ Duss, Interview with authors.

⁷⁷ Rough, Interview with the authors.

⁷⁸ These two decisions were mentioned by several interviewees as examples of contradictory policies and instincts within the Trump administration and of the president himself: Rough.; Kori Schake, Interview with authors, May 2024.; Jeremy Shapiro, Interview with authors, June 2024.

⁷⁹ Trump was already very critical of Japan and Germany as allies in his often-cited 1990 interview in Playboy.

⁸⁰ Duss, Interview with authors.

⁸¹ Kendall-Taylor, Interview with authors.

the last brief.”⁸² Both argue that Trump can be swayed by the various factions within the Republican Party, whether neoconservatives, restrainers, or prioritisers. Trump “balances the various components of the coalition”.⁸³ The last person in the room with a convincing pitch on a given issue may steer Trump. As Shapiro notes, “Trump does not dominate the party ideologically.” While “nobody is challenging Trump on foreign policy”, Shapiro believes that proponents of various policies hope that “Trump’s foreign policy is inconsistent and incoherent enough” that they can “translate their foreign policy into something that he can love.”⁸⁴ The fluidity of Trump’s politics does, according to Shapiro, strengthen a misguided “short term [European] perspective that they can treat the Trump administration like they treated it last time, that the strategies that they had last time worked or could work again.”⁸⁵

The long-term effect on the Republican Party from the Trump will be profound, as most of the established groups and leaders have been pushed to the margins. As several interviewees noted, consequently, the foreign policy debates in the Democratic Party “are much less interesting”,⁸⁶ and “very cartelised”, while this is not as much the case in the current Republican Party.⁸⁷ What is a common theme is that the next generation of the Republican party feels much less affinity with Europe and NATO. Trump’s Vice-Presidential candidate, JD Vance, has said that he “doesn’t care about Ukraine” and that support for NATO should be contingent on how the European Union treats Elon Musk’s X/Twitter.⁸⁸ During the primaries, Republican presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy argued it would be “reasonable” for the United States to pull out of NATO and even the UN.⁸⁹

There are, of course, splits and inconsistencies throughout the MAGA platform. Project 2025, a political initiative led by the conservative Heritage Foundation, is a case in point. While touted as a coherent view of conservative policy preferences, it is anything but on many occasions. The report itself, a nearly 1000-page document, aimed to bring together a big tent of the conservative spectrum, and in doing so became highly incoherent. At the core, as can be found in the sections focused on the State and Defense Departments, is a dissonant commitment to prioritising China while simultaneously maintaining influence and freedom manoeuvre on every other continent. Further, this is alongside a clear reorientation of security policy away from foreign affairs and far more towards the border and even domestic repression (e.g. targeting immigrants and women seeking healthcare access outside of their home state using federal security forces).⁹⁰ The final sign of incoherency is the Trump administration’s own repudiation of the initiative, not on substantive grounds, but rather in opposition to the institutionalised Republican establishment assuming it can influence Trump’s personalist style of leadership.⁹¹

⁸² Schake, Interview with authors.

⁸³ Rough, Interview with the authors.

⁸⁴ Shapiro, Interview with authors.

⁸⁵ Shapiro.

⁸⁶ Colby, Interview with authors.

⁸⁷ Shapiro, Interview with authors.

⁸⁸ ‘J.D. Vance’s Opposition to U.S. Support for Ukraine: In His Own Words - The New York Times’, accessed 19 September 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/15/world/europe/ukraine-jd-vance.html>; ‘JD Vance Says US Could Drop Support for NATO If Europe Tries to Regulate Elon Musk’s Platforms’, accessed 19 September 2024, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/jd-vance-says-us-could-drop-support-for-nato-if-europe-tries-to-regulate-elon-musk-s-platforms/ar-AA1qJcXB>.

⁸⁹ ‘Ramaswamy: U.S. Pulling out of NATO Is “Reasonable,” as Is “Reevaluating” UN Membership - POLITICO’, accessed 9 July 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/10/23/ramaswamy-nato-us-un-membership-00123119>.

⁹⁰ ‘Playbook | Project 2025’, 2 February 2023, <https://www.project2025.org/playbook/>.

⁹¹ Steve Contorno, ‘Trump Claims Not to Know Who Is behind Project 2025. A CNN Review Found at Least 140 People Who Worked for Him Are Involved | CNN Politics’, CNN, 11 July 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/11/politics/trump-allies-project-2025/index.html>.

What is a common theme is that the next generation of the Republican party feels much less affinity with Europe and NATO

The MAGA agenda can be considered a grand strategic approach since it is representative of a seriously influential portion of the incoming government in Washington. It does continue to draw upon the logic of American primacy, perhaps in part due to Trump's personal affinity for the military and at least the threat of force.⁹² If past is prologue to any degree, the last Trump administration's US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific, released only days before the end of the administration (and less than two weeks after the 6 January insurrection), points at the type of strategy the incoming Trump administration may pursue. Under the section "Top Interests of the United States in the Indo-Pacific", it calls for the government to "maintain US primacy in the region." It's desired end-states prioritise maintaining "diplomatic, economic and military pre-eminence," and aims for this pre-eminence to generate American "jobs and growth".⁹³ Under Trumpism, the U.S. is equal to none, with engines full ahead towards exclusive American control over world affairs.

92 Matthew Duss, 'Calling Trump an Anti-Imperialist Is Nonsense', *Foreign Policy*, 18 April 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/18/donald-trump-presidency-anti-imperialist-militarism-war/>.

93 'U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific' (Trump White House Archives, January 2021), 1–3, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.

4. The emerging consensus and implications for Europe

4.1. Cracks and shifts in grand strategy

Elite consensus on grand strategy, such as there was, has fractured surrounding Trump's administrations. However, it would be a mistake to attribute this solely to Trump. The fundamentals of that grand strategy were already under stress both domestically and structurally. The structure of the international environment had already begun shifting since the early 2000s when U.S. power was at its apex and the system could be described as unambiguously unipolar.⁹⁴ China's share of global GDP has since increased significantly to approximate that of the United States in nominal terms and has surpassed it in Purchasing Power Parity terms. However, Chinese GDP per capita is significantly lower and there are many question marks whether Chinese strong growth is sustainable.⁹⁵ China also faces demographic challenges over the long term. The Party has clamped down on Chinese society and Xi Jinping has an increasingly ethnonationalist bent to his policies. But there are questions as to the US economy as well. Various debt bubbles raise occasional fears of a new 2008-style crisis and a recession. Regardless, at present, both the United States and China outpace other powers in the system by wide margins. Indeed, both the Trump-era and the Biden-era National Defense Strategies stress that China is the only state that can challenge US power and hegemony across all dimensions of power: politically, economically, diplomatically, technologically and militarily.⁹⁶ While the United States has not essentially weakened because of China's rise, the US position has still declined in relative terms.

We have largely focused on the domestic level of politics. The domestic consensus on foreign policy goals – at least at the elite level – that sustained U.S. global commitments and regional commitments to allies in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere, has weakened and broken off in places. Domestic polarisation has increased in a multidecade process for a variety of reasons, but the Iraq War and the financial crisis that followed it worsened it. The Tea Party protests showed the discontent on the right wing of the Republican Party, which grew neatly into the MAGA movement. The Occupy Wall Street protests showed the early discontent on the left wing of the Democratic Party, something that has continued under the

94 William C. Wohlforth, 'The Stability of a Unipolar World', *International Security* 24, no. 1 (1999): 5–41.

95 Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Cornell University Press, 2018).

96 Jim Mattis, 'National Defense Strategy of the United States of America' (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018); 'National Defense Strategy' (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, October 2022).

Uncommitted movement in support of Palestine. Inflexibility and a lack of responsiveness of political class to systemic inequality, public health crises and the late-stage capitalism of the U.S. economy has created distrust in multiple aspects of elite-driven, continuity politics and a push towards 'domestic renewal' by all parties. These can take progressive or conservative, cosmopolitan or nationalist, multilateral or unilateral shapes.

The liberal internationalist approach emphasises continuity with previous U.S. priorities, although with a distinctly different outlook on national interests and trade, and specifically on China. This approach is primarily located in the Democratic Party, though with a rump, unpopular presence within the Republican Party. Both parties have seen so-called insurgent wings challenge the orthodoxies of foreign policy, but while in the Democratic Party so far continuity has prevailed, there is a complete breakdown of consensus on the Republican side. Some former neoconservatives and Reaganites within the Republican Party have moved to support the Democratic Party, while most are trying to achieve their priorities in one of the other groupings, with many Republicans in Congress especially turning towards MAGA. To illustrate, some elements of liberal internationalist thinking that emphasise maintaining U.S. hegemony are present in the prioritiser approach that is willing to de-emphasise Russia to ensure that China does not challenge the United States for the position of the number one power in the system. The restraint approach advocates for conventional retrenchment from most if not all U.S. commitments abroad; proponents focus specifically on the Middle East and North Africa but tend to also advocate throttling down in Europe and possibly Asia. It comes in both progressive and libertarian variants. The question is what the relative balance of these groups in government is; Kendall-Taylor would argue that the grand strategic choices have largely been reduced to "the status quo" (the liberal internationalists) and the "China First-ers" (prioritisers).⁹⁷

4.2. Point of consensus: China

China is a priority for all approaches, with even restrainers in favour of keeping an eye on the direction in which China's rise trends, though with particular attention paid to how US behaviour may cause a security spiral. China as a threat enjoys a wide bipartisan consensus within DC.⁹⁸ Though, as Emma Ashford of the Stimson Center argues, though China is considered the biggest threat, there are massive disagreements within the DC establishment over whether Russia remains a threat, whether it's some Russia-China axis (sometimes expanded to include Iran and North Korea), or whether Russia is an unimportant medium-sized power in Eastern Europe.⁹⁹

For the liberal internationalist approach, China is an ideological, security and economic challenger that will unsettle the liberal consensus and the so-called "rules-based international order." At the start of his administration, Biden looked to frame the competition in the Indo-Pacific as one between autocracies and democracies, though the administration later retired that framing.¹⁰⁰ Matt Duss of the Center for International Policy argues that the Biden administration sees everything through "the lens of strategic competition with China", which

⁹⁷ Kendall-Taylor, Interview with authors.

⁹⁸ 'Why China May Be the Last Bipartisan Issue Left in Washington', NBC News, 21 March 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/why-china-may-be-last-bipartisan-issue-left-washington-n1261407>.

⁹⁹ Ashford, Interview with authors. Ashford also argues that, despite the consensus on China, many experts are undecided on whether to defend Taiwan, or whether the line should be drawn further back.

¹⁰⁰ See again, the NDS. 'National Defense Strategy'.

China is a priority
for all approaches

the administration believes “has a vision of its own global hegemony.”¹⁰¹ For the prioritisers, Beijing is primarily a major power threat to US hegemony, security and prosperity, where the nature of the Chinese regime itself is of a lesser concern. For the “America First” grouping, China is a threat but less clearly defined, though rhetoric often points specifically to the role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The emphasis on China and Asia – later rebranded as the Indo-Pacific – is part of a long-term structural development. In a reversal of their Cold War roles, Asia is now a priority over Europe; and China has been prioritised as a threat over Russia by two successive administrations. Tellingly, as noted, the Biden administration’s National Defense Strategy, published five weeks *after* the start of the largest land war in Europe since WWII and which involved a nuclear-armed state comfortable with making threats, explicitly states that China is the “pacing challenge” for the Department of Defense, despite the “acute threat” that Russia poses.¹⁰² The interviewees for this report concur with this outlook. Clearly there is “lot of continuity” between the Trump administration and the Biden administration on China (as well as Iran).¹⁰³

It is noteworthy that even centrist U.S. national security experts who support the liberal internationalist continuity approach are no longer confident that the United States can manage simultaneous challenges in both Europe and Asia. As Andrea Kendall-Taylor notes, Europeans still have “blind faith” that the United States is going to maintain its influence and retain the capacity and the ability to monitor all the world’s problems; however, “the scope of challenges has grown such that there’s no way the United States can play the role it has always played. ... if the US is in a war in the Indo-Pacific, we can’t also be present in the same way in Europe.”¹⁰⁴ This is based on an “an outdated assessment of the preponderance of power and influence that the United States still has.”¹⁰⁵ Indeed, a war in Asia between the United States and China is likeliest to start over Taiwan. Analysis from think tanks using scenario exercises and war games has cast serious doubt on whether the United States could win a direct confrontation with China over Taiwan.¹⁰⁶ More concretely, in the bureaucratic processes of the Department of Defense, the defence planning assumptions have been scaled down and away from the decades-old “two-war construct.”¹⁰⁷ That means no US fighting power in Europe if a war starts in Asia.

4.3. Implications of the 2024 election for the US approach to Europe

There is now a new incoming Trump administration, and the Republican party has taken control of the Senate, which is massively influential in foreign affairs. Trump is quite likely to pursue a host of policy proposals that will impact both Europe directly and the ability of European states to pursue a relationship with the United States. This ranges from basing

¹⁰¹ Duss, Interview with authors.

¹⁰² ‘National Defense Strategy’, 2.

¹⁰³ Kendall-Taylor, Interview with authors.

¹⁰⁴ Kendall-Taylor.

¹⁰⁵ Kendall-Taylor.

¹⁰⁶ Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, ‘The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan’, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, January. https://Csis-Website-Prod.S3.Amazonaws.Com/S3fs-Public/Publication/230109_Cancian_FirstBattle_NextWar.Pdf, 2023.

¹⁰⁷ Mitre, ‘A Eulogy for the Two-War Construct’.

policy on 'transatlantic values' (a sentiment Trump and his officials will not be responsive to) to military and economic support for Ukraine. The four-year respite of the Biden administration in transatlantic affairs is over.

Strategic autonomy is on the agenda for European security experts since the Trump-induced uncertainty during his first term and is likely to be so again during his second. But the notion of Europeans taking more responsibility for their own security goes back to the 1990s, as the US commitment to Europe was deemed less certain and it became clear that Europeans were unable to stop the wars in former Yugoslavia by themselves. The U.S. response towards European attempts to create alternative security arrangements was outright hostile, whether towards the Franco-German Eurocorps or the European Security and Defence Policy.¹⁰⁸ When Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac met in St. Malo to discuss reinvigorating the EU's defence capability in the wake of the European failure to act in the Balkans, Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright referenced what became known as the 3Ds: "no duplication, no discrimination, no decoupling".¹⁰⁹

As a term, European strategic autonomy still ruffles feathers and creates confusion, but the US outlook has shifted over the past decades with the growing understanding that the United States cannot do everything and be everywhere. As Rough argues, "Biden's strategic mistake coming into office was to basically bearhug the Europeans so that they thought everything was the fault of Trump, which led to little or no introspection." Given increasing demand on U.S. resources due to the Sino-American competition, "we need more European action for Europe."¹¹⁰ As a prioritiser who would prefer to redirect US grand strategy towards Asia, Elbridge Colby is "sympathetic" to strategic autonomy; he believes that "NATO has to change and adapt to survive to become the European states' primary responsibility" and that is "the only possible way forward".¹¹¹ From the other side of the political spectrum, Matt Duss argued that "as a progressive, I think progressive values would be served by Europe stepping up and spending more on its own defence and developing its own capability and its own autonomy."¹¹² Putting a finer point on this, Ashford, Shiffrinson and Wertheim have argued that European defence increases would reduce the free "hubristic" hand Washington has in influencing Europe.¹¹³ At this point, U.S. policymakers "want Europeans to do more and they are not interested in how they do more or what institutional vehicle they use", Shapiro argues, adding that it is "very 1990s to be worried about that". The partial exception is defence industrial autonomy, though the stresses on the industrial base have diminished US resistance there as well.¹¹⁴

Whether the United States in fact abandons Europe and withdraws from NATO is more uncertain. For Matt Duss, a second Trump term means that Trump could "very possibly, perhaps

108 AND RUSH; Shiffrinson; Horowitz; Schake; Desmaele Kori Schake, 'NATO after the Cold War, 1991-1995: Institutional Competition and the Collapse of the French Alternative', *Contemporary European History* 7, no. 3 (1998): 379-407; Liviu Horowitz, 'The George H.W. Bush Administration's Policies Vis-à-Vis Central Europe: From Cautious Encouragement to Cracking Open NATO's Door', in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security after the Cold War* (Brookings Institution, 2019), 71-92; Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, 'Eastbound and down: The United States, NATO Enlargement, and Suppressing the Soviet and Western European Alternatives, 1990-1992', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2020, 1-31; Van Hoof, 'Land Rush'; Linde Desmaele, *Europe's Evolving Role in US Grand Strategy: Indispensable or Insufferable?* (Taylor & Francis, 2023).

109 Madeleine Albright, 'The Right Balance Will Secure NATO's Future', *Financial Times*, 7 December 1998.

110 Rough notes that there is also a blind spot among Europeans who have "little to no understanding for why Americans could vote for Donald Trump". Rough, Interview with the authors.

111 Colby, Interview with authors.

112 Duss, Interview with authors.

113 Emma Ashford, Joshua Shiffrinson, and Stephen Wertheim, 'Europe Must Step Up', *Foreign Affairs*, 22 May 2023, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/europe-must-step-up>.

114 Shapiro, Interview with authors.

European strategic autonomy still ruffles feathers and creates confusion

even likely ... withdraw from NATO.”¹¹⁵ Jeremy Shapiro believes it is a European blind spot to believe “that the Americans won’t be able to get out of Europe”; whoever is in the White House, in his view “the Americans are leaving Europe” and the choice is between “slowly and responsibly” or “quickly and irresponsibly.”¹¹⁶ He does not believe that Republicans want to “destroy NATO”, because “What’s the point of that?” Yet, a redistribution of burdens for European security is inevitable.¹¹⁷ Kori Schake believes that Americans do realise the importance of Europe and of allies, but that the biggest blind spot of Europeans is that they “don’t realise how little Americans care what anybody else does. ... The American system is so wide open and we’re so risk-tolerant ... That’s who we are. Europeans very often think telling us what you’re afraid of means we should do something about it. Americans don’t care that much.”¹¹⁸ That said, Peter Rough believes that Europeans have value for the United States when it comes to helping with China, as “Europe is still a preferred partner on everything.”¹¹⁹ The implication behind this is that European governments (as well as other allies such as Australia) simply say yes to any request from Washington out of an effort to prove either loyalty or relevance. European support for U.S. policy on China would be primarily economic, through coordinated export controls or the threat of sanctions in case of escalation over Taiwan. Our impression from the interviews is that there is limited to zero interest in a European military role in the Indo-Pacific. European capabilities and capacity are not seen as credible for such tasks, and possibly as a distraction for US forces. However, NATO is seen as a potential tool of coordination and cooperation with the key allies in the region, Japan, Australia and South Korea.

As for Trump’s return, the contradictions in Trump’s own past behaviour risks giving Europeans a false perspective. Peter Rough points out that during his first term, Trump both increased the U.S. presence in Eastern Europe through the enhanced forward presence, but “in his next breath, Rick Grenell, his ambassador, is openly floating redeploying American troops from Germany and relocating European Command to Belgium.”¹²⁰ That said, Rough notes that Trump could still get “serious people like Mike Pompeo, Marco Rubio, Tom Cotton, Robert O’Brien” on his team in a second term.¹²¹ Jeremy Shapiro believes that Trump as a restrainer follows a “Reagan peace through strength concept”, that he favours “a big defence budget” but “spending it at home.”¹²² Tom Wright of Brookings characterised Trump’s potential foreign policy well in early 2016 by describing it as closer to 19th century European imperial politics; transactional in nature, willing to use military force, but focused on national or personal prestige.¹²³ For Europeans, it would be a mistake to believe that there is a return to the status quo within the Republican Party. Whatever their political background, the interviewees generally believed that the Trump movement would persist beyond Trump,¹²⁴ and that Europeans should avoid taking “false comfort from Biden” and believe that Trump was “transient as opposed to a representation of a major structural trend.”¹²⁵ There is not a cadre of Reaganite Republicans waiting in the wings.

¹¹⁵ Duss, Interview with authors.; It should be noted that the U.S. president no longer has the authority to unilaterally withdraw the country from NATO without the consent of the Senate.

¹¹⁶ Shapiro, Interview with authors.

¹¹⁷ Shapiro.

¹¹⁸ Schake, Interview with authors.

¹¹⁹ Rough, Interview with the authors.

¹²⁰ Rough.

¹²¹ Rough.

¹²² Shapiro, Interview with authors.

¹²³ Thomas Wright, ‘Trump’s 19th Century Foreign Policy’, *Politico Magazine*, 20 January 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-foreign-policy-213546>.

¹²⁴ For example, Kendall-Taylor, Interview with authors.

¹²⁵ Colby, Interview with authors.

5. Conclusions: Europe after the twilight of Atlanticism

The next generation of American policymakers will be very different from those many European capitals are used to

What does all this mean for the future of the U.S. relationship with Europe? First and foremost is the deprioritising of European affairs across the wide breadth of the American political spectrum. Perhaps the best summary of the broad American narrative of Europe at this stage is, at best, that European states are sufficiently wealthy to provide for their own security, and at worst, these same states are actively taking advantage of the U.S. security umbrella to subsidise wealthy welfare states. The next generation of American policymakers will be very different from those many European capitals are used to. Decidedly less transatlantic in outlook, the formative experiences of the next generation of US leaders will include Iraq and Afghanistan, the 2008 economic crisis, Israel-Palestine, two Trump administrations and the COVID pandemic. The era of elite, Europhile politicians is rapidly coming to an end. The typical "Atlanticist" cadre of American and European policymakers was arguably past its expiration date prior to Russia's 2022 invasion. The contemporary revival of this community in the ensuing two years will likely only be temporary, as much of it continues to be carried forward by aging Cold Warriors and is likely on to "forestall the expiry date of a worldview that has seen better days."¹²⁶ The takeaway? European security is Europe's problem.

5.1. Important lessons from current US grand strategy for Europe

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has temporarily turbo-charged the remaining Atlanticists. This reinvigoration has put the United States at risk of, as put by scholar Van Jackson, "trying to do a strategy that requires you to have all the power in the world when you don't," a dangerous situation. This new energy in Atlanticism comes at the exact same time as a regional war in the Middle East is intensifying and Washington continues to prioritise China. As predicted by historian Paul Kennedy, this puts the U.S. in the position of "spending much more on defence that it did two generations earlier and yet still find discover that the world is a less secure environment."¹²⁷ Primacy has become more self-defeating than it even was in the past.

¹²⁶ Thomas Meaney, 'Masters of War: In Search of the New World Order in Munich', *Harper's Magazine*, accessed 30 September 2024, <https://harpers.org/archive/2024/06/masters-of-war-letter-from-germany-thomas-meaney/>.

¹²⁷ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: William Collins, 1988), 26.

There are several take-aways from our survey of the shifts in American thinking about grand strategy and specifically its outlook on Europe:

1. Europeans cannot and should not rely on the United States indefinitely. Europe has declined in importance for US planners because of the rise of China and the shift in political and economic weight towards the Indo-Pacific. A perpetual U.S. “boots on the ground” commitment in Europe was unlikely regardless. While the continuity-driven liberal internationalist approach looks to maintain U.S. commitments in Europe while strengthening U.S. presence and credibility in Asia, there is a clear awareness that the United States may no longer be able to fulfil its international obligations in every region simultaneously. This means that the burden for European security will shift to Europeans to a greater extent.
2. Greater European responsibility for European security would also take place under a future, post-Trump Democratic administration. The Atlanticist revival within the Democratic Party is temporary. Internal party dynamics are trending towards a renewed focus on domestic economic affairs and foreign policy priorities that do not lead with a focus on Europe.
3. It was and is wrong to focus exclusively on the turmoil in the Republican Party surrounding Donald Trump; there is a broader trend within U.S. politics of unease with international commitments, and a clear sense that China is the true challenge to U.S. hegemony, security and prosperity. This insurgency against the post-Cold War consensus is most pronounced in the Republican Party and there is little to no reason to expect a return to some imagined “normal”, particularly given Trump’s re-election.
4. The second Trump term is extremely unpredictable but almost certainly bad for the future of NATO. It would be a mistake to believe it would be similar to the 2017-2018 period of the first term when European allies thought they could manage policy separately from the rhetoric. There is little reason to expect the so-called “adults in the room” to again be part of the administration; the Trump supporters have been clear in their intention to hollow out the bureaucratic apparatus within the Departments of State and Defense and to fill it with loyalists. Trump’s own instincts are unpredictable, and policy could sway between a broad set of the policy approaches discussed. Transactionalism and flattery are less likely to be effective as European policy approaches as a new Trump administration would aim to make good on its promises to turn inwards. Further, Trump has emphasised draconian policies on issues of human rights and immigration, to include “mass deportation”, a securitisation of the US government that would trend negatively for positive diplomatic relations and could even come to directly impact European citizens residing or visiting the US

5.2. Implications for European foreign and defence policies

The planning assumption for future European thinking should be a declining U.S. commitment to European security. There is still a core of supporters of continued transatlantic cooperation in US policymaking circles, but there is consensus that conventional resources will be more strained and that the greater risk to U.S. hegemony, security and prosperity is China rather than Russia. The 2022 NDS of the Biden administration was explicit about this. The new Trump presidency will be highly unpredictable at best, and hostile to Europe and accommodationist towards Russia at worst. With the assumption of a declining US commitment as the starting point, we see the following implications.

The planning assumption for future European thinking should be a declining US commitment to European security

1. Ukraine. Be prepared for an abrupt end to US aid to Ukraine starting in 2025 and a Trump administration that is willing to negotiate over Kyiv's head.

- The US has been a leader in the transatlantic world in organising support for Ukraine's defence against Russia, through bilateral formats, the Rammstein Group and NATO itself. Under the incoming Trump administration, this is going to end. Trump and his cadre of incoming officials have touted an openly accommodationist approach to Moscow, view Ukraine a marginal issue in foreign policy, and will look to wash their hands of the war as soon as possible.¹²⁸ If past is precedent, observers should look to the Trump administration's approach to Afghanistan.
- Europe will be hard-pressed to fill the gaps left behind if U.S. support to Ukraine dries up, be it slowly or abruptly. It is quite possible that the U.S. under Trump could attempt to push Ukraine into a negotiated settlement that territorially divides Ukraine, a situation that would heighten the already existing crisis along NATO's eastern flank. European members of NATO would have to marshal defensive efforts to concentrate on European defence first, and coordinate efforts to ensure there is not distraction such as following the US into the Pacific or becoming engaged in the Middle East again.

2. NATO and the European Union. Strengthen the European pillar within NATO, enhance the role of the EU and downplay summit diplomacy with Washington.

- NATO remains the most effective means to organise collective European defence and deterrence; however, moving forward, Europeans should build the capability to take more initiative in NATO's decision-making and military structure if the United States is incapable or unwilling to devote sufficient resources or even act at all. This means that the Europeans should re-create a European pillar within NATO as was discussed in the 1990s. It also means that the Berlin Plus arrangements from 2003 – in which the EU could use NATO assets for crisis management if NATO declined to act – should be revisited.
- Duplication was one of the central concerns with regards to greater European strategic autonomy during the 1990s. However, robustness within defence and military matters can be achieved in several ways; redundancy is one of them. In case the United States is incapable or unwilling to uphold its commitments to European security, Europe should have fallback options, which means an EU permanent headquarters that can perform military planning without the United States if it is absent. It also means building up European capabilities for which NATO now relies heavily or exclusively on the United States: C4ISR; long-range strike; fifth-generation airpower; air-to-air refuelling; strategic air transport.
- In diplomatic terms, the trend in NATO of focusing on yearly summits should also be revisited. Summit diplomacy was messy during Trump's last term and is likely to be so again.¹²⁹ To avoid turning important alliance discussions into sideshows of Trump's personalism, yearly heads of state and government Summits should revert to the working level, focused more on defence and foreign ministerial meetings with working agenda's rather than communiques.

¹²⁸ Julian E. Barnes, 'Vance Describes Plan to End Ukraine War That Sounds a Lot Like Putin's', *The New York Times*, 13 September 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/13/us/politics/vance-trump-ukraine-russia-war.html>.

¹²⁹ Henry Foy, 'The Untold Story of the Most Chaotic NATO Summit Ever', *Financial Review*, 8 July 2024, <https://www.afr.com/world/north-america/the-untold-story-of-the-most-chaotic-nato-summit-ever-20240708-p5jrvf>; Michel Duclos, 'The Trials and Tribulations of Trump's G7', *Expressions by Institut Montaigne* (blog), 23 June 2020, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/trials-and-tribulations-trumps-g7>.

3. Personnel and defence industry. Invest in Europe's conventional defence to ensure a backup in case of a Sino-American conflict in the Western Pacific.

- NATO's New Force Model (NFM), as part of aligning defence planning efforts with the new operational demands from the alliance's military leadership, calls for 11 Corps worth of forces to be prepared for a war with Russia.¹³⁰ This also includes an ambitious plan for an expanded Allied Reaction Force with tens of thousands of NATO troops at the ready, under NATO command.¹³¹ Should the U.S. conventional footprint in Europe be reduced significantly, the ambitions of the NFM are impossible for European states to fill. This merits a serious conversation about a coordinated expansion of reserve forces within European governments, the only alternative being a reduction in the ambition of operational plans.
- European defence industry is also not fit yet for sustaining a major conflict; Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shown the rapid rate at which munitions and material are consumed. Deterring Russia means that NATO Europe must show the credible ability to sustain a confrontation with Russia if it should come to that. Dependency on American defence industrial supply lines is a risk; not only because of the expectation that US policymakers could cut Europeans off, but because supply chains are likely to be overburdened in case of Sino-American conflict in the Western Pacific and opportunistic aggression by Russia – or vice versa.
- Europeans should invest in European defence industry and consolidate and integrate various national champions. This consolidation is also needed to build the European capabilities on which NATO currently relies on the United States. At the same time, it would benefit to ensure the presence of production facilities for the U.S. weapons that European states rely on in large numbers; in times of Euro-Atlantic or Indo-Pacific crisis, it would be possible to surge production in one region to reinforce defence and deterrence in the other region.

4. Deterrence: build a coordinated and cohesive approach with the French and UK nuclear deterrents and consider integrating these with conventional weapons.

- NATO's deterrent posture is dependent on the U.S. nuclear deterrent, with which the United States provides extended nuclear deterrence. In terms of size and flexibility, the French and UK nuclear deterrent are not comparable; whereas the United States has approximately 1700 deployed weapons and another 3500-4000 nondeployed with a hundred non-strategic weapons in Europe, France and the UK have respectively 290 and 225 nuclear weapons, with only France having a pre-strategic air-launched "warning shot."¹³²
- Moving forward, though the U.S. nuclear deterrent is not replaceable, and even restrainers have not called for the removal of the U.S. nuclear umbrella, a more coordinated and cohesive European approach built around the French and UK nuclear deterrents could give Russia enough pause. However, to compensate for the absence of a more flexible arsenal with which France and/or the UK could engage in nuclear signalling, European states could invest in advanced conventional weapons – primarily long-range strike and fifth- or sixth-generation airpower – for both deterrence-by-denial and the targeting of more strategic Russian targets to maintain a range of non-nuclear options.¹³³

130 Sven Biscop, 'The New Force Model: NATO's European Army?' (Brussels, Belgium: Egmont Institute, September 2022), https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2022/09/Sven-Biscop_PolicyBrief285_vFinal.pdf.

131 'Stand up of Allied Reaction Force Marks a New Era for NATO', [shape.nato.int](https://shape.nato.int/news-archive/2024/stand-up-of-allied-reaction-force-marks-a-new-era-for-nato.aspx), accessed 30 September 2024, <https://shape.nato.int/news-archive/2024/stand-up-of-allied-reaction-force-marks-a-new-era-for-nato.aspx>.

132 Hans M. Kristensen et al., 'United States Nuclear Weapons, 2024', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 80, no. 3 (3 May 2024): 182–208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2024.2339170>; Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, and Eliana Johns, 'French Nuclear Weapons, 2023', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 79, no. 4 (4 July 2023): 272–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2023.2223088>; Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, 'United Kingdom Nuclear Weapons, 2021', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 77, no. 3 (2021): 153–58.

133 Paul Van Hooft and Davis Ellison, 'Good Fear, Bad Fear: How European Defence Investments Could Be Leveraged to Restart Arms Control Negotiations with Russia' (The Hague, Netherlands: Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2023).

5. Regional prioritisations. Euro-Atlantic, MENA and Indo-Pacific.

- Assuming that the United States is less involved in Euro-Atlantic security, Europeans would be well-advised to themselves prioritise their own region first, then the maritime approaches to Europe in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The limits on their military capacity are severe; attempting to spread these over multiple theatres as far as the Western Pacific, *specifically when the United States itself is overstretched*, is unwise.¹³⁴ Instead, building the robustness of NATO collective defence and deterrence is essential for European security and diminishes the pressures on US forces. Likewise, ensuring maritime security in the MENA area would relieve pressure on U.S. Central Command. Both are meaningful ways to pursue better burden sharing while still protecting European security and economic interests.

6. Sudden shifts. Prepare for abrupt policy changes.

- Returning to the outset of this study, with the focus on domestic drivers of foreign policy, European planners should bear in mind that U.S. policy could shift wildly in the coming years under a new Trump administration in ways that contradict prior agreements and directions. As seen in Afghanistan, northeastern Syria and North Korea, Trump personally nor much of his staff do not see a need to coordinate with allies and partners on such changes. Given the increased domestic focus on immigration, the incoming Trump administration could suddenly turn aggressive towards its southern neighbours, particularly Mexico, to include even military strikes.¹³⁵ It could even include another attempted overthrow of the Venezuelan government.¹³⁶ Various influences on the administration could lead to a formal abrogation of the two-state solution for Israel and Palestine.¹³⁷ The point being, European governments will be very unlikely to know these things in advance.
- Abruptness in policy shifts will likely require allowing diplomatic daylight to appear between the US and Europe on a host of issues. Should Trump announce a sudden rapprochement with Russia and a willingness to partition Ukraine, European leaders should consider options that do not follow Washington. Should Trump conduct military strikes against states such as Iran, Venezuela, Mexico, or others, European forces should not participate or support such actions, and the principles of sovereignty should be defended in forums such as the United Nations. Foreign policy daylight should be allowed and not instinctually avoided.

¹³⁴ Davis Ellison and Paul van Hooft, 'NATO Should Not Go to the Indo-Pacific', *Atlantisch Perspectief* 48, no. 2 (2024): 30–35; Paul Van Hooft, 'China and the Indo-Pacific in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept', *Atlantisch Perspectief*, September 2022.

¹³⁵ 'Why America's Republicans Want to Bomb Mexico', *The Economist*, 14 September 2023, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2023/09/14/why-americas-republicans-want-to-bomb-mexico>.

¹³⁶ Zach Dorfman, 'The Untold Story of Trump's Failed Attempt to Overthrow Venezuela's President', *Wired Magazine*, 31 October 2024, <https://www.wired.com/story/trump-cia-venezuela-maduro-re-gime-change-plot/>.

¹³⁷ 'Read the Full Transcripts of Donald Trump's Interviews With TIME', *Time Magazine*, 30 April 2024, <https://time.com/6972022/donald-trump-transcript-2024-election/>.

5.3. In conclusion

The shifts in American grand strategic thinking over time are significant. We have recognised the differences in the options and preferences that existed from 1991 to approximately 2016, and those since. Current preferences are undergoing constant development and may congeal into a new set of ideas, depending on continued structural changes in the international environment, the ideas of the incoming Trump government and whether the Democrats or the Republicans will win elections over the years beyond.

We know well that despite changes in elite foreign policy consensus, this does not always mean that real shifts will happen. The Carnegie Endowment study mentioned at the outset of this study highlighted that strategic change requires a variety of factors must come together in a particular moment. These include a major external crisis, a concerted White House effort to overcome bureaucratic resistance, the president's personal willingness to spend political capital, united executive and legislative branches, and an approach that directly manages individual psychological obstacles to change. It is quite likely that such a shift is coming, particularly given the Republican control of the White House and Senate, a stated aim to target bureaucratic resistance to Trump's policies, and the real possibility of an external foreign policy crisis across different regions in the coming four years. We currently see another major shift looming, namely the end of the deep US commitment to Europe, with significant consequences for European security and defence policy as discussed above.

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